

**A/L ENGLISH**

**NEW SYLLABUS**

**NOTES**

*on*

**SHORT STORIES**

by

**Fr. Herman Fernando**

B. Th(Rome); B. A. (Pera); M. A. (Lond);  
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Series Editor

**A. K. Hewage**



**A DENUMA PUBLICATION**



# NOTES

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# SHORT STORIES

*for*

***GCE (Advanced Level) Students***

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## PREFACE

(To Notes On A/L Short Stories)

What I have set forth in the following pages are my personal responses to the five short stories prescribed for the G. C. E. Advanced Level Examination from 1997 onward. I have called them *Notes On Short Stories* because I thought my reflections would be of assistance to A/L students offering English as a subject. These reflections are not exhaustive. They are only the basic insights into the valuable wisdom enshrined in these stories.

My fervent hope is that these reflections will serve as guidelines for the students to intelligently respond to the stories in their preparation for the examination. They can also be of help to teachers engaged in teaching the subject.

I thank Denuma Printers and Publishers (Pvt) Limited and especially their Managing Director Mr. A K. Hewage for undertaking to publish these notes.

Fr. Herman Fernando  
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## ARABY

By James Joyce (1882 - 1941)

### A Commentary :

When we read Joyce' short story *Araby*, we must remember that this short story is only one of a collection of short stories Joyce published under the title *Dubliners*. In all, there are 15 of them in this collection. Their general theme we can infer from what Joyce wrote about them: "My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of paralysis." *Dubliners* thus is not a mere collection of short stories but really a multifaceted novel depicting to us the moral (Psychological) ethos of Ireland. *Araby* is only one facet of this multifaceted tale and for a correct understanding of it, it must be viewed in the general context of other stories whose general theme as Joyce himself has mentioned is *paralysis* - moral - spiritual (psychological) paralysis of the Irish race at the beginning of this century.

Even though Joyce himself meant his *Dubliners* to be an account of the moral - spiritual paralysis of his race, some critics have gone to the extent of calling the work a detached morally realistic account of modern life in general. This is a comment therefore we must examine before we focus on the short story *Araby* itself.

The modern short story is of recent origin. At most it may be about 100 to 150 years old. Before the art of the short story was developed, it was the longer novel or the ancient epic that was there. Behind these longer forms of literary works there was a basic philosophy which was essentialist. Essentialist view of things started with the Greek philosopher Plato (247 - 347 B. C.)

In order to understand the Platonic view of things we must get down to the basic philosophical problem. The basic philosophical problem that all philosophers have tried to solve is the problem of one and the many. How can a thing be at the same time the same thing (one) and be different (change) (many). Plato's answer to this problem was that everything in this world changes but everything in this world also has an unchanging idea (a soul) in the world of ideas (soul). Whatever there is on this earth is only a shadow of the idea in the world of ideas. That idea in the world of ideas does not change. Its shadow on the earth, the thing changes. Furthermore it is that idea that makes a thing what it is. It is the essence of the thing. That essence of the thing is intelligible to the human mind. Therefore man can understand the idea, the essence.

With regard to man himself, man can understand his essence or the true nature of man. So in the midst of all the changes that a man undergoes during his life-time, it is the duty of man to conform to that true nature. Any action that does not conform to that true nature is bad. Any action that conforms to the true nature is good. In other words, Plato and others like him believed that man must do what is good and avoid what is evil. That is moral idealism based on essentialist view of life. Classical literary writers therefore believed that their duty was to encourage their readers to follow the path of good living by doing what is in conformity with their true nature-essence.

Classical writings were therefore mimetic. Mimos in Greek means to imitate. So the classical writers presented heroic characters for the imitation of their readers. So classical writings are full of heroic characters. Even when there are no such heroic characters in more recent literature like that of Shakespeare, Dickens or Tolstoy, there is a basic assumption underlying the story. That is, after all, man must do good and avoid evil - the good are rewarded and the evil are punished. This is moral idealism in Literature.



Henrik Ibsen (1828 - 1906) the Norwegian playwright is considered the father of realism in literature. His opinion was that literature must deal not with heroic characters but with ordinary people living in real situations full of contradictions. Ibsen believed that such real situations of real people full of contradictions must be focussed on in literature and then these situations must be objectively discussed and analysed.

Then came Sigmund Freud (1856 - 1939) and the psychological Revolution. Psychology began to probe the secrets of the human mind and shattered the view held up to then about man's mind as a conscious record of all thoughts.

Aristotle, the Greek philosopher (384 - 322 B.C.) had taught that the human mind is a sort of a slate on which thoughts are written. After him many philosophers had thought of the human mind in the same way. Sigmund Freud showed that the conscious area of our mind is only about 1/10 of it. The larger part of it, that is 9/10ths were the unconscious area. According to Freud real motivation for our actions came not from our conscious mind but from the unconscious mind - from instincts hidden in our unconscious mind.

After Freudian discoveries, the mind became the subject of study in literature too. Like a scientist examining a slice of tissue under a microscope the literary artist began examining the mind. The short story became the instrument to focus on the mind.

In this process of examining the human mind the literary artist kept to the tradition of realism introduced by Ibsen. In other words the literary artist examined the human mind as it really is - in real situations full of contradictions. This new literary tradition of realism is called ironic tradition because literature is used as an instrument to expose, to objectively analyse the contradictions of the human mind and the human life in general. So there is

moral realism in the new realistic tradition. There is no more moral idealism.

Now to return to *Dubliners* it is a collection of stories written in the ironic tradition or in that of moral realism.

What then is moral realism? In moral idealism the reader is offered a moral ideal in the character of the hero to follow. In moral realism there is no such ideal offered. Thoughts and actions of the characters are exposed with all their contradictions. The characters therefore are no more heroes and heroines. Often they are antiheroes and antiheroines incapable of heroism, of heroic deeds or heroic achievement.

Thus implied in this moral realism is also moral paralysis. Incapacity for heroism is moral paralysis. *Araby* is yet another- manifestation of moral paralysis.

### The Theme of the Short Story *ARABY*.

When we examine the short story *Araby*, we could be tempted to give a purely psychological interpretation to this story as if Joyce' intention were to depict to the reader the adolescent psychology of a young boy who has fallen in love with a girl. This kind of psychological interpretation is likely because first there is much that is introvert self-analysis by the protagonist in the story. Secondly there is also a great deal of confusion manifested by that self-analysis. Mental confusion is also typical of adolescent psychology. Besides these facts which are inherent to the story, we also know that Joyce knew plenty about contemporary development in psychiatric research. He knew Jungian and Freudian theories and it was not for nothing that he lived in Zurich in Switzerland for some time.

What we must remember is that Joyce' intention in *Araby* as well as in all the other stories in *Dubliners* is not psychological but social. This we know from what Joyce himself said: "My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country."

A good starting point, however, for our discussion of the story would be the very aspect we mentioned before, namely the aspect of adolescent romantic love. The romantic references in the story are unmistakable. We are given a detailed account of the protagonist's newly awakening love for Mangan's sister. The love begins as a result of the physical proximity of neighbourhood through the medium of a third party - the brother. Love then grows in intensity quickly till at last it overwhelms the protagonist. In the end the protagonist fails to keep his promise to the girl to buy her something from the Araby market.

Running parallel to this romantic strand which symbolizes life and love in the story is also another concurrent idea in the story. That is the idea of death and decay. Just as romantic references are unmistakable in the story,

references to death and decay too are unmistakable. Consider for example the very opening paragraph of the story. We are told that North Richmond street was blind. There was an uninhabited house of two stories at the blind end and that it was detached from its neighbours. Even the other houses on the street we are told "conscious of decent lives within them gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces." The whole paragraph thus suggests a sense of being trapped into emptiness (blind end and uninhabited house) and devitalization through decency trapping one into mediocrity.

