

ENG440A: Topics in Literary Genres



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THE WASP NEST & THE GRAY

NIVEDAN

GOOD MORNING CLASS. I HOPE YOU READ BOTH THE TEXTS WE HAVE SHARED. TODAY WE WILL BE HAVING A PANEL DISCUSSION BASED ON THE TWO TEXTS. BOTH 'THE GRAY' AND 'WASPS' NEST' EXPLORE THE THEME OF MORALITY AND ETHICAL AMBIGUITY. IT IS MORE APPARENT IN THE SHORT FILM BUT WE WILL SEE HOW EVEN THE WASPS' NEST REPRESENTS SIMILAR THEMES. STARTING OFF WITH 'THE GRAY', IT EXPLORES THE VERY FASCINATING THEME OF ETHICAL AMBIGUITY. A VERY CENTRAL PART OF THAT THEME IS DEPICTED THROUGH THE EVIL AND GOOD METRE SHOWN. ON WHAT BASIS DO YOU THINK IT EVALUATES DIFFERENT PEOPLE?

MAYANK

IT'S AN INTERESTING CONCEPT, THE IDEA OF A MACHINE MEASURING YOUR MORALITY AND DECIDING WHERE YOU END UP IN THE AFTERLIFE. IT'S FASCINATING TO SEE HOW THE ACTIONS, BEHAVIOUR, AND CHOICES OF EACH CHARACTER ARE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT BY THE MORALITY METER WHEN CALCULATING THEIR MORAL STANDING. TAKE THE FIRST CHARACTER, KLAUS, FOR EXAMPLE. HIS ACT OF CHEATING ON HIS WIVES, RAISING THE PRICE OF INSULIN BY 500%, AND THE FACT THAT ALL OF HIS CHILDREN WISH HE WERE DEAD CONTRIBUTE TO WHY THE MORALITY METER DEEMED HIM EVIL AND SENT HIM TO HELL.

PRASHANT

THAT'S A GOOD POINT. IT SHOWS THAT THE MORALITY METRE CONSIDERS A PERSON'S OVERALL BEHAVIOUR AND NOT JUST ONE SINGLE ACTION. ON THE OTHER HAND, THE OLD LADY LUCY IS DESCRIBED AS A SOCIAL WORKER WHO HAS A CLEAN RECORD EXCEPT FOR ONE INSTANCE OF INDECENT EXPOSURE. DESPITE THIS, FRANCIS STILL CHOOSES TO SEND HER TO HEAVEN BASED ON HER A "GOOD" READING ON THE MORALITY METRE, INDICATING THAT HER OVERALL GOOD DEEDS OUTWEIGH THAT ONE INSTANCE OF IMPROPRIETY.

PUSHPANSHU

EXACTLY. IT'S CLEAR THAT THE MORALITY METRE TAKES INTO ACCOUNT THE CONTEXT AND MOTIVATIONS BEHIND A PERSON'S ACTIONS. IT WEIGHS THEM AGAINST THEIR OVERALL BEHAVIOUR AND IMPACT ON OTHERS. THAT'S WHY IT'S NOT ALWAYS A STRAIGHTFORWARD TASK TO DETERMINE A PERSON'S MORALITY.

MAYANK

THAT'S VERY TRUE. SPEAKING OF COMPLEXITY, LET'S LOOK AT CARLOS, FRANCIS'S SON. HIS INITIAL MORALITY METER READING IS GOOD, BUT IN ORDER TO STAY IN PURGATORY WITH FRANCIS, HE BEGINS TO ACT IN WAYS THAT WOULD RESULT IN A DECLINE IN HIS READING.

PRASHANT

RIGHT, IT SHOWS THAT THE MORALITY METER IS INFLUENCED BY THE ACTIONS A PERSON TAKES AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF THOSE ACTIONS. BUT WHEN CARLOS PERFORMS A GOOD DEED BY HELPING SOMEONE WITH MONEY, THE METER BECOMES CONFUSED BETWEEN "GOOD" AND "EVIL." THIS SUGGESTS THAT THE MORALITY METER IS ALSO INFLUENCED BY THE MOTIVATIONS BEHIND A PERSON'S ACTIONS.

PUSHPANSHU

THAT'S A GREAT OBSERVATION. AND LET'S NOT FORGET THE PART WHEN FRANCIS DECIDES TO KICK HIS SON OUT OF PURGATORY AND SENDS HIM BACK TO EARTH, EVEN IF IT MEANS FRANCIS'S MORAL READING WILL TURN INTO EVIL FROM GREY AND HE WILL HAVE TO SPEND ETERNITY IN HELL.

