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Lecture - 44 Two Stories and Three Cheers

Hello there, how are you today? Well, I know you must still be reeling under pressure or reeling under the influence of Borges's short story. I am sure you enjoyed I am sure you really must have enjoyed reading that; it's unconventional; probably it's like no other story you may have read.

So, that must have given you the value of strangeness as well because the world he projects is something very different, the metaphors are fresh. Well, if you are bowled by that story, well you will be in for a better surprise today because I have more remarkable stories here. In fact, I have two stories in the class and maybe after listening to these two remarkable stories, I am sure you will raise three cheers to these remarkable stories.

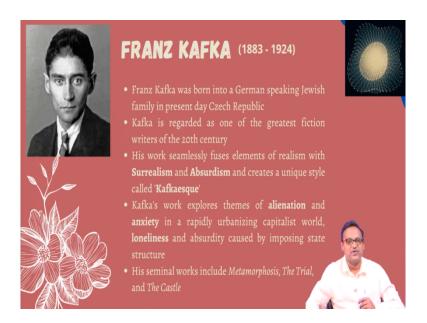
Now, usually, when we say cheers it's more celebratory in nature because we celebrate. So, here let's celebrate the spirit of literature, celebrating extraordinary quality, extraordinary values that literature imports to us. So, following the tradition that is why I call this class Two Stories and Three Cheers.

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So, now, let us go ahead and see our first story. The first story is called "Kafka and the Travelling Doll" by a well-known Spanish writer called Jordi Sierra Fabra. This is our first story. Let us go ahead and see how the story begins.

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Before that of course, in case you do not know who Franz Kafka is this is said; in fact, it is said that the story is based on the last days of the extraordinary writer called Franz Kafka. He was a German-speaking Jewish writer and in fact, Kafka is considered one of the remarkable fiction writers of the 20th century. And, his works wonderfully fuse together elements of surrealism, absurdism, and realism.

And that is why in fact, a deadly combination of these three can be called Kafkaesque like Shakespearean, Kafkaesque is today an accepted adjective in order to describe a world which is marred by bureaucratic oppression, which is marred by some kind of place where the downtrodden do not get justice. It appears something like a surreal world; all these things stand for Kafkaesque.

And, being a 20th-century writer he has witnessed firsthand alienation, and anxiety all the more because of the two world wars; I mean especially the First World War that he witnessed. So, therefore, his works are surrealistic fictionalizations of all these strange qualities that come to define modern life. So, some of his important works are *Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*, *The Castle*. In fact, *Metamorphosis* begins in a rather very strange way.

He says when I woke up after a long night, I found myself transformed into a gigantic bug or an insect. And later you realize that probably you think it is some kind of a nightmare, no. In fact, when actually he wakes up after the previous night's sleep, he finds himself transformed into one huge cockroach, and the rest of the novel talks about what happened to his family members, how they cope with that, and all these things.

It is some kind of a surreal world. A remarkable writer, a very sensitive writer, and the story it is said the story we are going to discuss now is based on the last few days of Franz Kafka. When he was traveling in a park, he comes across a small girl who is crying and that is when the story begins.

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So, here goes the story. It was said that one year before his death, Franz Kafka was walking through Steglitz Park, in Berlin. This was his daily walking route, but today took a different turn as he found a little girl crying heartbroken. She had lost her doll; obviously, for us it may be a doll for them it is just another family member; maybe something like that, that is why she is crying inconsolably.

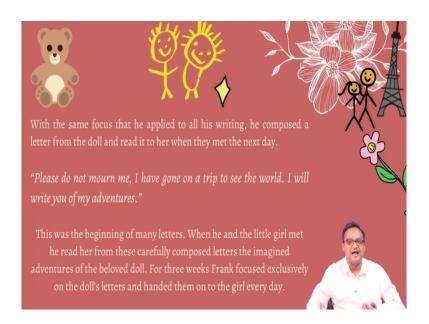
To calm her down Franz Kafka first helped look for the doll, he searches along with the girl. Eventually, he realizes that they are not going to find the doll therefore, Kafka tells the girl that the doll probably must have gone on a wonderful trip, and therefore, this girl should not worry because her friend just has gone out on a trip. And, he says that he himself is a

postman of the dolls and therefore, he would check in his office whether her doll has sent any letters to this girl at all.