In the second paragraph the reader is plunged deeper into a sense of death and decay. The house where the protagonist lives is a place where the former tenant, a priest had died. The air in the house is musty and the room behind the kitchen was littered with old useless papers. The books found in the house are old and damp. The garden is disorderly. The rusty bicycle pump adds to the sense of decay. The protagonist's own penchant for death and decay is brought out best in the statement that he liked a book best because its leaves were yellow. Yellow leaves suggest death and decay - They remind one of autumn.

It is from this scene of death and decay that a sign of life - the figure of a young girl, Mangan's sister emerges. She inspires life and love in the protagonist. There is an upsurge of love. The protagonist gets totally absorbed, preoccupied by his love for the girl. So he watches for her, waits for her to emerge from the house on her way to school. He follows her and overtakes her when they came to the point of divergence. This happened morning after morning and the girl's very name had a hypnotic effect on him.

This romantic love however is juxtaposed with circumstances most uncondusive to love. We are told that protagonist carried the girl's image "even in places most hostile to romance. " When his aunt went marketing on Sat-

urday evenings the boy went with her to carry some of the parcels. On those occasions he had to walk "through the flaring streets, jostled by drunken men, and bargaining women amid the curses of labourers, the shrill litanies of shop-boys who stood on guard by the barrels of pigs' cheeks, the nasal chanting of street singers who sang about the troubles in our native land." The protagonist says that as he walked through these circumstances hostile to love, he felt that he "bore his chalice safely through a throng of foes." The chalice has connotations of both joy and pain. The very sentiment of love has become ironical to the protagonist. He is confused. He is confused both within himself and by the circumstances outside.

During this upsurge of confused love in the protagonist one day he went into the back drawing room in which the priest had died. There is rain outside the room. The protagonist is so overwhelmed with the feeling of love he murmurs: "O! Love, O! Love' many times" Here is an experience of life and love. Rain symbolizes life and fertility. The boy's heart is full of love. But he stands surrounded by the circumstances of death.

It is then that the idea of going to the Araby market and buying something for the girl comes up. The protagonist again is completely overtaken by the suggestion. We are told that the syllables of the word Araby were called to him though the silence in which his soul luxuriated. At this juncture Joyce introduces to the story *Araby* another set of characters. They are the characters of the protagonist's uncle, aunt and Mrs. Macer and finally we have the young lady at the bazaar. This is the adult world which has been presented in the story as being generally hostile to the youthful enterprise of the boy. In fact the adult world in the story has been presented as adding to the paralysis. The uncle, the aunt, Mrs. Macer and the young lady at the bazaar, all knowingly or unknowingly work to defeat the protagonist's purpose. Thus they become obstacles placed in his way of achieving his purpose.

Thus we find both men and things lined up against the boy, his purpose. The uncle forgets the boy's request, the train delays. Mrs Macer's gossip delays the meal. Finally the young lady at the bazaar ignores the boy.

These are the forces external to the protagonist that worked against him to cause his moral paralysis. There are forces internal to him also. We are told that the boy remembered his purpose with difficulty: "Remembering with difficulty why I had come, I went over to one of the stalls and examined porcelain vases and flowered tea sets."

Thus the final picture that emerges in the story is one of contradiction. The realities juxtaposed are hope and frustration, promise and broken promise, zest and indifference, support and lack of support. These realities have been set in a background of death, decay, sterility and darkness.

There is life but it is constantly threatened by life-negating forces. It tries to raise its head but the forces negating life struggle to stifle it thus causing paralysis.

## The Mode of Presentation in *Araby*

When someone tells: "I'll tell you a story." It has its magic on us. Story telling is as old as the human race itself. It probably began in the dim dawn of history. Thus the short story in that sense goes back to the beginning of man's life on earth. But in a sense the modern short story is only about 100 to 150 years old. It is quite different from the earlier forms of fiction. In the earlier forms of fiction, incidents and situations were important. Most important of all was that the story was based on external action rather than on the internal landscape of man. The modern short story focuses on man's struggles not so much with other men, but with himself as one part of his mind wages war with the other or with the conventions of his time and society. Thus modern short story brings as it were a slice of man's mind under the microscope and tries to throw light on it for the better understanding of it by him.

As the authors of the modern short story have become more and more introvert their techniques also have changed. The modern short story is a condensed form like the Lyric poem replacing the longer epic poem. It uses the same resources of poetic language, imagery, symbolism, emotive words and rhythms to make its effect on the reader. In its presentation it does not ordinarily describe a variety of events or cover a long period of time or large movement in space as the longer fiction does. It concentrates on a focused human experience usually with only a few characters.

It is in the light of the above mentioned characteristics of the modern short story that *Araby* must be examined with regard to its technique. First we find Joyce focusing on the phenomena of the mind rather than on external events. There is a great deal of introvert analysis by the protagonist. The upsurge of love that the protagonist experiences and the great deal of confusion he faces are all facts of the mind rather than external events. Thus the

world of the protagonist is in fact a world of romantic idealism.

Juxtaposed with this world of idealism is the world of realism created by the adults and other realistic details. Thus Joyce used the technique of counterposing the world of idealism with that of realism to create the ironic sense of contradiction leading to moral paralysis..

The short story is also rich in its subtle symbolism and evocative language to reveal the condition of the protagonist's mind. The story opens with associations of a dark and empty atmosphere: "North Richmond Street being blind... the word "blind" reminds us not only of the dead end of the street - but also of the kind of illusion-ridden blindness of the protagonist to his true situation - was a quiet street." the word "quiet" is important here. It has associations of loneliness that is to come in the life of the protagonist later. The former tenant of the house in which the protagonist lived had died in it. Immediately as the story opens Joyce associates ideas of death and decay with it. Once again the third paragraph opens with references to darkness: "When the short days of winter came dusk fell before we had eaten our dinner. When we met in the street the house had grown sombre." As we read through the paragraph the references to darkness keep on recurring: "One evening I went into the back drawing room in which the priest had died. It was a dark rainy evening and there was no sound in the house. "Associated with this reference to darkness is the protagonist's ecstatic feeling of romantic love when he murmurs: "O ! love, O ! love."

Thus the predominant symbol of darkness associated with the growing love of the protagonist shows only too clearly the state of his mind. It was an illusion - ridden mind completely contradicted by the reality around it.

In the final revelation we have again the symbol of darkness associated with evocative lyrical language to portray



to us the pathetic confused state of the protagonist's mind: "Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity and my eyes burned with anguish and anger."

Thus we can conclude our discussion on Joyce's *Araby* with our final assessment of it as a very successful short story which dramatizes Joyce's favourite theme of moral-spiritual (psychological) paralysis through techniques very appropriate to the modern short story.

## UNLIGHTED LAMPS

By Sherwood Anderson (1976 - 1941)

A Commentary :

When we finish reading Sherwood Anderson's short story *Unlighted Lamps* we are struck by the sudden death of Doctor Cochran. Even though it had been announced early in the story we do not expect it to happen so soon. In fact, the impact of that announcement we do not feel much because we do not hear it announced. Instead we read about it when we read the reactions of Doctor Cochran's daughter Mary to that announcement. So the impact of the announcement of the Doctor's imminent death resulting from a heart disease is minimal on us because it comes to us filtered through the consciousness of Mary. Later on the Doctor's own consoling words to the daughter that in spite of his heart condition he may live for many more years puts the doctor's condition out of our mind. As the story proceeds the focus is more on Mary. So we forget that there is a man with the threat of death on his hand in the story. So when suddenly the doctor collapses and dies as it were before our eyes we are shocked by the unexpected event. The shock is so much that our response to the story can swing to the other extreme. Whereas throughout the story from the beginning to almost the last scene we were moving with Mary and were called upon to respond to her situation, the sudden death of doctor can make us forget Mary and think and respond to this death. Therefore we can be tempted to stay with the dead body of Doctor Cochran as it were and forget the focus of the story. That must not happen. The story is not about Doctor Cochran even though he plays a very important role in the development of the theme in the story. The story is about Mary, Doctor Cochran's daughter. Thus the message of Anderson's story is not about a dead man but about a living person, a young girl.