MAYANK

YES, THAT PART IS DEFINITELY ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL IN THE FILM. IT DEMONSTRATES THAT THE MORALITY METER IS NOT A PERFECT GAUGE OF A PERSON'S MORALITY AND THAT THERE ARE NUANCES AND COMPLEXITIES TO HUMAN BEHAVIOUR THAT IT CANNOT ALWAYS ACCURATELY REFLECT. FRANCIS'S ACTIONS ARE AN EXAMPLE OF A MORAL DILEMMA, WHERE THE DECISION IS NOT CLEAR-CUT AND DEPENDS ON THE CONTEXT AND MOTIVATIONS BEHIND THE ACTIONS.

PRASHANT

EXACTLY. AND IN THE END, THE MORALITY METER JUDGES FRANCIS'S ACTIONS TO BE SACRIFICIAL AND FOR THE GOOD OF HIS SON, AND HE IS FINALLY SENT TO HEAVEN. THIS HIGHLIGHTS THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSIDERING THE CONTEXT AND MOTIVATIONS BEHIND A PERSON'S ACTIONS WHEN MAKING JUDGMENTS ABOUT THEIR MORALITY. IT ALSO SHOWS THE LIMITATIONS OF THE MORALITY METER AND THE COMPLEXITY OF HUMAN MORALITY.

PUSHPANSHU

I COULDN'T AGREE MORE. "THE GRAY" IS A REMINDER THAT MORALITY IS NOT A BLACK AND WHITE CONCEPT AND THAT THERE IS OFTEN A GRAY AREA WHEN IT COMES TO DETERMINING A PERSON'S MORALITY. IT'S A THOUGHT-PROVOKING FILM THAT MAKES US QUESTION OUR OWN BELIEFS AND VALUES.

NIVEDAN

THAT'S BEEN AN ENLIGHTENING CONVERSATION BY THE THREE OF YOU. SO, AS DISCUSSED IN 'THE GRAY', A MACHINE HELPS IN DECIDING WHETHER A PERSON IS MORALLY GOOD OR BAD. WHEN WE COMPARE THIS TO WASP'S NEST WE NOTICE THAT POIROT IS THE MORAL HIGH GROUND. DO YOU THINK A MACHINE SHOULD BE THAT MORAL HIGH GROUND OR SHOULD A FAIR PERSON BE CONSIDERED FOR THAT POSITION?

PARAS

I THINK THAT ULTIMATELY, A FAIR PERSON SHOULD DECIDE WHETHER ANOTHER PERSON IS MORALLY CORRUPT OR GOOD. IN WASPS' NEST, POIROT IS SHOWN TO BE A VERY RESPECTED DETECTIVE WHO HOLDS JUSTICE OVER ALL OTHER VIRTUES. SUCH A FAIR PERSON WOULD WORK BETTER IN THIS POSITION THAN A MACHINE. AS WE SAW IN THE CASE OF THE OLD LADY LUCY, THE MACHINE SHOWED SHE WAS GOOD BUT AT THE END SHE FLIPPED THE BIRD AT FRANCIS AND THE METER STARTED TO GO TO EVIL. THIS PROVES THAT THE METER WAS NOT A FAIR JUDGE OF CHARACTER, RATHER JUST AN ACCUMULATION OF POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE ACTIONS.

NEERAJ

TO ADD TO THIS, WHEN CARLOS WAS BEING DELIBERATELY EVIL TO TRY AND FORCE HIS WAY INTO HELL, HIS METER WAS SHIFTING TOWARDS EVIL. THIS INDICATES AGAIN THAT THE MACHINE WASN'T TAKING INTENTIONS INTO ACCOUNT, BUT ONLY ACTIONS. HOWEVER, AT THE END WE NOTICE THAT FRANCIS' METER STARTS SHIFTING TO GOOD WHEN HE BREAKS THE RULES AND OPENS THE DOOR BACK INTO EARTH. THE MACHINE SEEMS TO HAVE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT HIS INTENTION HERE, AS HE WISHES TO SACRIFICE HIMSELF SO THAT HIS SON CAN GO BACK AND LIVE WITH THEIR FAMILY. HENCE, WE SEE THAT THE MACHINE IS NOT CONSISTENT WITH ITS EVALUATIONS AND SO SHOULD NOT BE USED TO JUDGE A PERSON'S MORALITY.