Well, the girl does not believe him and she asks him, where is the letter? He says well probably I will have to go back and check, it must have come just today and tomorrow I will come at this particular time, please wait for me. And, in case there is a letter, I will give it to you then you feel happy, if there is nothing well you can continue crying.

Of course, that is the language that the girl understands therefore, she returns home. Immediately he goes back home and throughout the night he sits with an exact vigor that he would generally sit to write any fiction that he generally wrote.

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And, the next morning he is ready with a beautiful letter that he has taken the whole night to compose. Therefore, the next morning he goes upright and the girl has come for him anxiously waiting and he just gives her a good hug, a warm hug and says my dear, I told you right, there is a letter for you that your doll has sent. The girl does not believe it, but he hands over the letter, but this girl does not know how to read it, she is still a small girl.

So, she says what has my doll written to me? Well, he says opens it with all seriousness and says it says, "Please do not mourn for me, do not cry for me, I have just gone on a trip to see the world. I will write to you of my adventures and eventually after my journey is over, I will

come back to you. So, please stay happy for me, please wish me good luck," this makes the girl so happy.

In fact, the girl thought that her doll was lost forever; on the other hand, all that the doll has done is gone on a beautiful trip; that is how she has come to believe. So, this is how this beautiful relationship begins, the relationship between the little girl and Franz Kafka and it lasts for a couple of weeks. When he and the little girl met, he read her from these carefully composed letters, the imagined adventures of the beloved doll; imaginary for him, whereas, it's real for the little girl because she believes in that. Well, for 3 weeks Kafka focused exclusively on the doll's letters and handed them on to the girl every day. After reading them he would pass that letter on to her and she would keep it, though she does not know how to read it, she would keep it as a sweet remembrance of her doll. Something like that goes on beautifully like this for some time.

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And, maybe now the time has come for the girl to realize and then what Kafka does, he presents her maybe after a couple of weeks he presents her with another doll, maybe the last letter or something like that. Then he says in the last letter probably this is my last letter and there are different versions of this story, there are different versions of the story. And, in some versions, it is said that Kafka even arranges a marriage of the doll and finds a match for the doll and all that.

And the little girl believes that. "Now I am about to be married I will be slightly busy. I may not be able to write so regularly for you therefore..." something like that, and then after that Kafka presents her with a new doll.

And, now the little girl thinks this is not her doll, now she tells him this is not my doll; it's true this is not your doll you may think like that, but look what your doll has written here. In fact, inside the doll, there is a letter and there it says this is actually me, my travels have changed me that is all; obviously, he talks of a profound truth.

Experiences change human beings, right. So, this is precisely probably what the doll is indicating, my experiences have changed me. So, you may not exactly remember, but I am your doll something like that. Well, many years elapse, and years later now the little girl is now a grownup girl and when she is searching one day maybe casually when she is searching through her doll she finds a small letter stuffed inside an unnoticed crevice.

She had probably not noticed it earlier, and then she just picks it up and reads. The summary it its simply means this "everything that you love you will eventually lose", but in the end, love will return in a different form. This is what she learns, such an extraordinary lesson in love, a lesson in life and that is something that all of us should also learn right. Because, every moment is precious, there is no point cribbing over a moment that is already gone.

Because, unless we are open to receiving the fresh idea, well or unless we are open to, if we do not block ourselves out, if we do not open ourselves out, if we simply block ourselves inside then there is no scope for fresh experience to come in. So, probably this beautiful story talks of very many things. In fact, this story went on to win a National Award for children's literature. So, a very remarkable short story, you will find it on the net may be in different versions.