Doctor Cochran certainly is an important character in the story. In fact without Doctor Cochran Mary's charac-

ter would not have the same stamp it has now. It is Doctor Cochran's character that shapes, fashions and then seals the fate of Mary's character. Therefore it is important for us first to study the character of Doctor Cochran and see what he stands for.

Doctor Cochran is a physician by profession. We can therefore expect him to be an educated man and to belong to the middle class. He lived and practised his profession in a provincial town in America in the state of Illinois. The town was called Huntersburg about fifty miles away from Chicago. These details are important for us because we find that there was not much communication between Doctor Cochran and the people of the town. The people of the town were mostly farmers. Doctor Cochran maintained a distance from the people.

This does not however mean that he was not devoted to his profession, as a doctor and also to the people of the small town. He was not only devoted to his people. He in fact went out of his way to help them even financially when they needed such help. The farm labourer's account of Doctor Cochran's generosity in curing his son and then going out of his way to help the family even financially reveals his generosity. But the labourer also quite correctly adds: "Your father is a good man and I don't think he is very happy." The labourer tells this to Mary.

This is the other trait of character that we notice in Doctor Cochran. He was not a happy man. While we agree with the farm labourer's assessment of the Doctor's character as unhappy we can also see it throughout the story. He was a cold and quiet man. Even when he announced his death to his daughter he remained cold. "Doctor Cochran had told his daughter of his approaching death in a cold quiet voice," we are told in the story. So to the girl it "seemed that everything concerning her father must be cold and quiet." A little further in the story we are told that "in all her life there had never been anything warm and close." That is after living all her life with her father.

He was never warm and close to her. He was a cold man.

One may argue that that sort of lack of warmth is not necessarily a sign of unhappiness; that was just the way of Doctor Cochran's character and that there are other people we come across in society who are by nature quiet and even cold. While we may agree with an argument in defence of Doctor Cochran's character as being cold and quiet by nature we cannot forget the other details given in the story about him. There are other details in the story which point unmistakably not only to a mere natural trait of character but to a serious emotional problem in Doctor Cochran. For example look at what we are told in the story about him after he announces his imminent death to his daughter: "He had wanted to put his arm about his daughter's shoulder as he talked to her but never having shown any feeling in his relations with her, he could not sufficiently release some tight thing in himself." In other words here is not merely a natural situation of just being quiet but a highly artificial situation in which there are signs of emotional suppression, entrapment. See what the Doctor himself reminisces about his relationship with his estranged wife: "When my Ellen was here living with me" he thinks "I let her think me cold and unfeeling while something within me was straining and straining trying to tear itself loose." These last words of the doctor's thoughts that something was straining and straining within him trying to tear itself loose are an eloquent admission that he was suffering from a serious emotional blockade.

We have another instance in the story which reveals this emotional entrapment. That is the scene of the doctor's wife announcing her pregnancy to him on their drive home after a drive to the country. We are told that "on the drive home the young wife had told her husband of her pregnancy and the doctor had been stirred as never before." As any father would be, the doctor too is moved within himself greatly at this welcome news. But he just sits while his wife drives on and then we are told that

when she announced the coming of the child "she looked away across the fields." Doesn't that show what a cold response there was from the man. The man who was greatly stirred within himself could never show his emotions.

This emotional entrapment, this blockade within himself which prevents him from being expressive and communicative costs him not little. It first cost him his wife and then his life. As he muses on the incident of his coldly receiving the news of his wife's pregnancy we are told that "he thought he understood the failure of his marriage and of his life."

Then comes his denouement, his revelation. He reflects: "I've always been silent because I've been a proud man and a coward". In other words at the bottom of Doctor Cochran's uncommunicativeness there was certain pride, a certain arrogance. This is the sort of professional arrogance many a professional artificially assumes. It is also interesting to note how the Doctor links that pride with cowardice. He thinks: "I've been a proud man and a coward." We might be inclined to think that the so-called professionals assume a certain pride - an arrogance because they are conscious of their achievements. The Doctor's musings here reveal something else. That is that his uncommunicativeness was only a defence mechanism against his cowardice. The author tells us that "there had been a defence for himself built up."

In the end therefore we realize that Doctor Cochran's uncommunicative character was the result of a fear, a phobia of being open to others. In order to cover up that fear, that lack of self-confidence that diffidence which often we notice even in the so-called highly educated professionals Doctor Cochran assumes a certain superiority, a pride and an arrogance. So at the root of it all is not a strength, but a weakness, not virtue (virtue in its original sense in Latin meant strength or power) but weakness.

In fact when we look at Doctor Cochran's life from that angle, namely as a man suffering from a basic inadequacy, a fear or phobia and assuming an aura of pride or superiority to cover that fear, we begin to wonder whether his generosity to the farm labourer's family was not a covert way of asserting his own assumed superiority. His marriage to a theatre girl we might think superficially looking at it, was a kind act on his part. But on deeper reflection we are likely to have a doubt about the Doctor's motives here too. Probably his sense of inadequacy, his cowardice did not allow him to marry someone of equal status. After marriage because of his assumed superiority which was only a cover for his own weakness, the Doctor did not treat his wife as an equal. Rather he treated her as his inferior.

~~X~~ Whatever we may discover about Doctor Cochran from the story what we have to remember is that Doctor Cochran is not the protagonist in the story. He is only a supportive character. The Story is about Mary Cochran, the Doctor's daughter. On the other hand we cannot, as we said before, understand Mary Cochran except in relation to her father. It is he who actually fashions her character and seals her fate.

When we meet Mary Cochran for the first time at the beginning of the story we meet her as a girl with a problem on her hand. She is a teenager facing a crisis. Later we come to know that her crisis has been created by her father's announcement on the previous evening that he was going to die soon from a heart ailment.

Later on in the story we also come to know that Mary's mother had left her father and her long ago. Mary was brought up by her father. There is no mention of other children of Doctor Cochran and therefore we are made to presume that Mary had no brothers and sisters. Mary is only a teenager and apparently from the story we gather that she is not employed. Therefore the news of her

father's imminent death can upset her with regard to her future economic security.

Mary's problem as presented in the story as we come to know later is really not economic. It is otherwise. In fact it is here that Doctor Cochran's role in fashioning Mary's character and sealing her fate comes in. Doctor Cochran we saw was a man who was proud and aloof from the working class community in whose midst he was living. As a result Doctor Cochran lived an emotionally imprisoned life. This emotional entrapment arising from professional pride had become contagious. Mary too had contracted this same emotional ailment.

In fact it often happens that children take after their parents; they absorb the values and attitudes of their parents. The children of upper class families tend to adopt the sort of highbrow values and attitudes of their parents. Mary had done that. She had adopted the values and attitudes of her father. As a result she too lived a life apart from others - the members of the working class community that lived around her. We find Mary not only being aloof from her poorer neighbours, she in fact is arrogant and aggressive to Duke Yetter, the young man who means no harm to her during her excursion that evening. He means only innocent fun. Mary reacts violently to this fun and threatens the young man with death by her father: "My father just wants the chance to kill some such fellow as you." She shouts out at the boy. Mary in her cocooned life has become paranoid.

Thus we see that Mary's future is dark not necessarily because of the economic insecurity into which she would be plunged by her father's death, nor because of her lack of any other person kin to lean on but primarily because of her own emotional death. Having lived a life of upper class arrogance with her father Mary had never known to relate herself affectionately to anyone, neither to her father, next of kin who lived with her nor to anybody else in the neighbourhood.

So we can say Sherwood Anderson's story *Unlighted Lamps* is about death, both emotional and physical death while Mary's father dies of a serious cardiac arrest - a heart-attack, Mary lives a death - in - life.