HRITESH

I WOULD LIKE TO ARGUE THAT DESPITE THESE FAULTS, THE MACHINE IS STILL A BETTER METHOD OF JUDGING A PERSON THAN ANOTHER PERSON. IN BOTH THE TEXTS, WE SAW THAT SITUATIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES OFTEN APPEARED TO OVERRIDE CHARACTER IN AFFECTING A PERSON'S RESPONSE TO A MORAL CHALLENGE. IT SHOWS THAT PEOPLE ARE MORE WORRIED ABOUT SITUATIONS AND REACT BASED ON HOW THEY MAKE THEM FEEL THAN ON WHETHER OR NOT IT'S RIGHT.

NEERAJ

ALSO, A WIDE RANGE OF EXPERIMENTS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD PROVES PEOPLE ARE LESS CONCERNED ABOUT THEIR CHARACTER AND MORE CONCERNED ABOUT THE CIRCUMSTANCES. POIROT TELLS HARRISON "YOU ARE A DYING MAN; YOU HAVE LOST THE GIRL YOU LOVED, BUT THERE IS ONE THING THAT YOU ARE NOT, YOU ARE NOT A MURDERER."

HRITESH

RIGHT, AND I ALSO FEEL THAT HARRISON FINDING OUT HE HAD ONLY TWO MONTHS TO LIVE HAD A PROFOUND IMPACT ON HIM. COUPLED WITH THE INFORMATION THAT HIS FIANCE WAS CHEATING ON HIM, HE BECAME QUITE ANGRY AND DECIDED TO EXACT REVENGE IN A WAY HE NORMALLY WOULDN'T HAVE. HE WAS REDUCED TO NOTHING LESS THAN A MURDERER BY THE CIRCUMSTANCES.

NEERAJ

THERE IS A SIMILAR PLOT POINT IN "THE GRAY" FRANCIS, WHO USED TO BE A POLICE OFFICER AND LIVED AS SOMEONE WHO ALWAYS FOLLOWED THE RULES AND UPHELD FAIRNESS, WAS FACED WITH A MORAL DILEMMA WHEN HE ENCOUNTERED CARLOS, HIS YOUNG SON WHO HAD DIED. THE WORRY OF HIS WIFE BEING LEFT ALONE CAUSED FRANCIS TO PRIORITISE HIS FEELINGS OVER WHAT IS RIGHT. HE MADE THE DECISION TO OPEN A DOOR THAT WAS NEVER MEANT TO BE OPENED AND SENT HIS SON BACK, DEMONSTRATING HOW SITUATIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES CAN LEAD EVEN THE MOST MORALLY UPRIGHT INDIVIDUALS TO PRIORITISE THEIR EMOTIONS OVER THEIR PRINCIPLES.

PARAS

I THINK EVEN POIROT IS SOMEWHAT INFLUENCED BECAUSE OF HIS EARLIER CONNECTIONS WITH THE CHARACTERS. INSTEAD OF CONFRONTING HARRISON, AS HE HAS DONE IN OTHER STORIES, HE MANIPULATES THE CIRCUMSTANCES SUCH THAT HARRISON DOES NOT END UP COMMITTING ANY CRIMES.

NIVEDAN

YEAH IT IS APPARENT THAT CERTAIN SET OF CIRCUMSTANCES CAN REALLY TEST AN INDIVIDUAL'S MORALS AND MAKE THEM ACT IN A WAY THEY USUALLY WOULDN'T.

NIVEDAN

NOW, ANOTHER INTERESTING THING I NOTICED IS THAT THERE SEEMS TO BE SOME COMMONALITIES IN THE WAY BOTH STORIES END, AS THEY BOTH END ON A POSITIVE NOTE AND A CHANGE IN HEART, WHICH IS SAYING SOMETHING CONSIDERING THE MURDER PLAN IN WASPS' NEST. CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THIS?

MAYANK

YES, WE SEE HOW HARRISON'S ATTITUDE AND THINKING CHANGE FOR THE BETTER AT THE END, AS HE REALISES HE IS NOT THE TYPE OF PERSON TO EXACT REVENGE THROUGH MURDER. AT THE END HARRISON WAS FRUSTRATED WHEN POIROT CAME TO HIS HOME. WHEN POIROT REVEALED THAT HE KNEW ABOUT HARRISON'S PLAN AND HE HAD COME TO SAVE HIS AND LANGTON'S LIFE, HARRISON REALISED WHAT HE WAS DOING WAS WRONG.

PRASHANT

THIS IS VERY SIMILAR TO THE CASE IN 'THE GRAY' WHERE CARLOS WANTED TO STAY WITH HIS FATHER BUT HIS FATHER WANTED HIM TO STAY WITH HIS MOTHER AND TAKE CARE OF HER. CARLOS WAS ANGRY WITH HIS FATHER BECAUSE HIS DAD TOOK EVERY DECISION OF HIS LIFE AND EVEN AFTER HIS DEATH HE DID NOT WANT TO GO BACK TO EARTH BUT HIS DAD WANTS TO SEND HIM BACK AGAINST HIS WILL. BUT WHEN FRANCIS SENT HIM BACK TO EARTH, HE WAS HAPPY WITH HIS MOTHER AND REALISED THAT HIS DAD WAS RIGHT.

