

# The lecture essay



Isaac Bashevis Singer's short story *The Lecture* is about a lecture that never takes place but leads to the lecturer's enlightenment. The story's significance lies in not what the lecture is about and whether it gets delivered or not, it rather lies in what it makes the lecturer N. and the audience realize. The lecture's impact lies in its ability to act as a device and the thread that holds the past, present, and future. It was an optimistic report on the future of the Yiddish language; thus, it appears to be purely academic and didactic in nature and is supposed to enlighten its Yiddish audience about the possibility of a brilliant future. Yet a harrowing encounter enlightens N.

, as it makes him realize the narrowness of his vision and his lecture. He then realizes that he cannot deliver the lecture after all, because a future devoid or alienated from a painful past cannot be entirely 'optimistic' and so his lecture is useless and false bravado. The old woman represents his Yiddish audience, and her death reflects the disappearance of his (both N.'s and Singer's) audience, so the lecture loses its meaning. The lecturer has been self-centred and didactic, as he has been concerned about the future of the Yiddish language and not of the people. He realizes that language and literature and lectures about them must spring from the past, from the love and compassion of the uniting force that wrote it, and not from the uncertainty of the future.

Through the title, Singer wants to remind us that a bookish, academic and didactic perspective of things and an over optimistic view of the future doesn't always work, especially when the past has been harrowing and painful. Singer always regarded modernism as a falsehood in the sense that

the past cannot be escaped, and the present and future are null and void when there is no past. John Updike's short story *The Persistence of Desire* is based on the idea that former lovers always hold residual feelings and have a sense that they have an unfinished business. How well they are able to handle these feelings show their maturity and growth and the ability to come to terms with life's vicissitudes.

Clyde's character shows a lesser degree of maturity than Janet. He has a sentimental view of life and seems to be hanging on to the glory of his youth through refusing to wear specs that are more practical and less fashionable. He becomes oblivious to the passage of time and finds his desire for Janet rekindled when he sees her. He even attempts to kiss her, forgetting that he has a wife and two children, and his gesture is a form of infidelity. His views regarding happiness are ambiguous and he is afraid to admit to Janet that he has been happy.

When he is unable to read the note Janet pressed in his palm before leaving, he perhaps realizes that he is no longer young. According to Detweiler, "meeting Janet also becomes for Clyde an orienting moment in the flux of life" (48). Both the short stories through their unique ways show how the characters come to terms with their past, present, and future. N. 's experience in Montreal makes him aware about human suffering, tribulations, pain and burden of the past, and the power of compassion and hope in order for the future to be possible.

Meanwhile, Clyde learns that a past love affair evokes a familiar and beautiful feeling, yet it remains a thing of the past.