I hope you enjoyed this right. How was the story? Does not it change you? In fact, the two stories that I mentioned, if you read very carefully, they may change you forever, they have the remarkable ability to affect you in a positive sense.

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Now, having read the story let us see what have we learnt from this, do we think we have learnt anything from this story at all? Well, for beginners, grief and loss are present everywhere, even a young child is not spared from that. Like you can of course, quickly recall what Buddha says right. Suffering is something that is permanent in this world. Well, we have to learn to cope with it.

Grief and loss are ubiquitous even for a young child and to recover one has to look for how love comes back in another form. The story is a beautiful story, at the end of the day, but the story teaches you how to cope with your grief, how to cope with your loss, and come to meaningful terms with it. Of course, the loss makes us bitter, loss turns us away from life, but we cannot be in that state forever, we have to get back.

Because life-sustaining forces always beckon us and now think of the story that is related to Buddha. In fact, once a lady who had lost her child, she goes to Buddha and she is crying profusely and she says somehow people tell me that you are a great guru, you are a reincarnation of Vishnu and all that, please somehow you have to get back the life of my kid, something like that.

Then Buddha knows it, but he cannot tell the crying lady what life is, what death is and death is inevitable. He says do not worry my dear, do not worry; Buddha had an extraordinary love and compassion for everybody. Anybody who went to him felt a motherly presence.

So, he consoles her and says, now just go around, if you can get me some mustard seeds from any house that has not witnessed death, I can definitely get back your kid.

all that you have to do is just go around and get me back some mustard seeds from that house that has not seen death. Now, this woman wipes her tears, and then she goes and goes on asking around. Now, that is when she realizes that every house has witnessed death, every house has seen loss, every house has seen some kind of tragedy or the other.

I do not think there will be any house that has not seen tragedy and during that travel, she realizes one great thing, that loss is inevitable, probably we need to come back, and then she comes back. A little overcome she says well I know what you mean. So, in its own way this story is making this little girl realize the profound truth that Buddha imparted to that lady right, do not you think so?

Now, the girl eventually comes to terms with the predicament of the doll, and therefore, when her object of affection returns even though in a changed form, she welcomes it. Because she has nurtured, she has nursed that hope that what she has lost will come back to her, that is a remarkable thing that our little girl learns; then this is how probably Kafka addresses the notions of loss, separation, and of course, then reuniting them in a little later way.

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Now, look at this entire structure, now what is this fiction doing here? Of course, it is a story, and obviously, we discussed that fiction is a lie. So, within these lies lie a profound truth,

within the lie, within this untruth lays a profound truth that loss is inevitable; coming to terms with loss is the order of the day.

So, within a lie is the greatest truth that humanity can ever discover, more than that the short story must give you enough hints as to how fiction can act as a coping agent, a coping mechanism. Because in the company of this short story we too must have thought of many losses that we must have gone through in life and this story must have offered even some ray of hope. Because at the end of the day, whatever we have lost we will get back, may not be the way we had seen them earlier, but in modified, better versions something like that, that is precisely what the story is seeming to hint at.

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Now, having read the story now think of it, initially probably while dealing with fiction we had relayed to Albert Camus, "Fiction is a lie through which we tell the truth." Now, do you think you understand the statement a little better?

Why fiction is a lie and what kind of truth does it inhabit within its scope and how it does house the greatest truth in all these things. Think about it, we will come back with another better and more riveting story than this.

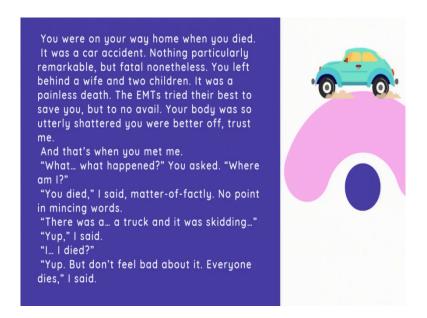
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Here is the second story as promised and I am sure you will definitely enjoy it, but here I request you to indulge me for a while. Because, from next week we are going to pick up drama, play, theatre, and all that, I wish to present this short story in the form of a short audio skit right.

