

A cream cracker under the settee analysis essay



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I have been studying a twentieth century drama called ' A Cream Cracker Under the Settee. ' It was written by Alan Bennett and appeared in the BBC1 series ' Talking Heads. ' It has been written in the form of a tragi-comedy monologue where the juxtaposition of humour and pathos reflects real life. In this drama an elderly woman named Doris reveals her thoughts, feelings and past experiences to the audience. Doris is an elderly woman of 75, who lives alone and appears isolated from any form of socialising.

The social services advise her to go into a retirement home called Stafford House as her independence is becoming limited but Doris persists that she wants to stay in her own home. Throughout the monologue Doris expresses her emotions as she reminisces about different periods in her lifetime. Her lonely and dedicated life draws to an end as a dreadful accident compels her to make the decision to die in her own surroundings rather than getting medical attention. The issue of loneliness appears to the audience to be quite a strong theme in the drama. All of the nostalgic thoughts that Doris accumulates are based on the fact that she is lonely and too immobile to have an active life.

Doris became secluded after her husband, Wilfred, passed away and she was left in their house alone. The author shows Doris' isolation and loneliness by using conversations between her and a photograph of her late husband. On numerous occasions Doris turns to the photo as a friend in which she confides her thoughts and feelings. Just after the incident where Doris injures her leg she looks down at the photo and proclaims, ' Cracked the photo. We're cracked, Wilfred.

‘ This shows the audience how Doris always imagines Wilfred to be with her and that she has nobody else to talk to. The issue of loss and death in this drama is somewhat emotional for the audience. The way the author writes makes you feel involved with the characters and able to imagine what they are going through. As Doris reviews her life, we realise that she has had quite a few traumatic experiences.

Doris talks about the difficult period in her life when she gave birth to a stillborn baby. Doris confesses, ‘ I wanted him called John. The midwife said he wasn’t fit to be called anything and had we any newspaper? ‘ This nostalgia, where Doris is looking back, gets her deep in thought. Doris explains that, ‘ If it had lived, I might have had grandchildren now. ‘ The audience can tell from this how she thinks about what her life might have been like if her child would have survived.

Doris gets very upset when she says, ‘ Wrapping him in newspaper as if he was dirty. He wasn’t dirty, little thing. ‘ The audience sympathise with her here, trying to understand what she went through. Doris also talks a little about her late husband, Wilfred. The audiences acknowledge that Wilfred has died from the way Doris speaks of him when she says, ‘ Well he’s got a minute now, bless him.

‘ Doris’ life has been destroyed through loss and death on different occasions, which is why she is so lonely and isolated from people now. In the drama Doris refers to a lot of conflict that has occurred in her existence. She talks about the disputes that she’s had with certain people and the

antagonistic thoughts that go on within her own mind. Doris discusses her conflicts involving her home help, Zulema.

Doris' interpretation of her is very negative. She informs the audience about how, ' Zulema doesn't dust. She half dusts,' and exclaims, ' I know when a place isn't clean. ' On one occasion Doris complains, ' She's not half done this place' and infers that she's more trouble than she's worth in the statement, ' Home help. Home hindrance. ' Doris recalls all of the conflict that went on between her and her late husband, Wilfred.

He used to conjure up imaginative ideas that Doris would disagree with. They argued over the garden, Wilfred's ideas of pretty surroundings were destroyed when Doris admitted, ' Given a choice, Wilfred, I'd have preferred concrete. They debated about getting a dog as Doris said, ' Hairs all up and down, then having to take it outside every five minutes. ' Conflict also grew within Doris after she had given birth to the stillborn baby, she explained, ' I don't think Wilfred minded. A kiddy. It was the same as the allotment and fretwork.

Just a craze. ' The issue of conflict grows as a ' young lad' comes passing by Doris' house, she notices him ' spending a penny' inside her gate in broad daylight and is outraged. Doris shouts with fury and the ' young lad' runs away. After a moments thought Doris realises she has just ruined her chance of getting help and says, ' He wouldn't have known what to do anyway. Only a kiddy. The policeman comes past now and again.

If I can catch him. ' Problems also arise for Doris when Jehovah Witnesses come ' braying' on the door. She gets extremely annoyed as she describes '
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they opened the letterbox and started shouting about Jesus. ‘ Doris explains, ‘ They ought to get their priorities right. They want learning that on their instruction course. ‘ The issue of changes in the community concerns Doris a lot and a vast amount of the audience could probably also relate to it.

In the drama, when Doris is desperately trying to grab the attention of passers by she confesses, ‘ I’m en-route for the window only I’m not making much headway. I’ll bang on it. Alert someone. Don’t know who.