NIVEDAN

THAT'S A NICE WAY OF ANALYSING THE ENDINGS. WE ALSO NEED TO REMEMBER THAT THE STYLE OF NARRATION AFFECTS US AS READERS. HOW DOES THE CURRENT NARRATIVE STYLE DICTATE OUR FEELINGS TOWARDS DIFFERENT CHARACTERS?

PUSHPANSHU

AS YOU VERY RIGHTLY POINTED OUT, THE NARRATION OF BOTH THE TEXTS WAS VERY POWERFUL, AND IT IS WHAT HELPS THE READER OR VIEWER TO UNDERSTAND AND EMPATHISE WITH THE STORIES. BOTH THE TEXTS 'THE GRAY' AND 'THE WASPS' NEST' CARRY A THIRD-PERSON NARRATOR PERSPECTIVE. INTERESTINGLY IN THE WASPS' NEST, THE NARRATOR IS NOT OMNIPRESENT. THE STORY UNFOLDS AS THE READER READS THE SCENES.

PARAS

YES, AND IF WE LOOK DIRECTLY FROM THE PLOT PERSPECTIVE, BOTH THE CHARACTERS OF HARRISON AND POIROT KNOW ABOUT THE "MURDER" THAT IS GOING TO BE COMMITTED. YET, AS THE READER CANNOT HEAR THE THOUGHTS OF BOTH CHARACTERS, THEY COULD NOT POSSIBLY THINK ABOUT SUCH AN ENDING. AT THE START, THE READER VERY EASILY BELIEVES THAT POIROT HAS COME TO WARN HARRISON ABOUT A POSSIBLE MURDER ATTEMPT ON HIM BY HIS FRIEND LANGTON WHICH IS NOT THE CASE. POIROT WAS THERE TO CONVINCE HARRISON NOT TO DIE AND HENCE NOT HARM AN INNOCENT MAN'S LIFE.

PUSHPANSHU

EXACTLY, AND I FOUND IT QUITE INTRIGUING HOW THE NARRATIVE STYLE IS SO IMPORTANT IN THE WASPS' NEST. IF THE TEXT WERE FROM SOMEONE'S ELSE'S PERSPECTIVE IT WOULD HAVE RESULTED IN A VERY DIFFERENT FEEL FOR THE READER. FROM POIROT'S POINT OF VIEW, HE ALREADY HAS OBSERVED THE HATE IN HARRISON'S MIND FOR LANGTON IN LANGTON'S SIGNATURE. POIROT FINDS HOW HARRISON LIED ABOUT LANGTON'S ARRIVAL AT 9:00 INSTEAD OF 8:30 WHICH HE ALREADY KNEW FROM LANGTON HIMSELF. THIS CONVERSATION WITH HARRISON CONFIRMS HIS DEDUCTION THAT HARRISON WAS PLANNING HIS OWN MURDER THROUGH THE HANDS OF LANGTON. HE COMES TO HARRISON'S HOME TO CONVINCE HIM, NOT TO COMMIT THIS ACT WITHOUT ACTUALLY MENTIONING IT, MAKING HIM BELIEVE THAT HE SHOULD NOT DIE FOR SUCH REASONS AND MOVE AHEAD.

PARAS

YES AND LOOKING FROM HARRISON'S PERSPECTIVE HE HIMSELF KNOWS HIS WHOLE PLAN AND YET HE TRIES TO ACT VERY NORMAL IN FRONT OF POIROT SO THAT HE BELIEVES IN HIM. ALTHOUGH THE READER WAS UNABLE TO GUESS WHO WILL BE MURDERED AND WHO WAS PREPARING TO MURDER FROM THE ACTUAL NARRATIVE STANDPOINT, IT BECOMES ESSENTIAL IN THE DISCUSSION OF PERSPECTIVES AT THAT POINT IN THE STORY.

A VERY SIMILAR COMPARISON CAN BE DONE FOR 'THE GRAY' SHORT FILM TOO. THERE, THANKS TO THE EXCELLENT STORYTELLING, SEVERAL DIFFERENT, YET EQUALLY REASONABLE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE SHORT FILM CAN BE CONJURED UP BY THE AUDIENCE.