This story is based on a dialogue between two individuals, you will get to know who they are therefore, allow me to enact this. So, what follows next is the dialogic interaction between the two characters that are present in the story. So, sit back, relax and enjoy listening to them while of course, the display is there, you can even read the story that accompanies the voice.

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"You were on your way home when you died. It was a car accident. Nothing particularly remarkable, but fatal nonetheless. You left behind a wife and two children. It was a painless death. The EMTs tried their best to save you, but to no avail. Your body was so utterly shattered you were better off, trust me. And, that is when you met me.

What happened? Where am I?

You died.

There was a truck and it was skidding.

Yup.

I died?

Yes, but do not feel bad about it. Everyone dies.

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You looked around. There was nothingness. Just you and me.

What is this place? Is this like the afterlife?

More or less.

But then are you are you god?

Yup, I am God.

My kids, my wife.

What about them?

Will they be all right?

That is what I like to see. You just died and your main concern is for your family. That is good stuff right there. You looked at me with fascination. To you, I did not look like God. I just looked like some man or possibly a woman. Some vague authority figure, maybe. More of a grammar school teacher than the almighty.

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"Don't worry," I said. "They'll be fine. Your kids will remember you as perfect in every way. They didn't have time to grow contempt for you. Your wife will cry on the outside, but will be secretly relieved. To be fair, your marriage was falling apart. If it's any consolation, she'll feel very guilty for feeling relieved."

"Oh," you said. "So what happens now? Do I go to heaven or hell or something?"

"Neither," I said. "You'll be reincarnated."

"Ah," you said. "So the Hindus were right,"

"All religions are right in their own way," I said. "Walk with me."

Do not worry. They will be fine. Your kids will remember you as perfect in every way. They did not have the time to grow contempt for you. Your wife will cry on the outside but will be secretly relieved. To be fair, your marriage was falling apart. If it's any consolation though, she will feel very guilty for feeling relieved.

So, what happens now? Do I... do I go to heaven or hell or something?

Neither. You will be reincarnated.

So, the Hindus were right.

All religions are right in their own way. Come, walk with me.

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You followed along as we strode through the void.

"Where are we going?"

"Nowhere in particular," I said. "It's just nice to walk while we talk."

"So what's the point, then?" You asked. "When I get reborn, I'll just be a blank slate, right? A baby. So all my experiences and everything I did in this life won't matter."

"Not so!" I said. "You have within you all the knowledge and experiences of all your past lives. You just don't remember them right now."

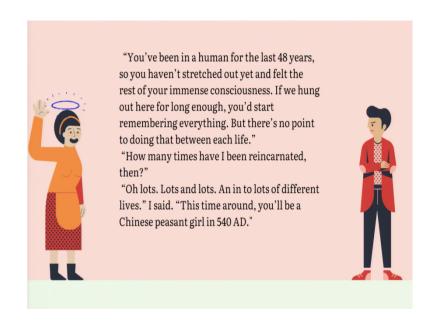
Where are we going?

Nowhere specific. It's just nice to walk while we talk, is not it?

I suppose so, but what is the point then? I mean when I get reborn, I will just be a blank slate, right? A baby. So, all my experiences and everything I did in this life it will not matter.

Not so, you have within you all the knowledge and experiences of all your past lives. You just do not remember them right now.

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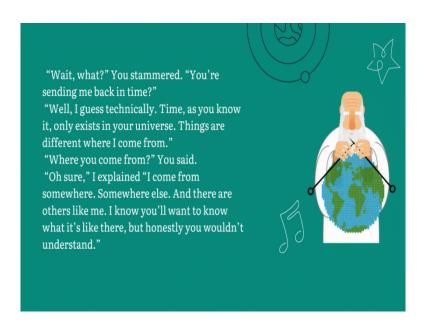
I stopped walking and took you by the shoulders, your soul is more magnificent, beautiful and gigantic than it can possibly imagine. A human mind can only contain a tiny fraction of what you are, it's like sticking your finger in a glass of water to see if it's hot or cold. You put a tiny part of yourself into the vessel and when you bring it back out you have gained all the experiences it had.