Don’t know anybody round here. ‘ Doris seems a little distressed as she begins to think of how the community used to be and how it has gradually broken down. Doris starts to reel off a list of all the people that lived opposite her, ‘ Used to be the Marsdens. Mr and Mrs Marsden and Yvonne, the funny daughter..

. Smartish woman after them... Then she went and they started to come and go. You loose track.

Apart from the fact the residents don’t stay very long Doris also accuses them of behaving like animals. She exclaims, ‘ You see all sorts. They come in the garden..

. I find the evidence in a morning. ‘ Doris seems to miss the old way of life and reminisces about all the good times she had in her community when she was younger. During the play Doris makes very little communication with any other person and from what she’s revealed about her life it seems her and Wilfred were never very sociable. Doris explains, ‘ We were always on our own, me and Wilfred.

We weren't gregarious. We just weren't the gregarious type. He thought he was, but he wasn't. ' After Wilfred had passed away Doris' only communication was with the home help, Zulema.

Once a week she would come and clean the house but Doris never thought much of her efforts. In the concluding parts of the drama Doris communicates with a policeman who is concerned for her wellbeing. She speaks to him for a moment but then he turns away so once again Doris is left isolated and alone. Towards the end of the monologue Doris' character has to make one very significant life choice.

She has to decide whether to remain in her own home and die alone or go into Stafford House with people that she doesn't know. Doris' perception of Stafford House is very negative and she only seems to have pessimistic views on it. Doris complains about the thought of living in Stafford House as she says, ' I don't want to be stuck with a lot of old lasses. And they all smell of pee.

And daft half of them, banging tambourines. You go daft there, there's nowhere else for you to go but daft. ' After reminiscing over her lifetime Doris decides that there is nothing else to live for. When the policeman comes and offers help she turns him away saying, ' I'm all right. ' Doris makes a very brave decision and realises it when she says, ' You've done it now, Doris.

Done it now, Wilfred. ' The life choice has been made and Doris closes her eyes as her life has drawn to an end. In the drama the audience would gradually gain a much better insight on Doris' character as she reveals a lot

of detail about herself by what she does and the idiolect that she uses. The writer has developed Doris' character into being a kind and loving person.

She has a lot of individual features that combine together to create who she is. Doris seems to be very house-proud and something of a perfectionist. She expects Zulema to perform every task up to her own hygienic standards and criticises her efforts at every opportunity. On one occasion Doris complains, 'She's not half done this place.' Doris' character appears to be quite defensive. This is shown when she strongly objects at the assumption people make from the leaves up and down her path.

She defends her name by making it clear to the audience that they're not her responsibility. She uses a stern tone of voice and exclaims, 'We've only got the one little bush and it's an evergreen so I'm certain they're not my leaves.' Doris also shows a humorous side to her. During the monologue she turns some serious matters into jokes and defines for the audience her sense of humour. When Doris gets annoyed after Jehovah's Witnesses keep leaving her gate open she changes the moment from anger to laughter after saying, 'Love God and close all gates.'

'This is showing the tragi-comedy in the play. Doris' tone changes rapidly as she uses humour and then pathos. The audience can establish from Doris' speech that she seems to be very good with words and uses a variety of speaking methods in different circumstances. She talks in a very formal and pretentious way when reminiscing of Wilfred; 'Wilfred said he would be prepared to under take the responsibility. The dog would be his province.'

She uses this format because she had great respect for him and is trying to show this to the audience. The idiolect Doris uses in the drama can be quite confusing for that audience as it is the speech particular to her, which others may not be able to understand. Some examples of this are, ' The flaming buffet went over', ' Ewbank' and ' Shakes you up, a fall. ' On occasions the author uses alliteration when Doris is speaking to create an exciting atmosphere for the audience. When Doris was describing the dog that Wilfred desired she says, ' Lolloping, lamppost smelling articles. The author also uses euphemism.

This tells the audience that Doris is quite old fashioned and still does not like to get directly to the point. It is shown when she uses the phrase, ' Spending a penny. ' Idiosyncratic phrases appear quite regularly through the monologue. These are phrases that are particular to Doris and nobody else.

The author uses idiosyncrasy when Doris is talking of moving, ' I'm going to have to migrate or I'll catch my death. ' Throughout the play there are a number of occasions where subtext could be used. This is what is suggested below the surface of the words and where the audience can fill in the gaps through their own experiences. When Doris is complaining about Zulema she says, ' And she hadn't.

Thick with dust. Home help. Home hindrance. ' Here, the audience can bring their own experiences from life for further understanding of the character.

The author uses various dramatic devices through the monodrama to create a more tense and intriguing atmosphere for the audience. Foreshadowing is a device where an event, effect of the set and lighting or specific language

prefigures later events. When Doris mentions the pram in her hallway it gives the audience a clue that a baby was present in Doris and Wilfred's life at one stage; ' This is where we had the pram. You couldn't get past for it.