In that context we can in fact say that the 2 types of deaths are not so different from each other. It may well be that it was the emotional death of Mary's father, Doctor Cochran that ultimately led to his physical death too.

There is one more area we must focus on. That is the attitude of the Town's people towards Mary. We find them in a way sympathetic and friendly towards her. That is the nature of ordinary people. That is the attitude of ordinary people towards those who live in their neighbourhood. There was however an element of gossip too among them about Mary's mother. This sort of negative attitude is generally created by the very aloofness one maintains towards others. In other words the very distance one attempts to maintain towards others because of one's assumed superiority at the end generates suspicion and gossip. This is what happens to Doctor Cochran and her daughter in the town of Huntersburg.

Thus a general conclusion we can arrive at from the above discussion is that Sherwood Anderson's short story *Unlighted Lamps* is about emotional death arising from upper-class pride. It renders a person uncommunicative and antisocial and at the end such emotional death leads one really to one's grave.

Before we finish our discussion, a word must be added about the working class people mentioned in the story and who form a contrast to the characters of Doctors Cochran and his daughter. They are of friendly type. They are a friendly lot. They have time to gather together and enjoy themselves. They have time even to gossip or engage themselves in innocent pastimes like angling for a fish or two. In fact they are the people who add a ray of sunshine to an otherwise dark story because it is as its title



quite rightly sums up about *Unlighted Lamps*, a symbolic way of presenting the darkness in the lives of people who are unaffectionate - who do not know how to love.

### The mode of presentation in *Unlighted Lamps*

Sherwood Anderson's *Unlighted Lamps* is a story over which darkness broods. There are at least 10 times when references are made to darkness. The events of the story begin at twilight and end in the deeper darkness of the night.

Darkness is a traditional symbol of ignorance, unhappiness or even evil. Shakespeare for example used it in his *Macbeth* to symbolize evil: So we hear Macbeth saying in the play: "Good things of day begin to droop and drowse whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse (Act 3, Sc. 2, Lines 52 & 53 ). Shakespeare here associates good things with day and light and evil with night and darkness.

We are also reminded of D. H. Lawrence' use of the symbol of darkness for ignorance. Elizabeth Bates in the short story *Odour of Chrysanthemums* at the end thinks how she and her husband had met in the dark, fought in the dark not knowing whom each one met and fought with. Darkness in this instance is a symbol of ignorance. Mutual ignorance of husband and wife is symbolized by the physical darkness in which the couple had met and fought.

Sherwood Anderson uses the symbol of darkness to mean unhappiness in the short story. In fact the title of the short story *Unlighted Lamps* plunges us at the very beginning into this atmosphere of darkness. The title implies that it is a darkness which should have been dispelled if not for the failure on the part of the protagonists to enkindle their own hearts with affection and love. In fact, at no point in the story there is reference to any

unlighted lamps. As we said before there is darkness brooding over the tragedy. The protagonists move in that darkness, in that tragic plight of unhappiness without being able to dispel the darkness that has swallowed them. As the story moves to its final climax, the frequency of the term darkness occurring in the story also increases. This reference to darkness happens not only in the main story. Even in the falshback Mary has of her childhood accompanying her father on a visit to a sick woman when she was fifteen, the events take place in the dark.

As we are awakened to the atmosphere of darkness at the beginning by the title *Unlighted Lamps*, we also end the story in the atmospheres of darkness when we are told in the last sentence: "Between his fingers he (one of the men carrying the dead body of Doctor Cochran) held a forgotten cigarette the light from which danced up and down in the darkness." This forgotten cigarette with its light dancing in the darkness has quite a few significant associations. Doesn't that remind us that the Doctor's life too had been wasted like a burnt our cigarette whose light only burns without ever dispelling an inch of darkness? The fire of love within the doctor and his daughter only burnt without ever enlightening the darkness that gripped them.

## THE STENCH OF KEROSENE

by AMRITA PRITAM

A Commentary :

In the story Stench of Kerosene by Amrita Pritam what strikes us most is the untimely death of Guleri the young wife of Manak. She commits suicide by dousing herself with kerosene and setting fire to herself. She dies off-stage. We only hear of her suicide from a third party - a friend of Manak. We are not less saddened for that because by then our sympathy is with her already. We find her unhappy in her husband's house. That is why she is homesick and likes to go back home. She enjoys her yearly visit home during the harvest festival. She meets her old friends and they all behave like young girls during that short period reviving their sweet memories. The arrival of the horse and her parents' servant Natu to take her home cheers her up and she remains cheerful almost childshlly till she disappears from the scene. All that makes us like her. She wins our love and sympathy for the unhappy flight to which she has been plunged by her marriage. So we are naturally saddened to learn of the tragic end of such a pleasant girl so early in life.

The tragedy does not limit itself to Guleri the heroine in the story. Its consequences are felt by her husband Manak and his new wife too. Manak remained worried and fretful. The second wife felt that she was not his wife. The mother thought that Manak would come back to normal when as expected, a child was born to the second wife and the child was placed in the arms of Manak. Instead of becoming normal, Manak shouted "Take him away, he stinks of kerosene." So the reverberations of the tragedy of Guleri's suicide continued to make the second family unhappy - tragic.

We might feel like accusing the mother of Manak for all the tragedy in the family. It is true we have to admit that

she plays an important role in bringing about the tragedy. Probably Guleri was unhappy in her husband's house as we have seen because of the interference of the mother-in-law. We are told that it is she who secretly arranged to bring another woman for her son when Guleri went home for the harvest feast. For these reasons we cannot certainly deny that Manak's mother had a big hand in causing the tragedy.

We cannot on the other hand say that the old woman is totally a wicked woman. She waits for seven years for Guleri to give a son to Manak her own son. It is then only when she fails to do so that the mother-in-law arranges another woman for her son. Furthermore the mother-in-law waits for the daughter-in-law to be away to bring the other woman home for her son. In all her action, we do not see any vendetta entering it. In other words she does not arrange the second marriage for her son for personal, selfish or wicked reasons. This means she acts on a reason that transcends her personal reasons. She acts on reasons beyond herself.

The concrete reason for which she arranged a second marriage for her son was to get a son for her son. Guleri had failed in this. This means the mother was not motivated from hatred for Guleri. If so we can call her a wicked woman. Her motivation comes from another source and that is the Indian culture in which a married woman's role is seen essentially as that of bearing and rearing a son or sons for her husband. When a woman fails to fulfil that role, she is a failure in marriage. Therefore she is worthless. She is to be rejected.

We can see here a completely different view of marriage from that of Jane Austen for instance in *Pride and Prejudice*. For Jane Austen marriage was a personal commitment on the part of the partners in love and understanding for mutual fulfilment. The commitment of the partners to each other was important in Jane Austen's view of marriage.

The kind of marriage we see presented in the story is not the union of two equal partners for the happiness and fulfilment of each other. On the contrary it is a business deal in which the husband buys the wife like cattle to produce children for himself. Thus the woman is reduced to a mere commodity thereby denying her even her basic human rights. Thus we find the ultimate cause of the tragedy was not a particular person as such but a whole culture of the country in which one half of the human race - that is women - is denied their basic human rights to be human and not mere merchandise.

In that sense it must be mentioned that Guleri's tragedy did not start at her death but at her marriage. She was denied her basic right to be human. That is way, she was unhappy and homesick.

The conflict between the oppressive culture which denied her rights and her own desire to be herself, to be equal with her husband was made all the more acute by the fact that Guleri came from a family which had a certain standing in society. Her parents had horses and servants. Furthermore her father had lived in cities. Therefore the family had acquired new views and values about life. That is why Guleri's father refused a bride-price. He wanted only "a worthy young man from a good family." This shows that Guleri came from a family which no longer acted according to the traditional culture of the country. So there was an acute cultural conflict. In the conflict, the traditional destroys the modern, the more personal and the authentic.

