

A cream cracker under the settee essay



**ASSIGN
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The melancholy of life, death and old age, are one of the many issues dealt with, in Alan Bennett's heart-rending tale. It tells the story of an isolated, fragile, elderly woman, who feels ensnared in a modernised society in which she strives for her sovereignty and prominence. In a culture where the old are forgotten, neglected and depicted as useless. 'A Cream Cracker Under The Settee' seems to be the perfect title of the play as the double entendre epitomizes this remarkably.

In addition, another reason for the dramatic piece being called 'A Cream Cracker Under The Settee'. Is because a cream cracker was indeed found under a settee in the play, this makes the title rather ironic. As the title in many ways also symbolises the character of Doris as she is depicted as a lost soul, abandoned, waiting to be found and cared for. Throughout 'Cream Cracker', the protagonist: Doris, speaks to an unseen audience, this could be seen to be another allegory used to signify the title of the play.

As although the audience is unseen to Doris as 'the cream cracker under the settee' is unnoticed, this may be used to indicate that although the object is concealed, this does not make it any less important than the objects that are perceived. Doris as a tragic woman confides her anguish and despondency in the spectators, placing, yet involving the audience into the position of a voyeur, or an eavesdropper, in which they are given an insiders' view of the protagonist life.

The stream of consciousness of the narrator in which, her revealing herself unwittingly to the viewer suggest, an invasion of privacy, as the audience are shown the events within Doris's life which have caused her great suffering,

self-destruction, and distress through references to past experiences, hence becoming drawn into the tale of the protagonist, as the audience becomes more responsive to Doris, as dramatic tension accumulates within the play.

The tragedy of the poignant downfall of Doris is further amplified by the fact that play is from a single viewpoint (monologue), this helps to provide the onlookers a detailed description and deeper insight into Doris's sentiments, life and current situations. Bennett's choice of a monologue is represented to be a symbolic metaphor of Doris's loneliness and isolation within ' Cream Cracker', as the entire play is acted out in solitary perspective.

Consequently, escalating the audience's understanding of Doris's emotions and state of affairs, this elps to intensify the sense of tragedy within ' Cream Cracker' as the protagonist is brought alive for the audience. Bennett's portrayal of both the simplicity of everyday life and yet the problematic situations which an ordinary individual may need to conquer in the course of their life, are successfully captured in immense minutiae through the character of Doris. Doris, the narrator is a seventy-five old widow, who due to her painful past experiences has had inadequate living circumstances.

Her entire outlook on life has been distorted to such extremes that she has become a prisoner of her own anxieties and fear of the outside world. ' Cream Cracker' commences with Doris sitting awkwardly on a low chair, after falling from a stall whilst doggedly dusting out of reach, strictly against the orders of her home-help, Zulema. Doris here, portrayed as a house-proud fanatical cleaner, who is determined in maintaining by any cause what is left of her independence.

Bennett cleverly associates the idea of Doris's failure, to efficiently remove the dirt on her shelf, to be an extended metaphor of the protagonist failure to reach her independence. Subsequently, leading Doris to the dreaded 'Stafford House'. These attitudes and stereotypical beliefs towards the quality of care given to those in the old people homes, 'They even mix up your teeth.' Can be depicted to be a result of the protagonist fears that the remaining control over what is left of her life will be lost, as a consequence of entering 'Stafford House'.

Consequently restricting her whole outlook on life due her views of cleanliness and hygiene. The protagonist acknowledges that beyond her doorstep her own spotless regime does not operate – even the front garden is subjected to casual 'urimators' 'spending a penny' and neighbours untidy leaves. The protagonist fears, she may be forced to socialise with the inmates 'smelling of pee'. Additionally expressing her feelings and obsession concerning hygiene. Unearthing Doris's neglected period of life, the saddest era of her being.

