The Happy Moth

*“Be happy for this moment. This moment is your life.”*

*-Omar Khayyam*

Omar Khayyam, a Persian philosopher, mathematician, astronomer and poet, puts into words the human quest for happiness. Khayyam’s views on happiness from the 11th century resonate with modern-day authors. Don Marquis is one of these said authors. He shows this view in his poem “the lesson of the moth”. In this short poem, a cockroach named archy gains perspective on his own life by talking to a moth intent on frying himself on a light bulb. By the end of the conversation, archy considers the fact that his life may not be as happy as he thought it was, realizes that the moth has purpose in what he is doing, and finds that he himself wishes he were as passionate about something as the moth was. In this way, Marquis suggest that a life well lived is a life in which one has great passion for something, and is willing to die for this passion.

When archy the cockroach converses with a moth trying to immolate himself on a bulb, he is aghast at the notion that the moth would willingly disregard his life in pursuit of the light bulb. He says to the moth,

if that had been and uncovered

candle instead of an electric

light bulb you would

now be a small unsightly cinder

have you no sense.

The idea of knowingly dying is foreign to the cockroach, as he is a cockroach and his ancestors survived the prehistoric era. He shows that what he is concerned about first and foremost is preservation of life. Once the moth explains his philosophy on his goal, archy considers the fact that he is focused on living a long life and may not be as happy as he though he was. He says,

myself i would rather have

half the happiness and twice

the longevity

This shows that he is not focused on happiness in his life and would rather live a long life instead.

The moth has purpose in his life, and is therefore happy. The moth believes that,

it is better to be a part of beauty

for one instant and then cease to

exist than to exist forever

and never be a part of beauty

It is easy to see that the moth is quite passionate about this, and this gives him a purpose. He wants to be a part of something greater than himself and that makes him happy. In response to being questioned about his motives, the moth replies,

fire is beautiful

and we know that if we get

too close it will kill us

but what does that matter

it is better to be happy

for a moment

and be burned up with beauty

than to live a long time

and be bored all the while

He shows that he is not afraid of death and would rather face his death in a beautiful way than live a long, boring life.

After talking with the moth, archy realizes that he is not striving for anything, and his life does not have purpose. In the end, archy says,

but at the same time I wish

there was something I wanted

as badly as he wanted to fry himself

In this quote, archy is acknowledging the fact that maybe his life is not as fulfilling as the moths, and he wishes it were not so. Through meeting the moth, he realizes what having a purpose can do to you, how it can make you very passionate and happy about life.

Marquis juxtaposes the rash, living for the moment essence of the moth with the calculated, logical essence of the cockroach to exhibit the idea that a meaningful and happy life is more important to a life well lived than living a long time. In other words, Marquis is in favor of quality over quantity.

Work Cited

Marquis, Don. "Literature | DonMarquis.com." *DonMarquis.com*. John Batteiger, 1995-2014. Web. 25 Feb. 2014. <http://donmarquis.com/literature?pp=651>.