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‘ Instructor’s Name’

Book: The count of Monte Cristo

The Count of Monte Cristo is a novel written by Alexandre Dumas and was first published in the year 1844. The plot of the story was expanded by Dumas in collaboration with ghostwriter Auguste Maquet. Along with the ‘ Three Musketeers’, this novel is one of the most anthologized works of Dumas, and as critics opine the novel has become a permanent fixture of Western literature.

Dumas was a French novelist and dramatist, and during his lifetime he produced a number of literary outputs like dramas, novels, memoirs, travelogues and historical studies. Mostly self-educated, Dumas actively took part in the revolution of 1830, and many of his stories use the revolution as a backdrop.

Set in the nineteenth century, ‘ The count of Monte Carlo’ is a story of betrayal and vengeance. The story centers on the life of a sailor named, Edmond Dantes, who after being elevated to the post of captain returns to his hometown to marry his lover, Mercedes. However his friends, consumed of jealousy towards him, betray him, and he ends up in an island prison, which is sort of a historic Alcatraz, with no return. The rest of the story delineates how he escapes from there, becomes rich and successful, and takes his revenge on his enemies.

The central theme handled by Dumas in this novel is justice. Though the novel deals with a typical revenge plot, through the journey of his protagonist, Dumas shows, how Dantes alters his concept of justice from retributive to restorative. In the beginning Dantes sets to inflict his concept

of retributive justice on his enemies, for the pain and devastation they caused him. However once he extracts his revenge, he feels fear and emptiness.

His restlessness and emptiness gives rise to restorative justice. He leaves his wealth to Maximilien Morrel and Valentine, and finds refuge in the love of Haydée. This essay aims at scrutinizing the characterization of Dantes, and explores how Dumas has conveyed the theme of justice in this story.

The novel is set in the post-Napoleonic period during the rule of Louis Philippe, and Dumas has paid careful attention to the historical details presented in the novel. In the French society which was divided by the French revolution, which further aggravated by the dictatorship of Napoleon, the vengeful Edmond Dantes would have been empathized with and would not have seemed out of place.

The story was written, like most of the novels written in those times, as a serialized fiction to be published in daily newspapers. So to keep the audience in a constant state of expectation, the main plot is further enriched by many sub plots which deal with a variety of subjects like love, murders, impersonation, etc. Contemporary readers, who are more used to the fast paced and crisp literary style of today, might find this little tedious, but the novel fit well with the expectations of a nineteenth century reader.

While Dantes is developed by Dumas as a fully rounded and complex character, the other characters are mostly one-dimensional and reflect the common stereotypes of that era. All the women in the novel weep, and the men flush and perspire. Dumas, though has given detailed descriptions of the aristocratic lifestyle and their luxurious dwellings, he has taken more

pain in explaining and shown more sympathy towards the lifestyle of the working class.

At the beginning of the novel, Dantes is portrayed as an idyllic hero, who is a young, brave, handsome, principled, and popular person, betrothed to the love of his life, Mercedes. Though he is not an aristocratic descendant, he is about to become the captain of a wealthy ship, and indeed, he feels uneasy by the amount of happiness he enjoys. As if on premonition, he says during his marriage feast

“ Man does not appear to me to be intended to enjoy felicity so unmixed”

As on cue, soldiers interrupt the feast and take him as a prisoner, for being the courier of the secret Bonapartist message, from the former captain of his ship.

Dantes, who did not know the contents of the message he was carrying, fell prey to the jealousy of Fernand, who secretly hoped to marry Mercedes. To add to his woes, the deputy public prosecutor Villefort, acts unjustly to save his father from shame, and buries Dantes into an island prison, from where there is no return.

This part of the story marks the end of the first phase, in the story as well as characterization of Dantes. The hero, who is young, filled with, hope, morals and dreams, turns into a cynic filled with resentment and rage. The imprisonment and the trial of Dantes marks a profound transformation in the character of the protagonist, and he almost loses everything he cared for in his life – his love, career and social stature.

His imprisonment can be considered the middle part of his characterization

whereby he almost become insane due to solitude and later through the acquaintance of Abbe Faria, gets courage and education. Faria tells Dantes about a treasure buried in a cave, and when Faria dies, Dantes escapes the prison by substituting himself for the corpse of his tutor.

The Dantes who emerges out of the prison changes both in appearance and character. The good natured, trusting and idealistic Dantes, turns into a revenge seeking, prudent and charming hunter. The fourteen years of his imprisonment, was partly spent by him by resenting the ill fortunes that befell on him and partly by honing his skills to extract vengeance over the people responsible for ruining his life.

Dantes finds his treasure in the island of Monte Cristo and dubs himself as the ‘ Count of Monte Cristo’. Once he found the treasure, Dantes’ transformation, which started during his time in prison, starts to gain momentum. The author writes

“ The almost incalculable riches that had thus fallen into his possession satisfied not the cravings of his heart, which yearned to . assume the rank, power and influence, unbounded wealth alone can bestow.”

