

STUDY MATERIAL FOR DEGREE-II (HONS.), ENGLISH, PAPER-IV

Dr. Suman Sinha

Department of English

R. N. College, Hajipur

SHORT STORY – THE BASEMENT ROOM

AUTHOR- GRAHAM GREENE

The Basement Room is a short story written by Graham Greene. The story was adapted as a film 'The Fallen Idol'. The story 'The Basement Room' was included in '**Twenty One Stories**', a collection of stories published in 1954 by Graham Greene. Graham Greene was a popular English novelist, short story writer, playwright and a journalist of the twentieth century. He was shortlisted for Nobel Prize in 1966 and 1967. Some of his popular works are, **The Heart of the Matter, Power and Glory, Brighton Rock, The End of the Affair, Our Man in Havana** and many others. Apart from the twenty five novels Graham Greene has to his credit some popular short stories like, **Destructors, End of the Party, Across the Bridge**, and many others.

The story of '**The Basement Room**' is based on the experience of a seven year old innocent boy, Philip. The incidents that take place at this moment of life leaves an impact of fear and cruelty that keeps him haunting for the whole life. He is not relieved of the trauma even at the time of his death. Sixty years later, at the time of his death he startled his secretary with the question, 'Who is she?' This story is about a child's journey that began with the hope of exploring life and ending with despair that the experience led to. In other words, the story spans between 'This is life' and 'That was life'. 'This is life' represented hope, freedom, excitement and adventure but culminated with 'That was life' which represented disappointment and despair.

Philip's parents had gone for a fortnight's holiday. He was left alone in the great Belgravia house with the butler Mr. Baines and his wife Mrs. Baines. The nurses did not turn up. After the doors were shut Philip begins to live. He explores the great Belgravia house because he was alone and independent and free from parental control. He moves freely and even goes through the green baize door to the pantry and even to the basement room. Usually, the green baize door divided the area of the masters and the servants.

Mrs. Baines was busy with her household work like pulling down the curtains and covering the chairs. Philip moves to the pantry to find Mr. Baines but he was not there. He went down to basement room. As he crosses the green baize he crosses the dividing line between the other rooms and the basement. The green baize door is very significant because it separates the world of innocence from the world of knowledge; world of love and hate; and the world of child and adult.

Philip discovers a new world behind the green baize. He enters the adult world where Baines is reading newspaper. Philip feels delighted and excited as he enters the new sphere of life and thinks, 'this is life'. The line 'this is life' is used every time he enters a new sphere of life. The following lines describe the joyful experience:

All his seven nursery years vibrated with the strange, the new experience. His crowded busy brain was like a city which feels the earth tremble at a distant earthquake shock.

Philip loved the company of Mr. Baines because he treated him lovingly. He shared with him the stories of adventures. He served him with Dundee cakes even between the meals. He treated him as a man. Mr. Baines and Philip enjoyed the company of each other and both seem to disapprove the presence of Mrs. Baines. She came to the basement room ruining their pleasure. Philip did not like

Mrs Baines because she was authoritative and harsh. She did not allow Philip the way he liked to live. He did not like the constraint and interference. Her voice was a voice in a nightmare. Philip did not like the way she behaved with Mr. Baines. He hated her because she was unjust towards Mr. Baines and made him cower. Mrs. Baines, however, tried to compensate for her harsh behaviour by making sweet food.

Philip felt pity for Baines. He develops a sense of responsibility towards Mr. Baines. He, like the master of the house desired to take care of the old servant by being good to him. The attitude of Mrs. Baines had snatched away the happiness of Mr. Baines. Hence, Philip decides to go out for a walk with him. Mrs. Baines refuses the proposal and restrains Baines from going out. In spite of the reluctance shown by Mrs. Baines Philip goes out to enjoy another experience of life. Philip moves alone on the road and comes across a sweet shop. There he finds Baines with a girl whom Philip had never seen. He was quite inquisitive about this girl. Baines had once told Philip about his niece. Philip wondered if she was his niece. Philip was desirous to know everything. He was desirous to know who that girl was. This question, 'who is she?', had lingered for the whole life. According to the narrator, the memory of this question had 'conditioned his career, the long austerity of his life; when he was dying he said: 'Who is she?' This scene became instrumental in changing Philip's life. He unconsciously enters into the adult world that moulded his life.