In which recollections of Doris's past history are triggered by present day objects such as; the wedding photograph of Doris and Wilfred represented to be a strong symbol, of the implication, in which Doris's endless campaign against dust, has cause the glass to crack. Representing the destructive nature of Doris's cleaning mania, and the separation of herself and Wilfred. Doris initial reminisces of the past, begin with thoughts like many of the elderly, of the golden days through coloured spectacles, in which the protagonist ruefully looks back upon the era where 'people were clean and the streets were clean and it was all clean.

The present for Doris lacks what she values and sees as important, and does not at all appreciate what the present has to offer – that is, a home- help; Zulema, and the prospect of care in an old people's home. Doris perceives these interferences within her strictly controlled life as an adversary to challenge – if possible – demolish the remaining control the protagonist withholds within her life. The central character shows a keen interest in Zulema cleaning, or lack of it, in which Bennett embodies the character of Zulema to illustrate the world ' outside' from which Doris now shrinks.

Zulema represents the forces of society at large, which have taken on responsibility for Doris, very much against her will, ' home hindrance'. Zulema's incompetence in her house cleaning may be said to be an extended metaphor of society's lack of proper control and fulfilment of their job expectations. Therefore may be the reason Doris is so pleased to have discovered the half hidden cream cracker Zulema has missed, as she hopes to report her, however is unable as she destroyed the evidence.

This would be ironic for the play's onlookers has the fact that Doris ate the ' cream cracker' despite not knowing ' how long' it ' has been there', could be stated as a contradiction against Doris previous claims on the importance of hygiene. Conversely, this act may additionally be perceived has an act of desperation on Doris's behalf, auxiliary generating condolences for the protagonist. Bennett's use of the phrase ' I could put another one under, they'd never know. ' May be assumed to be an extended allegory of the elderly people and how the issues of the old are ' brushed aside' and not acknowledge by society.

Zulema reflects all of the prejudice that Doris has about the 'outside' community. Zulema is presented by the protagonist as a intimidating, patronising person who has no respect for the elderly as she is depicted to speak to the protagonist in condescending manner, and constantly 'pressurises' Doris with the idea she would 'be better off in Stafford House'. Doris's umbrage towards Zulema may be due to her yearning for independence, as she detest having to rely on Zulema's once a week visits in order to do household tasks which she finds comfort in.

The protagonist's resentment towards Zulema may also be on a more personal level, in which Doris is jealous of Zulema's care-free life style, and longs to be back in the golden age, full of life and both emotionally and physically untroubled. Another unseen character mentioned continuously throughout the play and plays a crucial role in our understandings of the narrator's past history, is Wilfred. The cracked wedding photograph of Doris and Wilfred is a strong symbol which represents the destructive nature of Doris's cleaning mania, and the loss of Wilfred.

Throughout the monologue the protagonist regretfully mourns upon Wilfred's death, and is shown to even feel guilty that her obsession with sanitation, may be in fact what 'tided' Wilfred' into the grave'. The narrator relates her marital problems within her marriage to Wilfred to be due to the fact that if she had given birth to a child, Wilfred would have been given something useful to do with his time. Instead of his half-hearted attempts to take on hobbies such as; the growing of mushrooms in the cellar, making of fretwork toys, keeping of a dog and running a allotment, all of which failed to come to fruition.

Doris also believes a child would have solved her immediate problems as well, as she imagines if her baby had survived and produced grandchildren for her, she ' wouldn't be in this fix'. The audience here imagine how different Doris's life would have been if her unborn child had lived hence causing the audience to become more emotionally involved in the play. Doris's brief account of the birth of her apparently stillborn baby is central to an understanding of her character. In which, Doris confesses to the audience, ' I wanted him called John.

The midwife said he wasn't fit to be called anything and had we any newspaper? ' This nostalgia is disturbing for the audience since Doris was never able to see her long awaited son. Has the midwife took the baby away without letting Doris see him and wrapped him in newspaper, ' as if he we a dirty, little thing'. Doris primary instincts were that ' He wasn't a dirty little thing,' showing that at the time she was able to respond to birth, one of the very messiest of event, with a normal human acceptance. The grief and disappointment seem to have marked a ' before and after' division in Doris's life.