PUSHPANSHU

YES, THAT IS VERY TRUE. INITIALLY I THOUGHT THAT CARLOS IS ALREADY DEAD AND HAS REACHED THE PURGATORY FOR FURTHER 'FORMALITIES'. BUT AS THE MOVIE GOT ENDED I CANNOT HELP BUT THINK THAT THE WHOLE STORY MIGHT JUST BE HAPPENING INSIDE CARLOS' CONSCIOUSNESS AS HE RECONCILES WITH HIS FATHER.

NIVEDAN

WOAH, I DID NOT THINK OF THAT POSSIBILITY. THAT'S AN AMAZING WAY OF THINKING ABOUT THE FILM. IT JUST GOES ON TO SHOW HOW MUCH YOU CAN TAKE AWAY FROM A FILM ONLY AS LONG AS 9 MINUTES.

NIVEDAN

LET'S MOVE ON TO ANOTHER TOPIC NOW. THERE SEEMS TO BE THIS INTERESTING ANIMAL SYMBOLISM IN BOTH THE STORIES, WITH THE WASPS IN THE WASPS' NEST AND THE MOTH IN 'THE GRAY'. I THINK IT REFLECTS HOW MOST PEOPLE LOOK AT THESE INSECTS, WASPS FOR EVIL AND MOTHS OR BUTTERFLIES FOR GOOD. OKAY SO I THINK WE SHOULD END THIS DISCUSSION WITH SOMETHING I AM DESPERATE FOR. LOVE! OR RATHER, LET'S TALK ABOUT THE THEME OF LOVE. IT DOES SEEM TO HAVE AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN CHANGING THE MORALITY OF CHARACTERS IN BOTH THE TEXTS. WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THAT?

MAYANK

I THINK LOVE BETWEEN CHARACTERS IS PIVOTAL TO BOTH TEXTS AND PLAYS AN INSTRUMENTAL ROLE IN EACH STORY'S PROGRESSION. IN THE TEXT, THE CHARACTERS ARE SWAYED TO MAKE CHOICES AND TAKE ACTIONS. IN THE "WASP'S NEST" THE LOVE TRIANGLE INCLUDES TWO GOOD FRIENDS, AND THEIR LOVE INTEREST MISS DEANE. HARRISON, WHO IS ENGAGED TO MISS DEANE, DISCOVERS THAT SHE IS DRAWN BACK TO LANGTON. FULL OF BITTERNESS AND HATRED FOR HIS FRIEND LANGTON, HARRISON PLANS A VICIOUS STRATEGY TO HAVE HIM TRAPPED.

POIROT FORESEES THE SCENARIO AND INTERVENES TO STOP IT. WE CAN SAY THAT HARRISON'S BREACH OF MORALITY IS MOSTLY MOTIVATED BY HIS LOVE FOR AND BETRAYAL OF A WOMAN.

PRASHANT

RIGHTLY SAID AND THE LOVE IS SEEN AS A BOND BETWEEN A FATHER AND A SON IN "THE GRAY". FRANCIS'S ACTIONS CAN BE SEEN AS SACRIFICIAL EVEN IF IT MEANS THAT HE WILL SPEND AN ETERNITY IN HELL. ON THE OTHER HAND, THE SON

(MORE)

PRASHANT (cont'd)

IS RELIEVED TO FINALLY UNITE WITH HIS FATHER. HE IS ALSO FULL OF BOTH YEARNING AND RESENTMENT FOR HIS FATHER PERHAPS DUE TO EARLIER CONFLICTS. ON LEARNING THAT HE IS ABOUT TO BE SENT BACK TO EARTH, HE PROTESTS AND GETS INTO A SERIES OF SHENANIGANS TO STAY IN PURGATORY WITH LANGTON. JUST BEFORE BEING DROPPED ON EARTH, THE TWO HAVE A HEARTFELT CONVERSATION IN WHICH THE SON TENDERLY URGES LANGTON TO JOIN HIM SO THAT THEY MAY ONCE AGAIN BE A FAMILY.

NIVEDAN

I THINK THAT IS A FANTASTIC WAY TO END THIS PANEL DISCUSSION. WE HAVE DISCUSSED SOME INTRIGUING TOPICS LIKE THE METHOD OF DETECTION, ETHICAL AMBIGUITY AND THE UNDERLYING THEME OF LOVE. IT'S BEEN A PLEASURE MODERATING THIS AND I HOPE ALL OF YOU HAVE HEARD SOME POINTS WHICH MAKE YOU THINK AND PONDER OVER THE TEXTS AGAIN. THANK YOU FOR BEING A GOOD AUDIENCE. THIS IS US SIGNING OFF.

END OF DISCUSSION