You have been a human for the last 48 years. So, you have not stretched out and felt the rest of your immense consciousness. If we hung out here for long enough you would start remembering everything. But there is no point in doing that between each life.

Wait. So, how many times have I been born then?

Lots and lots. And into lots of different lives. This time around, you will be a Chinese peasant girl in 540 AD.

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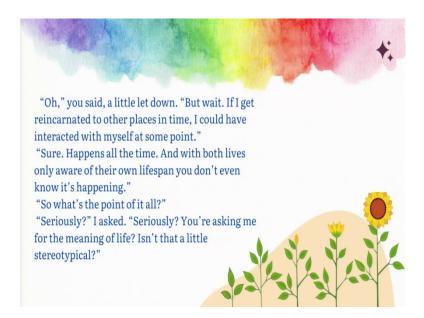
Wait, what? You are sending me back in time?

Well, I guess technically. Time, as it, only exists in your universe. Things are different where I come from.

Where do you come from?

Sure, I come from somewhere. Somewhere else. And there are others like me. I know you will want to know what it's like there, but honestly you would not understand.

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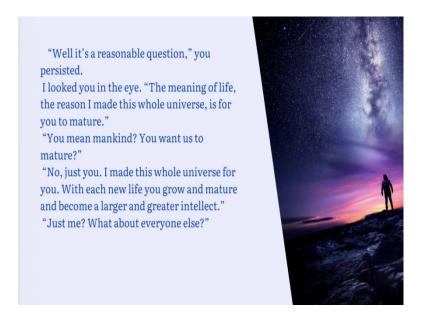
But wait. If I get reincarnated to other places in time, I could have interacted with myself at some point right.

Sure. Happens all the time. And with both lives only aware of their own life span you do not even know it's happening.

So, what is the point of it all?

Seriously? You are asking me for the meaning of life? Is not that a little stereotypical now?

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Well, it is a reasonable question.

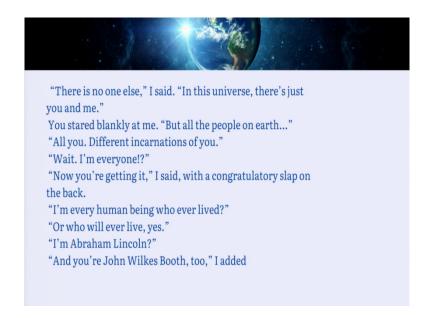
The meaning of life, the reason I made this whole universe is for you to mature.

You mean mankind? You want us to mature?

No, just you. I made this whole universe for you. With each new life, you grow and mature and become a larger and greater intellect.

Just me? But what about everyone else?

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There is no one else. In this universe, there is just you and me.

But, all the people on earth.

All you. Different incarnations of you.

Wait, hang on see you are telling me that I am everyone?

Now, you are getting it, yes.

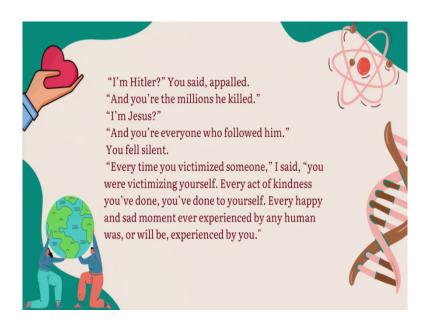
So, I am every human being who ever lived?

Or who will ever live, yes.

So, then I am Abraham Lincoln?

And you are John Wilkes Booth too.

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Hitler?

And you are the millions he killed.

I am Jesus?