The sadness of the loss of the child is brought back to Doris in the hall, as she re-encounters the never-used ' perambulator', bought overconfidently in advance by Wilfred, foreshadowing his subsequent failure to follow through any of his plans. Doris' s crusade against dirt must have developed obsessively after the failure of their hopes of family life, which demanded the acceptance of a measure of mess and disorder. Now, at the end of her life, the protagonist looks back to a time when ' cleanliness' was associated with happiness – the time before the baby's death.

Not only were the streets and the people in them clean, there was a friendliness she remembers and now issues, and married life meant contentment: ‘ I’d wash up while he read the paper and we’d eat the toffees and listen to the wireless’. The choice of names for both the seen and unseen characters of the ‘ Cream Cracker’ is imperative, and especially so in the case of Doris and her husband Wilfred. Doris states within her monologue ‘ They don’t get called Doris now . . . That’s what they’re all called in Stafford House.

This statement stated by the protagonist is ironic, as their names are indeed from the past, which the audience will also key into. The audience perceives these names are from a culture that does not belong any more. This notion can be further identified with references made to phrases and objects used in the text such as; ‘ jump the gun’ and ‘ Ewbank’ these are idioms the audience would not normally associate themselves with any more, additionally illustrating the sense of no longer belonging. Zulema, however, has a name which comes from a culture that Doris is not familiar with.

Bennett represents Zulema as a member of higher ‘ power’ and the new reality of life. Bennett’s use of the language device of onomatopoeia to illustrate Zulema’s importance in the play is crucial; the audience perceives the name of Zulema to be strange and unusual, similar to how the protagonist distinguishes modern day society, as the world she remembers is extinct. Doris refuses to admit that there have been some constructive changes since her era and that it has been her pessimistic perceptions of today’s society which have led her into her present situation.

Doris complains that she does not receive any ‘ bona fide callers’ however should not really contemplate any visitors, when she doesn’t make the effort to meet anyone, who would find it worthwhile to come and visit her.

Therefore is a hypocrite, as she complains about matters in which she can help improve the situation, but is too stubborn to attempt to do so. An essential example of the protagonist stubbornness and fight for independence is at the end of the play, after accepting that, in absence of relative and friends, society in general is indeed trying to look after her.

She refuses to surrender her philosophy of sovereignty and freedom, this shown when a police officer offers of help, however is declined by the protagonist. Doris thanks the concerned policeman who has been checking up on her, one more time than necessary. But, of course, it is a significant ‘ NO! Thank you’ for Doris, as we understand that she is stating the intention to die alone with some pride and self dignity left, rather than end her days in the dreaded Stafford House.

As the protagonist begins to drift in and out of consciousness, she goes back to her childhood and her earliest recollections of the association of happiness and cleanliness: ‘ I wish I was ready for bed. All washed and in a clean nightie and bottle in, all sweet and crisp and clean’. The play very well received the Talking Heads series when the monologues were first screened in 1987. It was written in form of a tragic-comedy monologue where the juxtaposition of humour and pathos reflects real life.

The intimacy of the television screen has offered numerous opportunities for Talking Heads, in which Bennett was cleverly able to provide a voice to

society's marginalised members. In the late 1980's, the popularity of television was increasing exceptionally. Allowing Bennett's choice in writing an on screen monologue was an excellent way of making his views on subject matters widespread to catch the attention of everyday people who could associate themselves with the narrators of the Talking Head series.

Bennett successfully lays out the trail for its audiences, to search for the hidden meaning beyond what the narrator has stated. The audience are forced to consider not only the narrators' status in society, but also our own acceptance of a society which suits us but not them. Throughout the play a somewhat claustrophobic atmosphere is accumulated, underlined by the fact that the setting of all four scenes are within Doris's home – her hygiene fortress against the dirt and confusion of the world. During the first three scenes Doris hopes to attract the attention and help from the 'outside' after her accident.

