

Fritz

by Satyajit Ray

1. (a) With reference to the short story 'Fritz' describe the difference between the Bundi of Jayanto's childhood and the present times.

Answer: Satyajit Ray found the perfect setting for his short story 'Fritz' in the small historic town of Bundi. Exploring the theme of macabre with a tinge of humor, he required a setting that would evoke horror without any artificial interference and forced technique. Ray invoked a sense of morbidity in his short stories and Bundi with its old roots lent a sense of the supernatural and horror to the story.

"Not many people visited Bundi," and yet Shankar and Jayanto found it a perfect place to explore during a holiday. Jayanto had memories attached to Bundi and he wanted to relive those and experience the emotions that came along with it.

Jayanto finds nothing changed in Bundi of today than the one he had visited as a child. He had expected Bundi to change and taken up by the storm of modernization. In reality, the only visible change in Bundi was the arrival of electricity in the city. Bundi was just the same as he had left. The streets were still cobbled with houses jutting out from the first floor. The carvings on the houses and the wooden doors were a reminder of the Rajputana that existed in the older times. The circuit house had the same look, the same furniture. It seemed nothing had changed in Bundi except the intrusion of the electric poles on the street.

Jayanto arrived in Bundi to find that time had come to a standstill as he went back in his memory to relive his childhood days. Bundi had changed only in his imagination but on his visit, he realized Bundi was still the same.

(b) What is the significance of the last line in the story?

Answer: The last line brings an element of surprise and shock where the readers are left in perpetual confusion whether to believe in the supernatural or not. The readers find a chill running down their spine when the remains of a skeleton of the size of a doll are found at the end. Satyajit Ray is famous for writing stories that appeal to both children as well as adults. Many of his stories are written in the horror genre and Fritz is one of them. Ray introduces the theme of supernatural and macabre in this story but on a very subtle note. His stories induced an element of shock and mystery in the readers through the setting and words. Fritz, set in the location of Bundi, is about Jayanto recounting his childhood memories which come to haunt him when he visits the old places, only to find nothing has changed with time. He is reminded of his Swiss doll, a favorite toy with whom he talked and

shared most of his feelings as a child. The Swiss doll had been mauled by stray dogs and the separation was painful. Jayanto clearly remembered that he had ensured a very dignified burial for his doll under the Deodar tree.

The horror begins when the Swiss doll returns to talk to Jayanto, trying to pick up the strands of their relationship from where it ended. Jayanto is horrified at the sequence of events that take place. He is convinced of the doll's return from the dead. His friend Shankar lends a sane voice, neither believing Jayanto's words nor dismissing them. He suggests going to the Deodar tree where the Swiss doll was buried to find remains and be convinced of its fate.

However, much to the horror of Shankar and Jayanto, the last line reveals that after digging under the tree, a human skeleton of the size of the doll was found.

The last line of the story leaves everything to the imagination of the readers. Readers are allowed the comfort to either rue in the elements of supernatural or allow their logic to supersede. The logical readers will find the entire situation funny and laugh off it as comic relief while the believers can remain perpetually engulfed in the world of the dead and macabre. Thus, the last line serves a dual purpose, while it induces a sense of comic relief, it also gives a sense of shock and surprise to the readers.

(c) Jayanto appeared absent-minded throughout the trip. Why? How did the author assuage his mind on the night of the incident?

Answer: Fritz by Satyajit Ray is a short story in the horror genre. The story explores two friends, Jayanto and Shankar visiting Bundi on a short vacation. While Shankar was interested in visiting Bundi due to its old-world charm and mention in Tagore's literature, Jayanto had spent a significant part of his early life in Bundi and was keen to relive his old memories.

During the period, he stayed in Bundi at the Dak Bungalow where he had been gifted a Swiss doll named Fritz by his uncle. In no time, Fritz had become Jayanto's favorite toy, treating the doll almost like a confidant and a true sharer of his feelings just as he would do with a human friend. The relationship of the doll and Jayanto ended on a very tragic note, with the doll being shredded to pieces by a pack of stray dogs. Fritz was buried but had remained an essential part of Jayanto's life throughout. He was a very distinct memory and the visit to Bundi rekindled those old emotions and feelings within him for Fritz reminded him of the dear friend he had lost. This is why Jayanto remained absent-minded throughout the trip.

Jayanto was woken up one night by some nocturnal visitors in the Dak house. The rumblings of these creatures had created a sense of irrational fear in his mind which he had started associating with supernatural elements and the Swiss doll. Fritz. Shankar realized

his friend was haunted by the memories of the past and therefore comforted him and tried to calm him down with soothing, calm words so that he could manage a good night's sleep after a tiring day. He convinced Jayanto of no presence of any untoward elements in the room and reassured him by checking the room himself. He also suggested giving a tranquilizer to Jayanto to soothe his words.