Philip, just for the sake of fun, imitated the voice of Mrs. Baines and called, 'Baines'. The two shivered at this and immediately the spell of happiness disappeared. Philip regretted for this as he never wanted to hurt Baines but he tried to laugh at Mrs. Baines. The terrifying image of Mrs. Baines was enough to spoil their pleasure.

Philip's experience of adult world left him puzzled. Baines gives a responsibility of keeping secret of this meeting, though; he very well knew the shrewd and cunning ways of Mrs. Baines. Mrs. Baines cunningly extracts the secret of meeting out of the innocent child. She was suspicious of Mr. Baines's extra-marital relation. Philip was angry and miserable because he failed to keep Baines's secret. Instead, Mrs. Baines traps the innocent child. She promises him with a Mecanno Set if he did not reveal anything to Baines.

Mr. Baines tells Philip about Mrs. Baines being called away as her mother was dying and she won't be able to come back till next day.

Philip watched Mr. Baines with uneasiness and thought and thought it to be wrong for a grown up man like Baines to be merry. He felt uneasy with whatever was happening. Philip was 'divided by the fear and attraction of life'. Before Philip could realise anything he was trapped in the adult world and their secrets. This frustrated the boy.

Baines was happy and felt like celebrating the day in absence of Mrs. Baines. He desired to share his time with Emmy. Philip was scared for both himself and Mr. Baines. The narrator of the story describes the stress of Philip's mind:

He couldn't help wondering at every bite, at every draught of the ginger pop, what Mrs. Baines would say if she ever learnt of this meal;.....

Philip was sleeping in his nursery and was dreaming something horrible when suddenly he woke up to find Mrs. Baines's presence. He was scared and terrorised to see her. He felt helpless for Baines. Philip struggled more and more as he discovers the adult world. Mrs. Baines moved carefully and softly towards the room to find Baines. Before she could discover anything Philip screamed 'Baines, Baines' and spoilt her efforts. Fear gripped and scared Philip as Mrs. Baines appeared as a nightmare to him.

In a scuffle between Mr. and Mrs. Baines she fell down into the hall. Philip was unable to understand as to why she was lying on the floor. He escaped from the house and desired to stay in the

garden that was far away from the adult world. Philip was terrified and had felt insecure in such a situation. The narrator describes the situation:

The whole house had been turned over to the grown-up world; he wasn't safe in the night-nursery; their passions had flooded it. The only thing he could do was to get away,.....

He moved and moved and finally reached to a place where he realised that he was lost. His mind was torn with dilemma of going back but he was frightened to think of Mrs. Baines. However, he was recovered by the police and brought him back to his Belgravia house which was now piled with secrets. Philip resisted to enter the house because he thought Mrs. Baines lying in the hall. He was afraid of her even though he came to know she was dead. Philip decides to keep no more secrets even though Baines eyes urged him to do so. He delinked himself from everything like, love, life and Baines. He does not respond to Baines. According to the narrator

'But the wires were cut, the messages just faded out into the enormous vacancy...'

The whole incident changed the life. His mind was haunted with memories that spoilt his personality. He never used the Meccano Set because it reminded him of the fearful, cruel and malicious Mrs. Baines. All his ability to create was lost. He held Emmy responsible for everything.

Thus, **The Basement Room** reveals the psychology of an innocent child and the impact of the incidents that changed the entire personality of the child. The story portrays the journey that began with a sense of excitement and ended with rejection of the world that the child had discovered. Apparently, the world that appeared attractive turned to be a nightmare. The narrator of the story very delicately describes the intricacies of mind that left the man in shambles even after sixty years.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

SHORT STORY: BASEMENT ROOM

AUTHOR: GRAHAM GREENE

Born: October 2, 1904 at Berkhamsted, England

Died: April 3, 1991 at Switzerland

Main Characters: Philip, Mr. Baines, Mrs Baines and Emmy

Nature of the story: Psycho- analysis of a child's character