And, you are everyone who followed him. Every time you victimized someone you are victimizing yourself. Every act of kindness you have done, you have done to yourself. Every happy and sad moment ever experienced by any human was or will be experienced by you.

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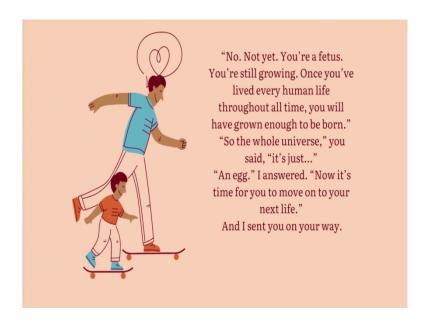
You thought for a long time.

But why? Why do all this?

Because someday you will become like me. Because that is what you are. You are one of my kind. You are my child.

Whoa, you mean I am a god?

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No. Not yet. You are a fetus. You are still growing. Once you have lived every human life throughout all time, you will have grown enough to be born.

So, the whole universe it's just...

Yes, you are right it is just an egg. Now it's time for you to move on to your next life buddy. And, I sent you on your way."

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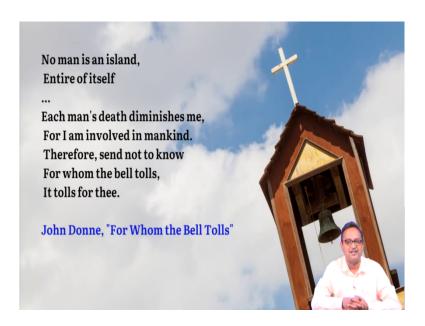


Yeah, how was the audio skit, and more than that how did you like the story? I am sure this must have been one of the remarkable short stories that any of us might have ever come across right and obviously, we are interested to know who this guy is. This is the brilliant guy Andy Weir, a well-known American novelist, and former computer programmer.

"The Egg" in fact, is one of his most famous short stories and it's been translated into more than 30 languages, more than that it's been adapted into short films, even an audio film, a video film, and all that. You just have to search YouTube with "The Egg" and Andy Weir, you will come up with brilliant versions of the celluloid versions of this particular short story.

And of course, he also writes very interesting sci-fi novels, but probably more than any of these novels, this particular short story seems to have earned him an extraordinary name and fame.

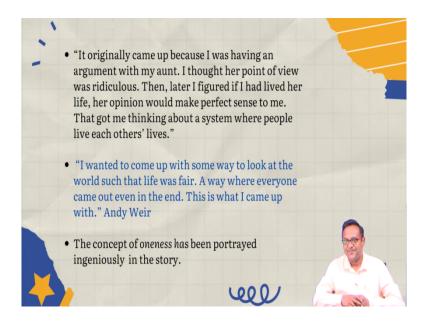
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So, when somebody asks him why he wrote it, what exactly does he mean by that? He seemed to have remarked something that John Donne told us ages ago. In fact, if you can quickly recall during metaphysical poetry we said, no man is an island entire of itself, each man's death diminishes me; it's from John Donne's "For Whom the Bell Tolls".

When everybody anybody dies or when you listen to anybody's death, well it dwindles us to a certain extent; because we are connected in extraordinary ways, probably the story reminds us of that.

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And, when the author was asked if there was any specific inspiration behind this. He says probably when he was having an argument with his aunt and when he refuses to see her point of view, she seemed to have very innocuously remarked; well you have not lived my life that is why you do not get to see what I say, that is why you do not see eye to eye with my argument.

Probably, that must have prodded our writer, the young writer to go on and think he is not even in his 50s, late 40s something like that, or about to be 50 and such an extraordinary story. And, he says I wanted to come up with some way to look at the world such that life was fair. A way where everyone came out even in the end. This is what I came up with; Andy Weir.