Till this part of the story, Dantes is portrayed by Dumas as the embodiment of righteousness. The reader was able to empathize with his suffering, and his quest to bring his enemies to their knees, appears justifiable. The escape from the prison, finding the treasure and masking his identity, all these deeds are part of his preparatory measures to take revenge on the people who wronged him.

Dumas’ story travels unwaveringly towards its foreshadowed ending of good’s triumph over evil. The hero at this juncture of the story feels no

remorse or doubt over his moral righteousness to extract revenge. Besides being a classic revenge plot, 'The Count of Monte Cristo', also adds a few interesting views to moral and ethical repercussions of the, age old "you killed my father, and I kill you, thus justice is served", routine.

Dumas' worldview is based on the typical eighteenth century philosophy advocated by elites such as Dickens: men are basically good natured, but are corrupted by their circumstances and the society at large. Dantes' character in this novel espouses this philosophy.

He is a good-hearted person who takes to murderous ways, because of the treachery inflicted on him by people whom he trusted. If human nature is basically good, then the greatest form of oppression is the oppression of innocent people. In the light of this philosophy, Dantes is justified in his quest for revenge. Even after amassing his wealth, for sinister ends, Dantes does many kind acts, and helps many people using his wealth. Though his primary aim, after becoming rich is to kill his enemies, in the process he helps many people who were kind to him and others who deserved his kindness.

Dumas has clearly bifurcated his characters into two categories – the oppressed and oppressors. Edmond Dantes at the beginning of the story belonged to the oppressed category. However after gaining his wealth, he garners unimaginable powers. He uses this power to protect the oppressed and punish the oppressors. He helps many people by his wealth like bailing out his debt-laden old employer Morrel. He even gives Caderousse a chance, by giving him a diamond. By these acts, the author makes it clear that his protagonist is a benevolent and righteous human being, whose anger is

directed towards his enemies and not the society at large.

There are also religious undertones to the characterization of Dantes. Like Christ, who was crucified by the betrayal of his friends and resurrects from death, Dantes too is left to die in prison and resurrects from his fall. The island where Dantes finds the treasure and undergoes transformation is named Monte Cristo, which translates into the mountain of Christ. Franz d'Epinaay associates the island of Monte Cristo to Calvary, the mountain in which Christ was crucified.

Dantes, like Jesus, emerges from a cave, only in Dantes' case the cave is filled with treasure. The meaning of Château D'If, the place where Dantes is imprisoned, is the 'house of the evergreen tree'. Jesus was born under the evergreen Christmas tree, and Dantes' rebirth occurred in Château D'If and thus, there is a clear religious symbolism in the novel.

Dumas' generation had a, fallen and resurrected, real life hero in the form of Napoleon. The historical events, surrounding his banishment and return to power, are intricately woven in the plot of this novel. Edmond Dantes' story spans around the period between 1815 and 1838. It is a known historical fact that Napoleon was exiled to this island of Elba in the year 1913. Elba is the same island where Dantes makes port, to retrieve a letter during his journey towards Marseilles, at the beginning of the story.

The historical and political scene of France during that era provides a perfect backdrop and impetus to, this story of vengeance. Napoleon was a soldier who rose to power, and was popular among the French people. After a failed attempt to invade Russia, his army weakened, and he was driven to the island of Elba by the other European powers.

Dantes' story starts right after Napoleon's exile. So like Napoleon Dantes too rises to a position of power from being an ordinary sailor, is glorified by his peers, betrayed by the people he believed in, and left to rot in a jail, which marks his fall from glory. He then resurrects and gets his revenge on all the people who betrayed him.

Not just while Dantes' voyage to Elba, but throughout the novel, Napoleon and the politics of that era find mention. Napoleon's escape to Paris and his army's movement is discussed at various parts of the story, and Villefort's father is portrayed to be a Napoleon loyalist. This depiction of political events gives the story, the tension required for a plot of vengeance and plotting, and also enables the reader to establish a connection with the story.

Also, some historians and critics believe that this story might be based on true events, which took place during that era. Many believe Dantes' character is based on a real life person named François Picaud, who was framed by his friends and imprisoned. He is believed to have successfully extracted revenge on them, after amassing a fortune through one of his fellow prison inmate. So, the political events narrated around the story, might have been added to give the story a touch of authenticity.

Apart from the philosophical foundations, the author's personal life experiences also bears an impact on the theme of vengeance conveyed in the story. Dumas father was persecuted, and Dumas was known to have had trouble with creditors. Hence, he had harbored many grievances against the social divisions in general and personal enemies in particular. His anger against the race and class divisions is seen in the following excerpt from the novel.

“ We grow according to our race and our species, and we pursue the same lines and often the same uselessness all our lives.”

