

# **VELS INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND ADVANCED STUDIES**

## **ENGLISH I – 24LENG11**

### **UNIT III – SHORT STORY**

#### **"The Dear Departed" by Stanley Houghton**

"The Dear Departed" by Stanley Houghton is a cleverly written one-act play that offers a sharp critique of human nature, particularly within the context of family and societal values. The play uses irony, humor, and satire to expose the shallow and materialistic tendencies of individuals when it comes to matters of inheritance, morality, and family obligations.

#### **Detailed Plot Elaboration**

The play is set in the early 20th century in the home of the Slater family. The opening scene immediately introduces the audience to Mrs. Amelia Slater and her husband, Henry, who are preparing for the arrival of Mrs. Slater's sister, Elizabeth Jordan, and her husband, Ben. The two sisters are meeting to mourn the passing of their father, Abel Merryweather. However, rather than being genuinely grief-stricken, Amelia is preoccupied with claiming her father's belongings.

Amelia's actions are far from what one would expect from a grieving daughter. She has already begun to take her father's possessions, even going as far as to move his clock and other items into her own house. Her husband Henry, although hesitant, helps her with this morally dubious task, showing his own complicity.

When Elizabeth Jordan arrives with her husband Ben, the two sisters engage in thinly veiled conversations about who will take what from their father's estate. Their conversation, under the guise of concern, is dominated by their greed and their desire to outdo one another in claiming valuable possessions. Both sisters act as if they have the right to their father's things, without any regard for his actual death or the finality of it. This highlights the satire Houghton is employing, showing how shallow and self-serving these familial relationships have become.

In a dramatic twist, Abel Merryweather, the supposedly deceased father, wakes up from his slumber. The confusion and shock of his daughters is palpable, and instead of relief at his survival, they are terrified that he will discover their attempts to divvy up his possessions before he is truly dead. This moment of Abel's revival turns the play on its head and forces the characters to confront their own moral failures.

#### **Themes Explored**

##### **1. Materialism and Greed:**

At the core of the play is the theme of materialism. The two sisters, Amelia and Elizabeth, see their father's death not as a tragedy, but as an opportunity to gain material wealth. This reflects the superficial nature of their familial bonds, where wealth and possessions take precedence over emotional ties and respect for the deceased. The irony in the play lies in how quickly they jump at the chance to divide Abel's belongings, even though they mistakenly assume he is dead.

## **2. Family Dynamics and Hypocrisy:**

The family dynamics in *The Dear Departed* are far from ideal. The interactions between the sisters are laden with jealousy, competition, and hypocrisy. Both sisters pretend to care for their father, but their actions speak otherwise. Their immediate concern is who will get what, revealing their opportunistic behavior. This points to the erosion of traditional family values, where respect for elders and familial loyalty are replaced by self-interest.

## **3. Irony and Satire:**

Houghton employs a great deal of irony to heighten the play's comedic effect. The irony is that instead of mourning, the characters are more concerned with possessions. The title itself, *The Dear Departed*, adds a layer of irony, as the father, Abel, is hardly "dear" to his children—they are far more interested in his material wealth than in his well-being. The play also satirizes the social and moral norms of the time, where money and possessions often supersede genuine human relationships.

## **4. Death and Mortality:**

The way the characters handle Abel's supposed death reflects their detachment from the gravity of death itself. Instead of mourning, they act as if his death is simply a transaction to be settled. Abel's sudden revival underscores how death is treated almost as an afterthought, rather than a profound event. The play questions how people react to mortality when material gain is at stake.

## **Symbolism**

### **1. Abel's Clock:**

One of the symbolic objects in the play is the clock that Amelia takes from her father's room. A clock often symbolizes time, and in this case, it could represent the time running out on the sisters' moral integrity. Amelia's eagerness to take the clock, even before her father is officially declared dead, symbolizes her haste in prioritizing materialism over any moral responsibility.

### **2. The Revival of Abel:**

Abel Merryweather's sudden return from the "dead" can be seen as a symbolic moment where truth confronts the greed and selfishness of his daughters. His revival is almost a moral judgment, where the daughters' true nature is laid bare. It serves as a catalyst for Abel's decision to change his will, leaving everything to a more deserving person rather than his opportunistic children.

## **Character Analysis**

### **1. Abel Merryweather:**

Although he appears late in the play, Abel is the central figure around whom the conflict revolves. His daughters perceive him as a weak, old man, but when he revives, he turns the tables on them. Abel's final decision to rewrite his will shows that he is not as gullible as his daughters believe, and he cleverly exposes their selfishness.

