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The Grave – Digger’s Scene: Hamlet’s Journey to the Dead Souls

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Abstract:

Major Shakespearean critics have pointed out the immense significance of the grave-digger scene in the *Hamlet*. There is a huge scholarship on the name and nature of comic relief that this scene provides in the play. In his *Lectures on Shakespeare*, Coleridge has pointed out that the drunken porter scene in the *Macbeth* and the grave-digger scene in the *Hamlet* intensify the tragic vision of the plays. The comic relief is not a respite between two tragic scenes in a play, rather it is a way of making subject and object come together – a way to make the tragic flaw and ensuring catharsis relevant to our common sense, and that humour enables a man to survive through the worst ordeal in his life. I would like to further elaborate the idea of comic relief as an intensification of tragic vision by pointing out that the grave-digger scene in its matrix has two over-lapping tropes i.e. of personalized eccentricity and of cheerful death. I would also like to point out that these two troupes have been extensively explored by subsequent writers like Lawrence Sterne, Tennyson, and Conrad.

Keywords: Comic relief, Grave-digger scene, Tragic vision.

The idea of personalized eccentricity presents before us an image of a clown or clowns laughing in a tragic atmosphere of death. In anthropology, this topos has been traced back to the ritual of cultic indecencies on the occasion of death as it makes the loss suffered in death bearable. It also enables the social group to come back to its normal day-to-day activities. On the other hand, the matrix of cheerful death can be traced back to the plays of Aristophanes, and Seneca and to the philosophy of stoicism. The grave-digger scene is a magnificent synthesis of clownish, cultic and stoic traditions that existed in the renaissance sensibility.

The setting of the scene is in a churchyard. The two rustic type of clowns with spades are digging a grave for the burial of Ophelia, who has committed suicide by drowning in a pond. The clowns speculate whether Ophelia came to water or water came to Ophelia. Obviously, here is a parody of the famous soliloquy of: HAMLET. To be or not to be. (3.1.56)

The clowns in their parody have raised the metaphysical problem on the validity of suicide:

FIRST CLOWN. Here lies the water; good: here stands the man; good:
if the man go to this water, and drowns himself, it is,
will he, nill he, he goes; mark you that? but if the
water come to him, and drown him, he drowns not
himself: argal, he that is not guilty of his own death
shortens not his own life. (5.1.15-21)

Like ordinary people, the rustics also discuss the pragmatic issue whether Ophelia deserves a Christian burial. Then the First Clown sings a song while digging the grave. The song has its own illustrious history in European literature. The three stanzas of the song sung by the

grave-digger is from a poem attributed to Lord Thomas Vaux and was printed in the *Tottel's Miscellany* in 1557:

FIRST CLOWN. In youth, when I *did love, did, love,*
Methought it was very sweet,
To contract, O! the time, for-a-my behave,
O!, methought, there was nothing meet.

But age, with his stealing steps,
Hath claw'd me in his clutch,
And hath shipped me *into* the land
As if I had never been such.

A pick-axe, and a spade, a spade,
For and a shrouding sheet:
O!, a pit of clay for to be made
For such a guest is meet. (5.1.67-103)

The title of this poem is: "The Aged Lover Renounceth Love." Shakespeare has made this poem the world famous. Two centuries later its immortality was augmented when Goethe included a version of it in the *Faust*. He included the first two stanzas into the *Faust* Part II, where Lemures a choric character signs as an exordium before Helen, symbolizing perfect beauty, is recalled by Faustus from Hades. Faustus ardently pursues her but is finally bereft from her. It would not be out of place to refer to Goethe's poem on Kalidas's *Shakuntla*, and the effect of this play upon the writing of his *Faust*. Goethe also had put two stanzas from *Shakuntala* as a prologue to the *Faust*, Part I. Both passages, the passage taken from the *Shakuntala* and the stanzas taken from the *Hamlet* have the same implications i.e. the dismountable of hopes and aspirations is human destiny, so take cheerfully suffering, old age, betrayals and death.