It is Manak's mother who embodies the traditional culture. It is noteworthy that a mother should represent the Indian culture, because the mother reminds us of Mother India. The whole country is known as a mother. That shows also the place mother or motherhood has in India. She enjoys a privileged and powerful place.

One would ask how it is that woman who is denied her basic human rights to be herself as wife becomes so pow-

erful and oppressive as mother as it happens in the story. We are reminded of the words of D.H. Lawrence in his *Collected Essays*. Lawrence says: "We may also take it as another law that the very deepest quick of a man's nature is his own pride and self-respect. The human being, the weird phenomenon may be patient for years and years under insult to the very quick of his pride in his own natural being. But at last oh! the phenomenon, killing will come out of it."

In Lawrencian terms therefore it is nothing strange that woman hurt to the quick of her pride as wife must come out with killing as mother. Ultimately therefore we can say that the story is not so much about the death of one woman and misery of one family caused by another woman, but in more universal terms it is about cultural violence in Indian society which hurts and kills but is never punished by law. That violence is built into the fabric of that society in such a way that no one recognizes it for violence even though at the end it is in no way milder than any other form of violence because it kills all the same.

## The Mode of presentation in Stench of Kerosene

A writer's mode of presentation is determined by his or her intentions in the story. In the story *Stench of Kerosene*, the author brings out the theme of violence embedded in the culture of the Indian society. Family is the basic unit of society and the focus of cultural activity. Quite rightly therefore Amrita Pritam has chosen the setting of a family to work out her theme of *violence built into culture*. In choosing the family setting the author in fact has chosen the setting of the extended family as it is the type seen in the Indian society mostly.

As for the structure of the story the story begins fairly close to the climax and unfolds itself with flashbacks to necessary events in the past to fill the gaps. The story begins with the arrival of the mare and the servant from Guleri's father's house to take her home for the harvest festival. But the event of the story are traced when necessary much further down the memory lane into the past to give the reader a full picture of the whole tragedy. The story does not end with the death of the heroine. It continues to the birth of the son by the second wife and the rejection of it by the father exclaiming he smells kerosene. Thus the author succeeds in giving us a well-rounded view of the series of events. She thus also justifies to the reader her use of the particular title *Stench of Kerosene* for the story

There is a strong dramatic element in the story. The story unfolds before us like a drama. The dramatic element has been introduced into the story by the presence of several elements. First of all there is the element of dialogue. It is simple, vivid dialogue we read throughout that we feel as if the characters are standing before us and are enacting the scenes. The other element that infuses the story with a dramatic note is the quick succession of scenes. There are no long descriptive passages. We are not bored by the story. Therefore the story is fast

moving. Even though there is quick change of scene the story is not melodramatic. There is no exaggerated sensationalism. There is absolutely no external violence. We do not hear a single gunshot or sword stroke. Since the author is talking about hidden violence in the Indian society she has also kept external violence out of sight in the story. That is why we do not see the death of Guleri in the story. It takes place as it were offstage.

When we think about the symbolism in the story the flute is an unmistakable symbol in it. The flute is a musical instrument. The flute recurs in the story several times. Guleri hides Manak's flute under her dupatta before she leaves home. She wants Manak to play it as they walk along the road. She wants him to play it, at the fair. We find Guleri thus associating the flute with joy. The flute thus becomes a symbol of joy for her. When Manak plays it, it is as if the man brings out the joy in the heart of the woman. The first hint of this joy turning to tragedy is given the reader when the reader is told that when Guleri asked Manak to play the flute he "blew a strange anguished wail."



## LOVE LETTERS

by Kate Walker

### A Commentary :

A fitting quotation to begin our discussion on Kate Walker's *Love Letters* would be the words of the Friar to Romeo in Shakespeare's celebrated play *Romeo and Juliet*. On hearing that Romeo had found a new lover Juliet, giving up Rosaline so suddenly the Friar says: "Young men's love then lies not truly in their hearts but in their eyes." In those words of the Friar Shakespeare gives us a rare insight into the nature of teenage love. Though it may not always be so, in very many cases of teenage love, in romantic love, there isn't much depth. It is superficial, limited to the external attractions.

In the short story *Love Letters* Kate Walker is not directly focusing on the nature of teenage love but she seems to be discussing a related subject, namely the contents of the love letters lovers write. So it is not the need for writing love letters either that she is discussing in the short story. The fact of writing love letters is taken for granted. But the question she seems to be posing and answering in the story is the question what should the lovers write in their love letters.

To dramatize an answer to this question what lovers should write in their letters, the author has chosen as her protagonists two high-school students from Australia. They are Nick and Fleur. They are fresh lovers because we are told that their love-relationship was only three weeks old. There are also other characters in the story but they play minor roles.

The subject of love-letters is introduced by Fleur with a reference to a weird habit of a boyfriend of one of her friends, Helen. The boyfriend referred to is Clive. According to Fleur, Clive writes three page letters to his girlfriend Helen everyday. Fleur thinks that Nick doesn't write

to her like Clive because Nick is unromantic. In other words the implication here is that Fleur thinks writing long love letters everyday is a sign of love. This in fact is one of the expectations of girls as teenage lovers. They want their boyfriends to show that their boyfriends are always thinking of them. So the girls want the boys either to write or call them on the phone. If we ask what motivates this sort of demand on the part of the girls at a deeper level, we can discover a number of motives. First there is an element of selfishness on the part of girls in such demand for incessant attention through letters and calls.

The girls like to feel assured that their boyfriends are always thinking of them. Secondly there is also the fear of losing the boyfriend. Girls know that when a boy does not pay constant attention to a girl, he is cooling off on her and that cooling off does not take place for nothing. A boy cools off on a girl when his attention has been drawn by somebody else. So attention to a girl by a boy through letters etc. is a sign that he does not have anybody else in his life and therefore there is no danger of losing him. Lastly there is also the element of flattery often in these love letters. Girls like to be flattered. They like their boyfriends to speak nice things about them. This is why we are told Fleur's only comment on Nick's letter number two was "You didn't say anything in it about me" and that day she went off to eat her lunch with Helen. Fleur's ego was hurt when she didn't receive flattery from Nick.

While Fleur wrongly thinks that writing long love letters is a sign of love, Nick too is in the wrong when he thinks that licking the same icecream is enough love. Licking the same icecream or drinking from the same cup or eating from the same plate while hygienically may not be the best thing to do, the lovers do as a sign or a gesture of sharing. Such symbolic sharing as a sign of deeper sharing may still be welcome if there is deeper sharing. But we find that Nick was making a mistake in thinking that he could keep his girl from cooling on him, that he could sustain his love relationship by giving her a lick of his icecream.

There were one or two other mistakes that "Nick made too. Nick overestimated his girlfriend. So he thinks that "Fleur is really gorgeous." This is the mistake that boys make about their girls. Boys idolize their girls. In fact at times they even become paranoid. So Nick thought that "there were blokes all around the lunch area, every one of them just waiting" to snatch "the fabulous Fleur." He makes the further mistake of thinking that " a few lines crawled on a paper" can stop him from losing her. He was ready "to reveal" a few personal secrets to keep her.

Once again that is the wrong foundation for love. Love is built neither on a few lines scrawled on a piece of paper nor on revealing a few personal secrets.

We are told that when Nick sat down to write he began his letter with the address, "Dear Fleur." But he had nothing to write. He chewed his pencil and finger nails. We have the first hint in the right direction as to what should be the subject matter of love letters in the mum's advice to Nick, when she says: "Write about the things you have in common." As love is above all a matter of sharing, love letters must be written about things in common; things shared. Here again Nick makes a mistake. True to his light headed superficial character, when the mum says "Write about the things you have in common" he thinks he should share with Fleur the memory of some funny situation. So he writes to her reminding her how they all were amused when a student dropped the monitor of a computer, when he tried to show the little button underneath. Humour is an essential part of life but lovers must have something deeper to share if their love is to last.

