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Existential Quandary of a Young Man in Patrick White's *The Ham Funeral*

Abstract:

The play addresses some fundamental existential questions faced by the protagonist such as the meaning of existence and the life as a human being, its authenticity, true identity, passion for living, its function and development, and optimism in an oppressive or hostile environment. It also deals with the meaning of suffering, pain and death, the meaning of life in the light of these negative points such as anxiety, despair, alienation, loneliness, guilt, doubt and meaninglessness. The protagonist feels aimless, alone and uncertain. His alienation is as an essential aspect of his artistic identity. As a poet, he increasingly trusts subjective interpretations of life and seeks a self-construction of identity. He finds it difficult to balance his inner thoughts with his external experiences. At the end, he realises his responsibility and matures as an artist.

Key words: existence, life, death, meaning, alienation

Introduction:

The *Ham Funeral* deals with Young Man lodging in a house of Mrs. and Mr. Lusty, who searches for a meaning in his life. In the basement reside Lustys and the Young Man lives upstairs in his dream world with his girl, Anima. He has isolated himself from the reality of life and the basement. This Young Man is an aspiring poet but falls short of words for his expression. Soon Mr. Lusty dies unexpectedly and Mrs. Lusty announces a grand funeral, “an ‘am funeral”, in his honour. He becomes entranced by the landlady when the he finds himself drawn into desperate and dangerous seduction scene. Only when he is confronted by the real world of Lustys, he leaves the house in search for wholeness.

Although Young Man speaks of the “poets’ tragedy”- “to know too much, and never enough”, he is a poet only in his dreams, for his only poem has been discarded in the trash can. He asks Alma Lusty, “Tell me, Mrs. Lusty, do you expect much of life?” (*Four Plays Volume V, Issue VIII August 2017*)

21) This statement tells us about the inquisitive nature of the young man who seeks answers for his life's riddle.

The Young man is physically and emotionally detached from the reality of his life and the repellent reality in the basement where “the silent landlord and his bursting wife” reside (FP24). He is unhappy with his setting, Lustys and most of all, himself. He is a confused man, who looks at his own experience and utters the following words:

I'm certainly not clever. Sometimes my lack of cleverness makes me desperate. It seems that everybody else understands which button to press, which lever to pull, which tablet to take, to achieve the maximum happiness or the required dream... Sometimes I stand in the street and watch them. Then my ignorance begins to choke me. The answer is either tremendously simple, or tremendously involved. But either way, it's something I still fail to grasp. (FP21)

He is a fragmented personality; only partially developed who wants a way to come out of his confused state of affairs. He wants to succeed as a poet, composing new lines each time. He tried his best, but could not come out successfully. Akerholt in her book *Patrick White* opines:

However, the embryonic poet's inner retreat is a non-constructive rather than a non-communicative state of mind; he is full of his own importance and his own failure: ... Like Will he retreats, but unlike Will, he finds no meaning; like Alma, he searches, but unlike Alma, he only watches the faces in the street for the answer to “the required dream”... (16).

Leading a lonely life, Young Man turns to a girl who is an inspiration for him. The girl lives in the apartment across the hallway from the Young Man. On asking the whereabouts of this girl, the landlady tells that her name is Phyllis Pither who works for a firm of gas-fitters in Kennington. She is a “steady girl” who takes care of her aged aunt. The Young Man had never seen the girl, but has formed some kind of relationship with her in his mind. In her image, the Young Man found his Anima, in whom he looked inwards to his own experience; as Anima says, “Am I your other self?” (FP 57) Here White has depicted Jungian Psychology, in portraying the anima as a character. It is said to manifest itself by appearing in dreams.

The Young Man is already struggling in his life to find answers to his questions but gets dishearten by the quarrels of Lustys. He is confused and unable to solve the puzzle of his mystery. Unable to understand what to do, he resorts to his own alter ego. To find the path, he

asks his anima, “Then tell me what is the most I can expect? How am I to discover?” (FP32) As Young man’s subconscious self, the girl materialises to talk to him. She advises the Young Man to live fully in the present moment. To live in the present, is to live where life is happening, as the past and the future are mere allusions. Avoidance of responsibility is a ubiquitous human dilemma. Therefore she persuades the Young Man to go down stairs and act in the play and to analyse the things happening in the basement. The Anima figure wants the Young Man to take responsibility for the happenings around him, instead of just witnessing it. It is one of the main tenets of Existentialism as it challenges us to take responsibility for ourselves and for the life we choose to lead.