## **2. Amelia Slater:**

Amelia is portrayed as the more dominant and manipulative sister. She takes the lead in claiming her father's possessions, and her actions reveal a lack of moral scruples. Her behavior highlights the greed and lack of genuine care that pervades the family.

## **3. Elizabeth Jordan:**

Elizabeth, though seemingly less aggressive than Amelia, is equally complicit in the scheme to divide their father's belongings. She mirrors her sister's selfishness, showing that both are driven by the same motivations of material gain.

## **4. Victoria Slater:**

Victoria, Amelia's daughter, is perhaps the only character who represents a semblance of innocence. She is often confused by the actions of the adults, and her questions highlight the absurdity of the situation. Victoria serves as a contrast to the materialism of her mother and aunt, though she is still somewhat caught up in their schemes.

## **Conclusion**

Stanley Houghton's *The Dear Departed* is a powerful social satire that critiques the moral decline of family values in the face of materialism. Through sharp wit, irony, and humor, Houghton exposes the selfishness and hypocrisy that can arise when wealth and inheritance are at stake. The play remains relevant today, as it reflects timeless human behaviors and societal attitudes towards family and money, making it a significant piece of social commentary.

## **"THE FOOL'S PARADISE" BY ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER**

Isaac Bashevis Singer's story "The Fool's Paradise" delves deeply into the human condition, focusing on themes such as desire, contentment, illusion, and the consequences of misplaced priorities. The story is both a cautionary tale and a philosophical reflection on the transient nature of happiness, using the lens of Jewish mysticism and folklore to explore universal truths.

## **Detailed Plot Elaboration**

In this short story, Atzel is a young man living in a village who becomes obsessed with the idea of going to Paradise, convinced that life on Earth is full of suffering and that happiness can only be found in the afterlife. Atzel's story is set in a Jewish folktale style, blending humor, fantasy, and moral lessons in the way Singer is known for.

Atzel's fascination with Paradise begins to dominate his life. He becomes convinced that he has died and that he should now be allowed to go to Paradise. He refuses to eat, work, or participate in his daily life, insisting that he must now be treated as though he has died and deserves to live in eternal happiness. His family, deeply concerned, seeks the help of Dr. Yoetz, a clever and practical man.

Dr. Yoetz devises a plan to cure Atzel of his delusion. He tells the family to create a pretend "Paradise" in Atzel's own bedroom. The room is lavishly decorated, and Atzel is told that he has indeed died and is now in Paradise. At first, Atzel is thrilled. He enjoys the luxury and the feasts, convinced that he has finally reached the blissful afterlife.

However, after some time, Atzel grows bored and restless in this fake Paradise. He realizes that eternal pleasure and idleness are not as fulfilling as he imagined. With nothing to do and no challenges to face, Atzel becomes miserable. He starts to miss the real world, the work, and the responsibilities that come with life. Eventually, he begs to be let out of "Paradise" and is cured of his obsession.

At the end of the story, Atzel learns a valuable lesson: true happiness does not come from constant ease and indulgence but from the meaningful activities and responsibilities that make up life. He embraces life on Earth and marries the woman he loves, realizing that real joy is found in living and working, not in an imagined paradise.

### **Themes**

**1. The Dangers of Idleness:** The story illustrates that an idle life, one without challenges or purpose, can lead to dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Atzel's longing for Paradise is a metaphor for the human desire for easy rewards without effort, but the story shows that such a life is ultimately unfulfilling.

**2. The Value of Life and Work:** Atzel learns that life's value lies in the work we do, the challenges we face, and the responsibilities we take on. Paradise, when seen as a place of endless ease, loses its appeal, and real fulfillment comes from the effort and meaning we find in our everyday lives.

**3. Illusion vs. Reality:** Similar to many of Singer's stories, this tale explores the difference between fantasy and reality. Atzel's fantasy of Paradise turns out to be disappointing once it becomes his "reality," teaching him that fantasies are often misleading.

**4. Growth through Experience:** Atzel's journey is one of personal growth. His experience in the fake Paradise helps him mature and gain a deeper understanding of what brings true happiness, allowing him to return to life with a renewed sense of purpose and contentment.

The Fool's Paradise is a moral tale wrapped in humor and folktale tradition, teaching that true happiness is found not in idleness or fantasy, but in the everyday challenges and connections that make life meaningful.