' Symbolism is where one thing stands for something else. It has a deeper meaning than what the audience might first assume. One example of this is the cream cracker. It symbolises Doris' hygiene and independence. This is shown when Doris says, ' I'm going to save that cream cracker and show it her next time she starts going on about Stafford House.

Dramatic irony is where the audiences are aware of aspects of the character or plot that are unknown to the protagonists. This device is used when Wilfred had said to Doris, ' We're better off... Just the two of us,' but had previously pined to have a dog. An unreliable narrator is where there is only one character telling the facts so they might not be very accurate.

Once again the audience would have to fill in the gaps to the drama. One example of this is where Doris is criticising Zulema by exclaiming, ' Home help. Home hindrance. ' A dramatic twist is where the audience is surprised by an ending for which they have been unprepared for.

In the monologue a dramatic twist occurs where Doris turns down the chance to get help when she replies to the policeman, ' I'm all right. ' Dramatic pauses are a special device as they create tension and help to split up the scenes. The most significant pause throughout the play occurs at the end after Doris has made her life choice. ' Her eyes close and she sings a little to herself. Another dramatic device in this monologue would be a stream of

consciousness. This is where a flow of memories represents the process of thought and can include repetition.

This device is used as Doris' nostalgic thoughts are based on the community when she was younger; ' When people were clean and the streets were clean and you could walk down the street and folks smiled and passed the time of day... ' As the audience watch the drama the effect with numerous camera angles and lighting produces a substantial difference to the revelation of the character. During the whole play the camera moves in a variety of ways. At the beginning of the scenes there is normally a wide shot of the situation that Doris is in and then the camera gradually zooms in on her to view expressions that could facilitate the audiences understanding.

When Doris is relating conversations with subsidiary characters the camera focuses on the side of her face as if she is reconstructing the conversations that she had. Whenever Doris is revealing emotion or personal facts to the audience the camera always looks directly face-on at her and she continually holds eye contact. Throughout the drama the lighting is a significant effect for the audience as it reveals to them the mood of particular scenes. As Doris talks of disputes that she has had, the expressions on her face seem to be very distressed and angry.

Therefore, quite a lot of light is dispersed so that Doris' whole face can be seen. Whenever Doris is feeling nostalgic and starts to reminisce about the past, there is not much light shown so it creates a mysterious atmosphere for the audience where they feel a dark side to her is being revealed. The fact that this drama is a monologue makes Doris' description of her

circumstances more emotive and believable. Just after Doris has a fall she explains to the audience how she feels by saying, ' My leg's a bit numb but I've managed to get back on the chair. I'm just going to sit and come round a bit. Shakes you up, a fall.

' This helps the audience to apprehend how Doris feels from her own viewpoint and not somebody else's opinion. The use of humour and pathos together is a dramatic device that involves the audience and reflects real life. This creates the tragic-comedy in the monologue and helps the author to show Doris' condition. After the time she gave birth to a stillborn baby Doris said, ' I wanted him called John.

The midwife said he wasn't fit to be called anything and had we any newspaper. ' This quote shows tragedy and comedy in the form of humour and pathos. In some circumstances I think that the use of a monologue is more dramatically effective than if the representation was third person. This is because of the dramatic device, an unreliable narrator. It keeps the audience aware of whether the character is telling the truth or not as there are no other characters to tell their side of the story.

Another advantage of just having one character speaking is that the audience has the opportunity to gain greater insight into the characters personality. In different circumstances I think that a third person would be more effective than a monologue as it might bring more detail and interest into the drama. It would also create more issues for the audiences to relate to and more characters to learn about and comprehend. The use of only one voice restricts Bennett dramatically for two main reasons.

He can only describe the story from Doris' point of view and he can only describe what's going on wherever Doris is located. He attempts to overcome both these problems by the use of Doris' reminiscences, which transport the story to other times and places and therefore gives more scope to the monologue. I think that Bennett does this very successfully as he creates an interesting and factual drama that shows his restrictions did not prove to be an impossible problem. As a person who is considerably younger than Doris' character I find it quite difficult to relate to all of the traumatic experiences that she has gone through. I can sympathise with many of the facts that she has revealed to me as part of an audience but I cannot criticise any of the decisions that she has made as I have never been in a position like hers to judge. Although none of my experiences are in common with those of Doris' I can try and imagine the problems that occurred for her and the way she resolved them.

I really enjoyed studying this drama and trying to understand emotions, which I have never come across before. I think that Alan Bennett is a good writer who uses his skills to absorb his audience into the drama as it unfolds.