So it would not be entirely unreasonable to think that, Dumas has captured his own vengeful feelings in his novel.

Hence the middle/second part of the novel, which starts with Dantes escaping the prison and ends with his return to France, marks the transformation of his character into a scheming and charming person, capable of inflicting terrible cruelty to his enemies. Now that the protagonist is ready to make his enemies pay for their sins, the story moves into the final part. Based on the characterization of Dantes, the events that follow his re-entry into France can be termed as the final part of his transformation and self evaluation.

In this part of the novel, Dantes puts his plans into motion. As the story nears its end, we can find many references to the providence or supreme power. Dantes considers himself to be doing the work of God and acts as a vengeful providence. He makes the people who denounced him suffer, and they blame it on the providence. Dantes even says that he wishes to play the role of God.

“ I wish to be Providence myself, for I feel that the most beautiful, noblest, most sublime thing in the world, is to recompense and punish.”

He lets loose his schemes of murder and devastation, and all his enemies fall one by one like a pack of cards. This is the stage of the novel, where he advocates his retributive justice on his enemies. He thinks they have to bear the fruit of their actions, and takes it upon himself to punish them. He does not directly murder anyone, but creates situations whereby each of his

enemies destroys themselves.

Each one of the antagonists, against whom Dantes seek revenge, represents the basic evils in human nature. Fernand, who masterminds the downfall of Dantes and marries Mercedes, represent lust – for wealth, power, and passion. Villefort, who uses his position as an attorney to condemn an innocent man for his personal gain, represent misuse of power/position and blind ambition. Danglars, who resent Dantes' promotion to captaincy, represents jealousy.

So Dantes' fight is, in essence, a fight of a victim, against the darker natures of the humanity. Dantes' journey thus can be grouped under three cycles or stages. The first begins when the innocent and honest sailor, falls prey to the conspiracy of the wicked peers, and ends up in prison. The second cycle represents his escape from the prison and ascendancy to wealth and power. The third cycle is the act of his vengeance and self realization.

However the revenge he extracts, which came after much planning and efforts, leaves him feeling strangely empty. As his plan succeeds, he suffers with a growing disillusionment in the righteousness of his mission. When he sets his revenge plans on motion, Dantes is portrayed to be corrupted by his lust for vengeance. As Marinetti opines, in the process of defending himself against evil Dantes inevitably embraces evil.

Dantes' innocence and purity of heart remained with him, only until the gift of knowledge was bestowed upon him by Faria in the prison. His situation can be equated to man before the fall. Adam, in Bible, found that pure happiness can last only when the heart has pure innocence and trust.

Knowledge, like in Bible, has marked the end of innocence and thus the fall

of Dantes' character in this novel. While Faria thinks about all the good things Dantes will be able to do with his treasure, Dantes plots his revenge. Dantes' second resurrection comes when he realizes that his vengeful path is punishing the innocent, as well. The prospect of Valentine being poisoned by her step mother and the death of Villefort's son opens his eyes, to the unintended perils his schemes have brought. He is no longer able to defend his actions in the name of justice.

The red elixir, whose recipe Dantes gives to the Mme de Villefort, acts as a symbolic allusion to the problem faced by Dantes. When administered in a correct dosage this elixir acts as a cure, and when over administered it becomes poison. In the same way, Dantes is not able to control his deeds, and instead of inflicting justice, his actions have crossed the boundaries into evil.

Dantes towards the end of the novel is confronted both by his burning desire to seek justice, and his inability to control his power that causes damages to innocent persons. The French and Industrial revolutions were seen by some, as a positive phenomenon which would eliminate social disparity, while others thought they would bring chaos and disorder. Dumas dreaded the horrors of excess revolution, and the last chapters of the novel can be viewed as his attempt to resolve the problem.

Dantes pardons the Danglars, his last enemies, and leaves his wealth to Maximilien and Valentine. He had already saved Valentine from being killed by her step mother, and also does what he can to protect Mercedes and her son. He departs for an unknown destination, never to be seen again with Haydée. His final words to Morrel are " Attendre et esperer!", which means "

Wait and Hope".

While the novel is a colorful and enthralling story of love, betrayal and vengeance, it also has a greater message to the readers, about the ill effects of revenge, on both the victim and the perpetrator. While Dantes' plans, conceived over a period of a decade, wrecks havoc on his enemies, it also inflicts collateral damage and the guilty and innocents perish alike in this dangerous game of revenge.

Thus, the overall theme of 'The Count of Monte Cristo' is the ambivalence of the concept of justice. Even though Dantes' character exhibits imperfection and is at times dangerous, he has brought about a much closer definition for justice than his society offered. So though there was some unwarranted bloodshed, like the death of Villefort's young son, Dantes largely executed his acts within the accepted norms of justice. At the end by his noble deeds, he also altered his retributive justice to restorative justice.

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