Fleur was not pleased with Nick's first letter. Nor was she pleased with his second letter telling her about his embarrassment during the history lesson.

An appreciable characteristic up to then unseen in Nick manifests itself at this point when Nick writes to Fleur about the farmer who lost everything and was a stronger

man for it. He wished that he himself were the victim of such a great loss and would be able to "walk away stronger and nobler for it." That is depth in a character. It is only a character who can see the deeper implications of misfortune who can speak like that. Fleur lacked that depth and rejected that letter on the ground that there was nothing mentioned about her.

We also notice a streak of honesty in Nick when he fails to imitate Clive's letter of flattery to Helen. Nick could not write one like that. This basic honesty of Nick also enabled him to realize the mistakes he had made with Fleur. His affair with fleur was a failure. Realization of one's failure is also a sign of maturity.

Having realized the mistake he had made with Fleur, Nick had the courage to call it off. Once again it is a sign of strength. Like the pioneering farmer in the film who lost everything and was stronger for it Nick wrote to Fleur: "Even if it's a great personal loss to both of us I'm sure we'll walk away stronger and nobler." It is only the mature people who can see the positive side of adversity in life and grow stronger by that.

This means that being able to learn from failure making one stronger and nobler shows one has depth in his character. That is what goggle-eyed Gilda saw in Nick and was able to slip a note to Nick; "I like your style Nick. You've got depth." A serious mind appreciates depth. True love is not built on flattery and vanity but on sharing at a deeper level than mere hair, eyes and eye-lashes. That is why Nick "Took another look at goggle eyes" of Gild and did not mind her simple and direct style.

Nick and Gilda probably will strike a lasting relationship because they had common interests. Nick liked Gilda talk on Third World Famine Relief because he too was interested in a matter outside himself and common to both. Thus Kate Walker seems to say in the story that love letters must have as their subject not mere flattery of each

other but a third reality which in fact can make the lovers forget themselves and focus on it. It becomes the common bond binding the two parties.

In fact we find that Fleur was never pleased with Nick's letters in spite of the fact that he tried to accede to her demands that he wrote love letters like Clive. Each time Nick wrote a letter Fleur had something to say against it because the letter had nothing in depth to share in sincerity.

Therefore we can conclude that love letters if they are to build up and cement a love relationship must not be devoted to vain flattery, but to honest sharing of common interest in depth by the lovers. This seems to be the theme of the short story *Love Letters* by Kate Walker.

### Mode of Presentation in Kate Walker's Love Letters

Kate Walker in her short story *Love Letters* discusses the question what one should write in love letters. She contrasts two types of content in love letters. One type of content is the childish stuff many lovers write to each other. The other type of content is the more mature sharing lovers do in their letters.

The story thus can be divided into two movements. The first movement or the first part of the story consists of Nick's efforts to write several love letters to his girlfriend Fleur in imitation of Clive who is said to write three page letters to his girlfriend Helen everyday. Nick's efforts to please Fleur with his letters end in failure.

The second movement or the second part of the story consists of Nick's breakaway from fleur and striking a new relationship with Gilda. The writer makes it clear to us in this part of the story that Nick and Gilda are going to stick together as lovers because they have common interests. They have something to share.

In order to present her theme of what should be the contents of love letters Kate walker has chosen as her protagonists a few high school students. Nick and Fleur are the main characters. But it is the goggle-eyed Glida at the end who embodies for Kate Walker the really positive attitude to love letters. Therefore it is she who presents the positive values in the story.

It is interesting to note however, that the author has chosen not ordinary teenagers but high school students who could be the sort of counterparts of our university students or A/L students. We expect high school or university students to be mature and serious. Ironically we find the kind of maturity we expect in such students of higher studies missing or eluding them. In other words Kate Walker seems to be saying that the entry into a high school or a university is not necessarily the proof of maturity.

There are many students in such institutes of higher learning who are immature.

In this context, of particular interest is the character of Fleur. Her very name means 'Flower.' Like a flower she has only surface beauty. She has no depth. Above all she is self-centred and is difficult to please. She looks for attention and flattery. These are childish expectations. We do not expect a mature girl to entertain such ego-boosting expectations.

### Humour in the story Love Letters

Humour is an outstanding element present in the short story *Love Letters*. From the beginning to the end of the story we are made to laugh on several occasions. We laugh at the idea of Clive writing three page letters every day to Helen. It looks crazy to us. We laugh at Nick wanting Fleur to lick his ice cream as a sign of love. We laugh at Fleur's insistence that Nick must write long letters like Clive. We are also amused by the fact that Fleur gives only five and half out of twenty for Nick's letter. We are also amused by the fact that Fleur rejects Nick's first letter on the ground that he made a lot of spelling mistakes. Nick writing about his use of deodorant as proof of his being personal also amuses us. Finally when Nick tries to imitate Clive in writing a love letter with all the flattery about the beauty of Fleur, we are again amused.

Humour is a part of romantic love. We are often made to laugh at the sweet nothings teenage lovers write in their letters. But the question is whether the presence of humour in large measure in this story is merely accidental - happening by chance or intended by the author. Something we note with regard to the presence of humour in the short story is that it is present only in the first part of the story which dramatizes the relationship between Nick and Fleur. When the author deals with the newly sprouting relationship between Nick and Gilda humour is absent. As the relationship is a serious one the author has kept humour out of it.

Since the author's attitude towards the love relationship between Nick and Fleur is rather critical, we can also detect perhaps a purpose in her use of humour when dealing with that relationship. In other words when we laugh at things that Nick and Fleur say and do we are not merely amused, we also, though unintentionally, laugh at the superficiality, the immaturity of their relationship. In other words humour in the story has a satirical purpose.



## DISONCHINAHAMY

By Gunadasa Amarasekera

A Commentary.

Gunadasa Amarasekera is a dentist by profession. But he has devoted much of his time and energy to literary work. He has excelled himself as a fiction writer, poet and critic. In his early fiction he tried to carry on a campaign against the Victorian puritanical attitudes towards sex and morals we had inherited from the British. Later on he developed this opposition to a more positive concept which he has enunciated as Jathika Chinthanaya. Jathika Chinthanaya is essentially a philosophy based on the Sinhala Buddhist way of life and thinking. Gunadasa Amarasekera seems to think that many of our present-day problems are due to the fact that we have adopted an alien way of life and a philosophy inherited from imperialists. For that reason he has been critical of the westernized intelligentsia of this country.

In the short story *Disonchinahamy*, Gunadasa Amarasekera is not expounding his concept of Jathika Chinthanaya. But he is certainly criticizing the westernized intelligentsia of this country. Dr. Jayawardene is an unmistakable representative of that category of people. The story however is not limited to the criticism of westernized intelligentsia. Nor is that criticism the focus of the main interest in the story. There are other thematic motifs in the story. For example there is Bandusena who plays a key role and therefore is the embodiment of a different way of thinking to that of Dr. Jayawardene. Then we find as the author has titled the story *Disonchinahamy*, his focus of interest is neither Dr. Jayawardene nor Bandusena or the ways of life and thinking embodied by them. The story's focus of interest is *Disonchinahamy*, the poor village woman from Weudathenna, a remote village of Sri Lanka, who develops a tumour on her upper jaw and is transferred from hospital to hospital and finally

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dies in the Colombo General Hospital after a surgical operation.

We should be able to respond to all the thematic motifs embodied by these characters and see their interconnection if we are to appreciate the full meaning of the story.

Let us first take the way of life represented by Dr. Kumar Jayawardene. Dr. Kumar Jayawardene is a man born and bred entirely in the western way of life. His father himself had been a medical specialist. Kumar Jayawardene obtained his first medical degree from the Colombo medical College and then travelled to England, worked and studied there, becoming a cancer specialist before returning to the island. Thus Dr. Kumar Jayawardene is the embodiment of western expertise. He was the fellow of two British surgical associations and a first class specialist trained in tumour surgery. These are prestigious heights in the medical profession achieved by very few people. That is why we said Dr. Jayawardene is the embodiment of western expertise.