An example of this is when Doris 'bangs on the door' for help from the postman. This act of desperation holds a double meaning, as Doris's calls for help may be a pun, symbolising Bennett's plea for the nation's attention however, the postman similar to the nation do not perceive the elderly cries for help. By the fourth scene all preceding hope have been diminished as the protagonist realises that if heard she will be taken to 'Stafford house' which she dreads; hence, making the decision that she will let nature take its course and die in her own home.

The change in settings supports this sequence of Doris's thought in the play; as in the third, still thinking of rescue, Doris moves to the front door – the

nearest point to people and the life 'outside' which she mistrusts. Her withdrawal to the sitting room reflects her defiant or wilful rejection of the life society as to offer to her which consequently leads to her death. This assists in the amplifying of the sense of tragedy within Doris's life, making 'Cream Cracker' a tremendously tragic piece of literary work.

The setting of the play is an excellent idiomatic expression of the protagonist age and personality, the fact that the play is set in Northern Yorkshire, which can be due to references made within the text of its setting. Such as the protagonist northern accent and vernacular, and in reference to Zulema's statement within the script in which she says, 'They go on trips to Wharfedale'. As Wharfedale is a town in Yorkshire, it therefore indicates the region of the northern country that it is set.

The fact that the play is set in Yorkshire can be associated with Doris's personality, as similar to the main character, Yorkshire is characterise as an old, dreary, dull and strict in its traditional values and belief town. The imagery of the scenery of the play's setting and its relationship with the protagonist is imperative in allowing the audience to become fully drawn into the atmosphere tension of the entire play. Bennett has given Doris a lively yet forceful style of speech, in which Doris's idiolect within her speech displays a down to earth sense of humour. He's spending a penny' the use of euphemism allows the audience to not only dictate the protagonist age but also allows for comedy to be brought into the play, helping to maintain the onlookers interest.

Doris's understanding of the irony of life, presents the protagonist with a somewhat air of mortality, 'let the dirt wait. It won't kill you. I'm here every week'. The fact that the protagonist has chosen to state this statement, particularly after her recent downfall from the stall whilst trying to dust, would be ironic for the audience as it was indeed, because Doris could not 'let the dirt wait' which led to her present situation and the rapid deterioration of the central character's life. Idiosyncratic and colloquial language are used within the majority of the monologue, with some unexpected heavyweight words like 'surreptitious' and 'gregarious', such style of speech is effective for Bennett's audiences as it enables the character of Doris to become more believable and poignant, hence allowing the audience to connect to the narrator, as Doris is illustrated to be an ordinary person.

Who like everyone else must overcome daily obstacles life throws her. Doris's monologue is spoken at a slow steady pace with pauses being used continuously and regularly throughout. This is effective as it gives the opportunity to the audience to make sense of Doris's situation. "Thank you. (long pause) You've done it now Doris." The use of the 'long pause' is crucial in making an impact on the audience, as it enables the audience to reflect on Doris's scenario and understand the influence this has on their own thoughts and sentiments.

The use of pauses also aid the dramatic tension of the play as allows time for inactivity, depicting the silence and emptiness of not only her house but Doris's life as well. As a result the audience are fully able to connect and pity Doris generating a considerable dramatic effect. Conversely, the use of pauses may be to convey the full implications of old age such as the

difficulties of breathing which generates further commiseration for Doris, hence altering our views on how we perceive the elderly.

Flashbacks play a fundamental role in maintaining the interest of the audience as the sudden changes in settings and topic; ‘GO TO BLACK/ Come up on Doris sitting on the floor in the hall’. Requests for the audience’s persistent attention in order to fully apprehend what is happening. Thus, allowing the audience to understand the hidden meaning allocated within the play, such as the discovery of the ‘cream cracker under the settee’ in which subtext is used to illustrate its true meaning.

The diversity of cinematography, used during the play further aids the dramatic setting of the play, such as at the beginning of the scenes there was a wide shot of the protagonist’s situation, allowing the audience to associate themselves with the scenery, the camera then gradually zooms into Doris’s face enabling her facial expression to become clear to the spectators facilitating the audiences understanding of the main character. When the protagonist relates to conversations with subsidiary characters the camera focuses on a side of the protagonist face, as if reconstructing the dialogue between her and the unseen characters.