The concept of oneness. In fact, this is an extraordinary story for very many reasons. Now think of it, we discussed fiction, short fiction, and short story in terms of various elements: character, setting, theme all those various elements. Now, look at this. In fact, this is a short story devoid of any embellishment, a pure short story in its essence, is probably in the purest of the forms.

It does not require a detailed setting because you do not know where it is set. It does not even require an extensive background, exposition, and all that, just a dialogue. The short story is dialogic in nature and dialogic has more meaning than just to extend just to have a quick conversation between two.

And how everything, again we made use of this word called epiphany. How the god in the making, the character god in the making, and his conversations with the so, called god. The god you may not be a believer in God, I am aware that whether you are a believer or non-believer it's immaterial.

Now, come to think of it, if the entire life is one big goal, if the entire goal of the whole universe is towards evolution that is the principle, we constantly keep evolving. And so, is the universe even that too is evolving. And now look at where it is leading us towards.

The sudden realization that the entire universe is just a playground or a lab, an experimental room where an individual goes through various permutations, and combinations, and lives several millions of lives before he or she is turned into a perfect being.

And, how this entire universe is just a playground for that individual to live, learn, evolve, live, learn, evolve, mature. So, that finally, he or she or anybody they can become evolved creatures, perfect beings such a remarkable story right yeah.

Now, let me introduce you to the two young actors who perform these roles for you and of course, they let us also listen to them why they like the story. So, now, let me call the god who lend us god's voice; now I am going to show you the face of god yeah, Bidisha, please.

Yeah, hi here is god's face for you. She is Bidisha Mukherjee who played the role of god there. And, I would like to know why she likes the story, why do you like the story Bidisha? When you read this what happened to you?

I like the story so much because it brings us face to face with the concept of oneness through simple dialogue and we often wonder in our own lives, what is the purpose of life? There is so much suffering, so much disappointment, and also moments interspersed with happiness and kindness.

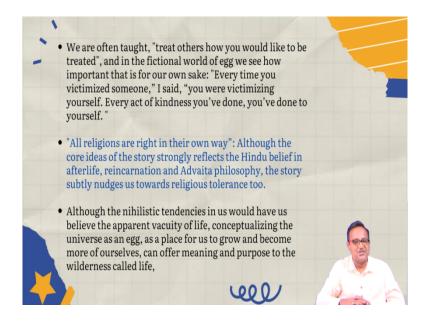
So, when I am lost for meaning, I think yes maybe that just might be the purpose of our lives, it is for us to mature and to grow through the different experiences and keep on accumulating experiences and impressions. And, I think that gets portrayed very nicely through the story, that is why I love the story.

Wonderful thank you. We have heard god and we have seen god. Now its time for us to again listen to the god in the making and also see him face to face. Now, this is Satwik who played the role god in the making, let us ask him why he likes the story. Why do you like the story Satwik?

"I like this story because when you read the story intensely, after reading it intensely you cannot even think about harming others. Because, you will have realized that harming others is as bad as harming yourself and when once you have realized that, and if everybody can realize that, then the evil in the world is already reduced significantly. And, if one story can achieve something like this, then what more could a person want to like it."

That is brilliant. Thank you, thank you. Wonderful, well said, how brilliant right.

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So, wonderfully said. So, well said by both of them of course, now that you have heard why they like the story and now that you have heard why I like the story. Now, this is the time for a little introspection right. Now, having read the story and having been drawn to its vortex, now think of what you like about it. Of course, there are plenty of aspects to like in the story right from its structure to its simplicity, the powerful dialogues all that.

And, more than that the vision it embodies within its scope, the great philosophical insight it offers, the oneness it tries to teach; all of them are remarkable. Now, see if you can formulate your own answers, and maybe you can even record them on our SWAYAM portal, try to see that.

Thank you. In fact, I hope you enjoyed both these stories like Borges's story "The Book of Sand", these two stories are remarkable. And, I am sure you enjoyed reading them, listening to them. And, see if these stories can inspire you to write. In some way, that would be absolutely an extraordinary venture. See you in the next class.

Thank you.