Along with this expertise we also find Dr. Jayawardene to be a man of <sup>dedication</sup> dedication. He was a man dedicated to his field of specialization. So he spent ten years in England after he qualified "because of his interest and dedication to his field." Even with regard to his daily routine it was dedicated work. He spent the morning hours seeing his patients and the afternoon he spent in research work.

Dr. Jayawardene is also <sup>democratic</sup> democratic. He believed in the equality of all. Therefore he treated Bandusena, a grade 3 clerk as his friend. This was something surprising to Bandusena himself who was not used to such treatment from his superiors. In Sri Lanka several decades after independence we are very much imperialist in our superior-subject relationship. The superiors lord it over their subjects and the subjects are expected to pawn their honour and self-respect for their wages. The relationship therefore that exists among men and women in administration

is not one among equals but between superiors and subjects. In fact this sort of distanced relationship we may have even inherited from our feudal history. Wherever we may trace the origin of such bureaucratic distanced relationship among people in administration, what we find is that a cordial relationship as that between friends that existed between Dr. Jayawardene and Bandusena was an unusual relationship and Dr. Jayawardene must be given the credit for it.

The above-mentioned are some of the positive qualities we can see in the middle-class western expert Dr. Jayawardene. Gunadasa Amarasekara has not failed to see quite a few negative qualities too in this middle-class intellectual. First and foremost he is an English-educated man. He does not know Sinhala. Therefore he can hardly communicate with his patients. In fact we are told that he needed Bandusena to reply to letters related to his administration and his own part in replying to these letters was to sign them. Without Bandusena Dr. Jayawardene could interact neither with his staff nor with his patients. This is the first step - the language barrier which created the estrangement of western expertise from its milieu and consigned it to an ivory tower existence. This in other words is the linguistic alienation of the middle class Sri Lankan intelligentsia of a western mindset.

In fact this alienation of the middle-class western-trained intelligentsia of Sri Lanka is not something unknown to that intelligentsia itself. We are told in the story that "barely six months had passed before Kumar (Dr. Jayawardene) realized that his return to Sri Lanka had been an act of folly." Dr. Jayawardene knew that he was a stranger in his own country.

One might think that men like Dr. Jayawardene having been educated in the west would be accepted by the west and feel at home in the west. Gunadasa Amarasekara does not seem to think so. Dr. Jayawardene was a stranger in England too. We are told that to the question he constantly

asked why he returned to Sri Lanka Dr. Jayawardene could give only one answer: "There was within him a deep confusion over and above the sense of isolation." He knew "he would not be appointed to a specialist's post for several more years merely because of his "black skin." This shows that Dr. Jayawardene was a stranger, an alien even in England. He was a rejected person because of the colour of his skin. He was discriminated against. In fact we find Dr. Jayawardene being driven to almost insanity and violence by the stresses of being an alien in an alien milieu.

Dr. Jayawardene <sup>ഉദ്ദേശ്യം</sup> alienated both in his own country and in the country of his education has serious <sup>മഹത്തമം</sup> implications for the middle class intelligentsia of this country. Doesn't that imply that they are misfits, aliens anywhere, driven by the very education they have received to live on the borders of society. Doesn't one further see a negative source for even some of Kumar Jayawardene's positive qualities? We saw that he was a man dedicated to his profession. One would ask couldn't he have immersed himself in his work because that is the only milieu where he is at home? In fact we are not wrong in asking that question because we are told that when Kumar Jayawardene's conviction that he was an outsider here as well as in England grew he "felt that if he could at least with effort turn his mind on to some research project, he could overcome this sense of isolation and loneliness."

Finally we also find Dr. Kumar Jayawardene an unhappy man a <sup>അസന്തോഷ</sup> frustrated man. This he confesses in his letter to his former professor. He says: "I haven't even the peace of mind necessary for ordinary life. Let alone collecting research for an article." He curses the past he has inherited. He is not at peace with his own father who he says has earned his living through crockery though he was reputed to be a doctor.

All that we discussed above is Gunadasa Amarasekara's verdict on the English-educated middle-class intelligentsia of this country. He sees them in spite of all their excellent education and even dedication to work and ideals of democracy, as an ivory-tower class of people at ease nowhere and deeply unhappy.

The other major character in the story is Bandusena. He is a Grade III clerk in the medical department. Unlike Dr. Kumar Jayawardene he is a Sinhala educated man. But above all he is in the story the communist party worker. He represents the communist ideology.

Communism was a political ideology introduced to this country in the 1930s. Especially after the great Russian Revolution in 1917 and the Chinese Revolution in 1947 there was a feeling in the world that communism based on the Marxist ideology was going to sweep through the world. It is in the wake of this hope for universal communism that the ideology had won a foothold in Sri Lanka too and there were many enthusiastic young men like Bandusena who looked forward to the communist revolution in Sri Lanka too. They were young men and women who were trained in the Marxist materialistic analysis. Everything had a cause. Until and unless the cause of the suffering of men and women like Disonchinahamy was removed, all the research into her disease would be useless. They believed that it was the capitalist system that was the cause of the misery of the poor. Only the complete overthrow of the capitalist system by revolution could correct the situation. They also believed that it was the establishment of world socialism that would bring about all-perfect utopia. They were looking forward to it. Short of that any other effort to correct the individuals for their faults was only patchwork. That is why Bandusena discourages Dr. Jayawardene to report the surgeon at Kurunegala to the superintendent of health service. Bandusena knows that the system is so corrupt that such action will have no effect.

Bandusena's view of remedying the evils of society by establishing socialism is opposed in the story by Dr. Kumar Jayawardene. Kumar Jayawardene upholds the view that "it's not really the fault of the system but it's the fault of those who work the system" that is at the root of evils in society. In other words Kumar Jayawardene holds the view that society can be corrected by correcting, reforming individuals.

Bandusena's giving in to the argument of his boss is in a way an admission of the weakness of his own argument. This may be the way Gunadasa Amarasekara is trying to show that communist ideology after all is as much alien and irrelevant to the problems of this country as western expertise - the middle-class English-educated intelligentsia. Whatever Gunadasa Amarasekara's view of communism may have been at the time of his writing the short story *Disonchinahamy*, today we know communism has virtually disappeared not only from the Sri Lankan scene, but from the international scene too. If it is not dead at least it is defunct, no longer active.

Finally the short story *Disonchinahamy* is neither about Dr. Kumar Jayawardene nor about Bandusena or the ways of life they represent. The focus of interest in the story as the title of the story shows is *Disonchinahamy* herself. The other two characters are brought in to play to show how the ways of life they represent, their ideologies are alien and irrelevant to the plight of *Disonchinahamy*.

The author has named the story *Disonchinahamy* because his concern is neither the academic world of Dr. Jayawardene nor the political world of Bandusena, but the real world of *Disonchinahamy*. It is the world of the Sinhala villager, the world of poverty, ignorance and indebtedness. As the letter *Disonchinahamy* wrote to her husband the day before her operation, reveals, it is also the world of hope and love unlike the dehydrated academic and political worlds of Dr. Jayawardene and Bandusena respectively.

We do not meet Disonchnahamy alive in the story. In fact when we meet her for the first time she is only "an upper jaw floating in a glass jar." This is in Dr. Jayawardene's research room where the upper jaw of Disonchnahamy was preserved in a formalin solution for Dr. Jayawardene's research. The story also ends in the same note of academic insensitivity when we are told that Disonchinahamy's body was amidst the collection of bodies flung on the stone slabs of the dissecting room.... A medical student was fondly handling the right arm of Disonchinahamy looking for a certain cluster of nerves and there were other students poking around in her head and face. Dr. Jayawardene needed only parts of the liver and spleen. Seeing that particular part of the body untouched, he was quite content.