During the revelation of Doris’s emotions and personal facts to the audience the camera normally upholds a direct headshot of the protagonist in which the protagonist maintains constant eye contact, continuously drawing the audience into her narrative. The changes in lighting help to divulge the mood of particular scenes to the audiences. For instance during Doris’s talks of dispute she has had, Doris’s facial expression is shown to be distressed and

irate, therefore light is dispersed upon Doris so that her facial expression can clearly be seen.

Little light is cast unto Doris's face during the protagonist's nostalgic thoughts and recollections of past memories, this generates a mysterious atmosphere for the audience they feel her 'dark side' is about to be revealed. As the 'LIGHT FADES' at the end of the monologue, the audience are left in suspense, as we are indecisive whether the protagonist has in fact passed away, or that her spirit has just died. Tension within the audience, reaches its pinnacle as the audience are unsure what to think, and provides the spectators with a shock factor.

Bennett uses the changes in time and settings to demonstrate Doris's current position as life is rapidly deteriorating. The changes in lighting may be dictated to be symbolic metaphor of Doris's hope for happiness. This is shown through the dimming of light throughout the play, representing the passage of time. As the inside lights are not on, there is no light, except for the streak through a window. Nevertheless, as it begins to darken and the onlookers are told the protagonist's life history, we are shown that Doris is a prisoner of her own unhappiness.

This gives the audience the sense of dramatic urgency, causing the play to become more emotive for its spectators. As when the remainder of the 'LIGHT FADES', Bennett leads the audience to believe so has Doris's hope for contentment, 'Never mind. It's done with now'. Bennett's use of the imagery of falling leaves mentioned within Doris's monologue may be said to be a metaphorical device, exemplifying that the season is autumn. In addition, as

a further representative of the protagonist's age. The association between the yearly period in which the play is set and the protagonist age can be identified by the depiction of different seasons.

In the season of spring, the birth of a leaf takes place; the summer is identified as the most fruitful part of life for a leaf, while autumn is the old age of the leaf, where the protagonist as seventy-five year old women presently stands. Winter is the death of a leaf and therefore Doris recognises that the leaves represent her, as she as the leaves are near their time of death. This may be perceived as an indicator as to why the protagonist obsesses over the leaves in her garden, 'I could do with trees if they didn't have leaves', therefore insists in the removal of the leaves as she feels threatened by the leaves.

Tragedy is one of the focal themes displayed in 'Cream Cracker', hinders the entire atmospheric tension of the entire play. The affiliation between lack of self-understanding and failure to understand others is important in the illustration of how such characteristics can lead to the loneliness and alienation the protagonist encounters from a 'corrupted' society that she no longer belongs. Become a prisoner of own obsessions with no hopes of escape, wherein the world beyond her front door is unknown and dangerous.

The protagonist's despondency and isolation due to perpetual confinement and estrangement, from today's society, as become progressively more tragic for the audience due to the looming death of the protagonist. The audience learns from Doris's past history, there will be no-one to recall and lament her death, as she has no accomplishments to show for her life,

except penitent reminisces on what may have been. Bennett cleverly associates society's fears of seclusion and misery as a result of ageing, through the persona of Doris.

Thora Hurd outstandingly performs the protagonist with acute authenticity escalating the overall atmosphere of calamity within the play, this generates further condolences towards Doris as the audience begins to correlate themselves with the protagonist situation. I learn from ' Cream Cracker Under The Settee' of Bennett's political views on society's rejection of the elderly and the consequences of these actions. Bennett's use of language and presentational devices provides the audience of contemporary society an in depth analysis of the implications of old age, once revolutionising my perceptions of the elderly society. Old age is immanent event most people in today's civilisation will encounter during the course of their, Controversionally getting across to me as a audience member that society has the power to revolutionise the government policies on the elderly, Causing me to become more aware of how today's policies and social problems may affect us in the future as it up to us as the new generation to decide whether it will be something to dread or look forward to.