Hamlet speculates about the first skull is like "Cain's jaw-bone..." (5.1.83). It is an allusion to the old tradition that Cain slew Abel, his brother, with the jaw-bone of an ass. The biblical imagery further leads Hamlet to speculate that schemers and plotters have the jaw-bone of an ass. So he calls this skull is that of a politician who must have circumvented even God to fulfill his Machiavellian deeds. Regarding the second skull, Hamlet speculates that it must be that of a lawyer:

HAMLET. This fellow might be in his time a great buyer of land, with his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt. (5.1.111-16)

Then there is a dialogue between Hamlet and the grave-digger which is full of irony and wit. The grave-digger does not know that he is talking to Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark. Instead he considers his interlocutor as a stranger who is not aware about the intrigues of the court. On Hamlet's enquiry regarding the dead person for whom the grave is being dug, the clown replies that he is making the grave for a woman. Then Hamlet's fancy takes a flight that she must be a poor woman whose grave being made at the cost of the state since the last three

years, which is the year 1601. Here is an allusion to the Poor Law of 1601, by which the poor people could be buried even in the grave of well-to-do persons at the cost of the state, for there had taken place the shortage of grave yards for the destitute.

Hamlet further enquires as to how long the grave-digger has been making graves. As he is illiterate, he does not know the arithmetic, but he knows the political events, by which the period of his grave-digging can be calculated. He remembers two simultaneous incidents when he had started the profession of grave-making. The first incident is that when the King Hamlet, i.e. the father of the prince Hamlet, had defeated Fortinbras, the Prince of Norway. Moreover, it was around this time the prince Hamlet was born. Thus the audience comes to know the age of Hamlet is of thirty years by the two historical events.

The mention of the age of Hamlet has relevance regarding the identity of the second skull as well as it reminds the sad predicament of the prince. The dialogue is a masterpiece of irony:

HAMLET. How long has thou been a grave-maker?

FIRST CLOWN. Of all the days in the year, I came to't that day that our last king Hamlet overcame Fortinbras.

HAMLET. How long is that since?

FIRST CLOWN. Cannot you tell that every fool can tell that; it was the very day that young Hamlet was born; he that is mad, and sent into England.

HAMLET. Ay, marry, why was he sent into England?

FIRST CLOWN. Why, because he was mad: he shall recover his wits there; or, if he do not, it's no great matter there.

HAMLET. Why?

FIRST CLOWN. 'T will not be seen in him there; there the men are as mad as he.
(5.1.1.152-69)

The last remark of the clown still arouses uproarious laughter among the audience, especially the British people.

Hamlet further enquires as to how long a grave is not reopened. The grave-digger replies that the skull that he had dugged had been in the earth for twenty-three years, and this skull was Yorick's skull, who was the king's jester. The mention of Yorick and his skull before him opens a flood-gate of Hamlet's remembrance of the time past. He takes the skull into his hand delicately, and talks to Horatio that he knew Yorick in childhood up to the age of seven. He must have been in the lap of Yorick thousand times and must have kissed his lips, where there are now bones. The speech of Hamlet is suffused with love, pathos and delicacy:

Hamlet. Let me see - (Takes the skull.) Alas! poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hat borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! my gorge rises at it, Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be yours gibes now? Your gambols? Yours songs? Yours flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your own grinning? quite chap fallen. (5.1.201-212)

The interior monologue of Hamlet results eccentric railing on Ophelia as he address to Yorick's skull to go to her chamber and tell her to "point an inch thick, to this favour must

come; make her laugh at that". The implication is that while alive, Yorick could set people laugh and roar, the dead skull of Yorick sure would have capacity to create smile to dead Ophelia. The subtlety of conceit points out the significance Hamlet attaches to the need of daughter in his own life in order to transcend his misery. The clowns laugh at the kings and powerful people and get away with applause. For a moment Hamlet feels he can also do: he can laugh at himself, at the world and get away from the intrigue of the court and start a new life for himself. It is this idea of laughing at him and the world as way to transcend the crises of the present has been a preoccupation in the European sensibility since the renaissance. Lawrence Sterne has called it in his own inimitable way as the Meditations of Yorick, which is an attempt to present humorously the inner reality, always elusive, and is always just beyond the character's grasp. There is also a further implication of Hamlet's role in the grave-digger scene that Shakespeare appears to convey that natural man is a crank. It is the opposite to Ophelia's praise of Hamlet:

OPHELIA. O!, what a noble mind is here over-thrown:

The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword;
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
The observed of all observers, quite, quite down! (3.1.159-63)

Ophelia presents the picture of the coherent external man of the renaissance. On the other hand, the grave-digger scene presents the internal man-the pure natural subjectivity which could only be laid bare with the help of jesters, clowns, and grave-diggers. The immediate predecessor who was a great practitioner of this technique was Rabelais. The critics from Diderot to Bakhtin have pointed the various influences of Rabelais on Shakespeare, and that the great dramatist was fully familiar with the Gargantua and Pantagruel. Like the cheerful grave-diggers in Hamlet, death and laughter are frequently brought together in Rabelais. When Pantagruel is born, he is so huge and heavy that could not appear in this world without suffocating his mother. The mother the newborn Pantagruel dies, and his father Gargantua finds himself in a difficult situation: he does not know whether to weep or to laugh. As a result he wept and laughed simultaneously. As he remembered his wife, Gargantua bellowed like a cow; then suddenly he began to laugh like a calf, remembering Pantagruel. Like Shakespeare, Rabelais has presented death in close relationship with the birth of new life and with laughter.

The Rabelaisian laughter and the cheerful grave-diggers of Hamlet combine in the persona of Yorick in Lawrence Sterne. In the *Tristram Shandy*, two simple story threads are juggled up to depict the author's cheerful view of the unreality of life. One story is Tristram's conception, birth, naming, circumcision, and breeching; and the other is the uncle Toby's courtship of the widow Wadman. The ironies that operate against Tristram depend on the contrast between the simple story live and the unreal chaos that Tristram makes of it. The Rabelasian formulation of Sterne's Yorick is like Hamlet swinging between unreality and reality. For instance, the final brief episode of the *Tristram Shandy* contains a confused conversation about Walter's bull: "L-d! said my mother, what is all this story about? – A COCK and a BULL, said Yorick – And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard" (Sterne 457).

The Shandean formulation Yorick has a great influence on the English as well as European writers. Among the latter is the German novelist, Jean Paul Richter, whose novels were translated by Carlyle and De Quincy, and Gogol's *Dead Souls* is an eccentric's journey into Dante's Hell. The Shandyism influenced English writers like Oliver Goldsmith, Tennyson, Joseph Conrad, and it was immensely influential in the emergence of the technique of stream of consciousness. Here I would like to conclude my point that personalized eccentricity and cheerful death as depicted in the grave-yard scene of Hamlet and as it developed and evolved in the persona of Shandyism have been continuing and inspiring ideas in the British imagination. To this I refer to Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*.

Jim is chief mate on board the Patna, an ill-manned ship carrying a party of pilgrims in Eastern waters. When the ship threatens to sink and the cowardly officer decide to save their own skins and escape in the few lifeboats, then Jim despises them. But at the last moment, dazed by the horror and confusion of the sinking ship, he joins them. However, the ship does not sink and pilgrims are rescued. What happens to Jim thereafter is related by an observer; Marlow. Jim faces the court of enquiry. He is condemned by the court. He disappears, and goes to a remote trading station. He wins respect and affection of the local people for his good work among them. He has achieved a sense of peace, but the memory of his jump still haunts him. When a gang of thieves led by one Brown arrive to plunder the station, Jim begs the chief to spare them, pledging his own life against their departure. But Brown behaves treacherously and massacre takes place. Jim feels that he has only one course of action: rejecting the idea of flight he delivers himself up to the chief whose son was a victim of the massacre. The Chief shoots him and Jim willingly accepts this honourable death.

The last part of *Lord Jim* is obviously based on the concluding fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes. Like Hamlet, Lord Jim willingly accepts death. For Hamlet, the acceptance of his tragic destiny acquires depth and spiritual overtone because of his earlier visit to the grave-yard and his soliloquy on the skull of Yorick. In a way, Lord Jim also transcends death as he has undergone inner charming by double betrayal.

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