Since the acceptance of responsibility begets personal empowerment, the Young Man could take his life into his own hands. Taking responsibility for one’s own life is a positive process that leads to much improved functioning. Franklin has given a general guide for finding meaning:

We must perform a kind of Copernican Revolution, and given the question of the meaning of life an entirely new twist. To wit?: It is life itself that asks questions of man... It is not up to man to question; rather, he should recognize that he is questioned by life; he has to respond by being responsible; and he can answer to life only by answering for his life... (62)

When the Young Man enters the basement, he finds the landlord dead. He is taken aback, as for the first time he witnesses a dead body. The landlord’s death brings him into reality. Koestenbaum has summarized the good effects of death:

Once he has recognized and admitted the inevitability of his death, the individual is on the way to becoming courageous, fearless, and decisive. Wherever he feels indecision and lack of courage, he must remind himself that life will end for him. The symbolic threat of death, which often is the cause of his indecision, will then disappear, since its basic fraudulence will have been made manifest. He will be able once more to steer his life with courage and decisiveness. (26)

Such realisation of death makes one feel responsible. The individual realises that he has to act immediately upon such situations, that he must face the fact of life and come to a decision. Koestenbaum says, “The pressure of the thoughts of death is a persistent and nagging (and most effective) reminder that he is coerced to make some sense of his life, and that he is to do it ‘now’ ” (27) therefore the Young Man feels the responsibility of doing something. He asks

Mrs. Lusty about the relatives, if there are any, for the funeral ceremony. He says, "Leave it to me, Mrs. Lusty. Where do all these people live?" (FP 37)

Scene seven is a gruesome and a shocking scene for the Young Man, when he leaves his lodging to bring the relatives of Mrs. Lusty. Here, on the street, he meets two dirty scavengers, who live on the discarded materials. These ladies are on the verge of living as they search through waste for the items that they can use. The first lady finds a fish in the garbage tin and starts to eat. Then she finds a string of pearls and swallows few of them. The conversation begins between them but they all are shocked at the sight of dead foetus in the bin. The Young Man has never witnessed such a brutal act. He is shocked by this situation, but at the very moment he gains consciousness and expresses a sense of compassion towards it. He witnesses death- a fact of life, a universal truth; first of his landlord and then of the dead foetus. He shows sympathy and laments, "You died so soon... or weren't even born." (FP 43)

In Act II, Mrs. Lusty has organised a funeral feast for her deceased husband. All the relatives have gathered in the house and are criticizing Mrs. Lusty for the consequences. The Young Man isolates himself from the happenings going on in the basement. He is unable to face the mourners as he can listen to their conversations. He has a corner of pity for Alma, "But she can't throw them off. Her consciousness sticks to her. Her confused soul lumbers through the labyrinth, laughing when it should cry, and crying when it should laugh. Such confusion is catching. If it weren't for that I might have gone down." (FP 54) His Anima starts to talk to him. She tells about the reality of life from which he feels disgusted. She tells him to go downstairs, to face the reality which "stinks" (55) to him and gives him a hint of his responsibility. She says, "And don't you think you're responsible? For some of it at least?" (FP 55)

The Young Man enters into the basement and confronts the relatives, and finally asks them to leave. He saves Alma Lusty from the relative's witticism. Both are left alone in the house. The Young Man is contemplative of Will Lusty, who was content with his life. Now the Young Man could understand Will Lusty clearly, "But Will was wise." (FP 63) The landlady, on the other hand is irritated and wants the Young man to fill the gap in her life. She now considers him as Fred, her lover and tries to allure him. She is desperate to embrace the Young Man, to feel the warmth again and says, "No man ever really leaves the breast. That's our weapon. The softest weapon in the world." (FP 64) She wants him at any cost and surrenders herself to him. But the Young Man moves away.

The Young Man wrestles with Alma Lusty on the bed and detests her act. He says, “Lie there in your own sweat! I’d call you ‘whore’ if I hadn’t made you one.” (*FP* 67) The Young Man almost strangulates her by putting his knee on her stomach and throttling her neck. The landlady cries, “You didn’t kill me. Jack, but couldn’t ’uv done a better job if you ’ad.” (*FP* 67) He follows his alter- ego, “but flesh, unfortunately, isn’t the final answer” (68) and successfully comes out of her embrace. The Young Man matures in this scene, as Akerholt says:

The experience of the flesh serves as initiation from adolescence to manhood, from inactivity to creativity. Moreover, in denying the kindness of his action, the Young Man realises its significance: that it is part of role to remove the visitors who have outplayed their usefulness. (*Patrick White* 31)

Life gives us the challenge to find the answers to these pressing questions. It is upon us, as to how we cope up with life in the midst of paradoxes, puzzles and mysteries. Though solitude allows his mind to rest in contentment and wander between new thoughts and ideas, yet it is the girl’s presence and landlord’s experience that incites his moment of realisation. It is only in the end that the Young Man comes out of his dream world into the world of reality.

The Young Man realises his responsibility, his abilities and limitations as well. He had the free will to decide his own fate. He had to choose from any one entity either the spirit or the flesh. But no amount of cajolery and no attempt at seduction could deter him from his path. To become free from the bondage of carnal desires of the landlady was essential, for his spiritual growth. Thus he attains ‘individuation’. By the end of the play, White renders a portrait of a mind that has achieved emotional, intellectual and artistic maturation.

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