Despite all these assurances, Jayanto was sure of the presence of Fritz around him and thus finally, the author relented by suggesting they dig it up under the Deodar tree to do away with his friend's fear for once and for all.

Long Questions and Answers

1. Evaluate 'Fritz' as a mystery story or thriller.

Answer: Fritz is a queer story which keeps the readers guessing throughout. It is not ghastly, but a bit ghostly. The suspense keeps building up, but it never turns bizarre or overly frightening. It appeals to child and adult alike as it teases the imagination with the promise of the unknown.

The story begins on an easy note with the introduction of two childhood friends, Shankar and Jayanto. Although Jayanto appears to be preoccupied right from the beginning, yet he was very eager to come to Bundi, but also fell quiet after reaching it. When both the friends were strolling, Jayanto was struck with the thought of a Deodar tree. He was absolutely thrilled to find it. When questioned, he revealed that something paranormal brought him here. 'Memory is a strange business', and in bits and parts, he recalled everything about a doll he had possessed. It was a twelve-inch long figure of an old man, brought from Switzerland by one of his uncles. The very thought of an old man as a doll, somehow makes the readers wonder. Another detail was that it was not mechanized and very lifelike. It had a smile on its face and it was possible to bend and twist its limbs, and the uncle told him that he would respond only to the name Fritz and nothing else. At that time Jayanto had a lot of toys as he was the only son of his parents. But once he got Fritz, he left all other toys and played only with the doll. He would talk to him for hours, and he had this uncanny feeling that the doll could understand every word of his. There was such a smile on its face and a look in its eyes. Sometimes he would feel the doll could talk to him, if he spoke in German. Well, we can rationalize this by thinking that it was a childhood fantasy of an over-sensitive boy, but yes somewhere the readers become aware of something deeper at this point of time.

Then comes the story of what happened to the doll. One day when Jayanto was away from the doll, a couple of dogs fought over it and damaged it beyond recognition. The boy felt the doll did not exist anymore. It was dead and thus was buried under the Deodar.

The suspense grips stronger when we read what happened in the night. Nothing blood-curdling, but a strong doubt that some presence was felt in the night. Jayanto woke up from

his sleep saying that something, maybe an animal, was in the room. It was strange that the doors and the windows were closed. He to his horror found small footmarks on the cover of his quilt. Shankar made it light by saying that it might be a cat, but Jayanto was disturbed.

That night in the circuit house, Jayanto told Shankar that it was Fritz who walked over the quilt. As Shankar felt that his friend was becoming obsessed with the doll, there was only one way to bring him out of this. So he decided to dig the ground under the Deodar tree where Fritz was buried. The writer builds suspense amidst the humorous exchange with the gardener, by juxtaposing it with the anxious expression on Jayanto's face. His shirt's collar was soaked in sweat. Then he made a strange sound. His eyes were bulging as he pointed with a trembling finger. The spade slipped from the gardener's hand. Shankar too gaped at the ground, opened-mouthed in horror, amazement, and disbelief. In the hole, was lying a perfect twelve-inch little human skeleton.

Satyajit Ray ends the story by leaving the rest to the imagination of the readers. It builds up a spooky feeling with subtle hints of the unreal, more of a paranormal genre.

2. Compare and contrast the characters of Jayanto and Shankar.

Answer: The protagonists of Fritz, Jayanto, and Shankar were childhood friends; they were together in school and college. Both enjoyed the company of each other and liked to take vacations together. Both had been thinking of visiting Rajasthan for a long time. Jayanto had a fascination for Bundi, but Shankar was puzzled with the choice. Nevertheless, he appreciated the natural beauty of Bundi and derived much pleasure from the old world charm of the place.

Jayanto worked in the editorial division of a newspaper and Shankar was a school teacher. The different kinds of jobs did not interfere with their friendship. There was an easy camaraderie between them and they shared their thoughts without reservation. Thus Shankar came to know his friend's sentiments for the place and appreciated them.

But the similarities ended there. Jayanto was overly emotional and prone to imaginative flights. He even had to take the help of tranquilizers for anxiety and depression. Shankar was down to earth, practical and had no flights of fancy. He always tried to show the practical side of things to his friend. When he saw Jayanto rather quiet, after coming to Bundi, he tried to make a rational explanation by thinking that it was natural to feel depressed because of past memories. When Jayanto thought something had walked into his room at night, Shankar tried to convince him that it must be a cat or some animal.

Ultimately, when the obsession about the doll increased, he tried to put an end to it by getting the burial spot dug. Thus Shankar emerges as the more practical of the two; but what happens at the end puzzles him as he never expected the skeleton to be there, making

Jayanto's sensitivity, the winner at the end.

Of the two, Shankar is the more mature one, taking care of Jayanto, who needed brotherly care and at times tranquilizers to control his hypersensitivity.