This shows that for the academic scientific world of Dr. Jayawardene and the like, the poor of this country are only material for research. They are the guineapigs for experiments and research. There is certain scientific objectivity implied in this sort of treatment of a dead body but we cannot also deny that in the process of this kind of treatment, there is bound to creep in an element of disrespect for the human body.

More than all that we should be able to see why Disonchinahamy's dead body ended up like that in the dissecting room of the General Hospital. The world of the poor that Gunadasa Amarasekara depicts in the story through the character of Disonchinahamy and her family is a poverty-stricken world. We hear the husband of Disonchinahamy wailing in hospital after the death of Disonchinahamy: "How am I to take her away? What else can I do but stand here and watch you do what you wish with her....? I pawned our rice ration books to make this journey." Thus we see the abject poverty of Disonchinahamy's husband making him abandon the dead body of his wife to the mercy of the hospital authorities.

In the story Gunadasa Amerasekara shows that poverty had its strangle hold on people of this country not only after death but while living too. In fact it is killing living people. Isn't that what Disonchinahamy's husband's confession about his hitting the wife with the plate implies. He says: "I saw the little one crying of hunger and couldn't bear it....I threw the plate I had in my hand at her. That was what caused it to swell up... Sir, kind sir, What am I to do?" So we find that it was the blow with the plate that caused the tumour on the face of Disonchinahamy and led to her untimely death at the age of 38.

In this context one might be inclined to blame the husband for impatient action of hitting the wife with the plate. While certain culpability on the part of the husband for his action is not to be completely ruled out, let us also take note of his words: "What am I to do?" These words imply a certain helplessness on the part of the speaker. In other words the speaker means that it all happened rather than he did it intentionally.

We get further insights into the poverty-stricken nature of Disonchinahamy's life from the death in her medical report. She was only 38 years old. In more developed societies, one considers oneself at the age of 38 still young and the time to enjoy life. Her employment was daily paid labourer. A casual labourer with no guarantee of economic security she was married and had six children. This is yet another phenomenon in rural Sri Lanka. The poor are burdened with large families. The husband himself was a labourer. So there was absolutely no economic security. The earnings of the husband and wife are not enough to make both ends meet. As a result such families are often indebted to their employers or other richer people in the village. This indebtedness makes it a vicious circle for the poor. They earn their meagre wages to pay their debts which often accumulate exorbitant interests and then they borrow again. In the medical record, it was also mentioned that Disonchinahamy's face and hands and feet showed a



Handwritten notes: *Bandusena*, *line about best*

certain pallor. This means she was suffering from anemia—a condition of bloodlessness caused by malnutrition. In fact we are told that the medical record had it as "Endemic malnutrition suspected." This means malnutrition is a common condition of the rural population of Sri Lanka. As a result Disonchnahamy had to stop working about a year before she developed her tumour. Thus we can see a chain of events caused by poverty leading Disonchinahamy to her death. Her poverty makes her work as a labourer. She is malnourished. Therefore she stops her work. The family becomes still poorer when she stops working. The children begin to starve. Father gets angry when he sees the children starving and hits Disonchinahamy with the plate. She develops her tumour and dies at the operation.

What reveals Disonchnahamy's character best is her letter to her husband on the day before her operation. It is a touching testimony to the Sri Lankan village mother. She is poor in wealth, so poor as we saw that poverty is at the root of her death. But from the letter she writes we see how rich she is in affection. On the day before her operation, when she suspects that the operation can end in her death her thoughts are not for herself but for her little ones. She tells her husband repeatedly: "If I die, look after my little ones."

This emotionality, the capacity for feeling is a typical characteristic of the people of more agricultural and less industrial societies. In fact authors like D. H. Lawrence and E. M. Forester have explored this aspect of life especially among the people of the industrially developed west and have found that modern industrial and scientific civilization tends to blunt people's capacity for feeling. This is why we find that Dr. Jayawardene, the highly trained man in the western ways has little capacity for feeling. We are told that Bandusena who read Disonchinahamy's letter to Dr. Jayawardene "read the closing sentences of the letter in a breaking voice. Dr. Jayawardene not only said nothing about the contents of the letter, he could not even understand why Bandusena was so moved by the contents

of the letter. That shows that Dr., Kumar jayawardene the western trained expert had a very unfeeling heart. He could not respond to the kind of pathos present in the letter. His western scientific training had blunted his capacity for feeling.

Finally we have the utter economic dependence of the Sri Lankan villager on the village businessman revealed in the words Disonchinahamy wrote: "Mr. Hitchi has still to pay us for two bunches of banana. Ask Mr. Hitchi to lend you what money you need for travelling. I have still to get three days' wages for weeding." The poor villager works and sells his produce to the village businessman and yet is indebted to him. That is the vicious circle in which the poor of Sri Lankans live and die.

### The Mode of Presentation in Disonchinahamy

When we read Gunadasa Amarasekara's Disonchinahamy we notice that Gunadasa Amerasekara does not have the sort of symbolic approach to the subject like either D. H. Lawrence in *Odour of Chrysanthemums* or James Joyce in *Eveline* or *Araby*. This means Gunadasa Amarasekara's approach to the presentation of his subject-matter is much more direct and discursive than poetic. This however does not mean that his language is not poetic or lyrical. The English version of the story is of course a translation.

Speaking about the language of the story as a translation we can see the kind of language the translator has used is not the sort of standard British English. We cannot fault the translator for that because the translator was trying to capture not a typical British experience in her language but a typical Sri Lankan experience already presented in the Sinhala idiom. In such a context the best language, the variety of English the translator could have employed is the sort of the standard Sri Lanka English which precisely is what the writer has done. So we have a certain Sri Lankan flavour in the language the translator has used. For example in the letter Disochinahamy wrote before her death, we have the sentence: "I keep remembering our small son's face. This is a translation of 'මට අපේ පොඩි පුතාගේ මුණ තීතර මතක් වෙනවා' Any other translation than the one we have would not carry the same flavour, the emotional content of the sinhala utterance.

Apart from such single expressions which bear testimony to the kind of language used by the translator, we can also say that the language of the story as a whole has a Sri Lankan flavour about it. One is not surprised at that because this is a story about Sri Lankan life written originally in Sinhala. Therefore any translation of it is bound to have that stamp of the local idiom in it.

We also said that Gunadasa Amarasekara in his approach to the presentation of the story is not symbolic but more

direct and discursive. Gunadasa Amarasekara's presentation in fact is more characterbased. In other words he unfolds the story to us by unravelling his major characters. For example he presents to us the theme of the alienation of the middle class intelligentsia of this country through the character of Dr. Kumar Jayawardene. The newly sprouting communist ideology is presented through the character of Bandusena and finally Disonchinahamy is the embodiment of the indigenous rural life with all its poverty and indebtedness. Thus we can say that Gunadasa Amarasekara's characters in the story stand for a certain ideology of life. Dr. Kumar Jayawardene stands for the western scientific liberalism, Bandusena for Marxist communism and Disonchinahamy for the reality of indigenous rural life.

In this regard, the two characters mentioned first namely Dr. Kumar Jayawardene and Bandusena are typical representatives of an ideology and therefore we can call them ideational characters. A character that represents an idea or an ideology is an ideational character. Disonchinahamy is more the embodiment of reality, the reality of the indigenous rural life.

The ideologies represented by Dr. Kumar Jayawardene and Bandusena are imported things to this country. They are not things that have grown on our own soil. Their lack of relevance to the plight of the indigenous rural people, dramatized in the story is Gunadasa Amarasekara's way of showing that after all to meet the problems of the people of this country an ideology must be evolved from our own soil. So there we can see the seeds of Gunadasa Amarasekara's Jathike Chinthanaya concept sprouting in his mind.

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