

Shakespeare's use of soliloquy with special emphasis on Macbeth's soliloquy "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow"

by Dr. Ashoke Kumar Agarwal, Associate Prof. in English

Soliloquies are the key by which we can unlock the hearts of the intricate characters prone to introspection. This device is resorted to explain the complex personalities who do not fully reveal themselves either through their actions or their dialogues. The soliloquies, being the window of the mind, show the springs of conducts which the ordinary dialogue does not disclose. The speakers think aloud to themselves and we overhear them. Though Gottsched has remarked:

"Clever people do not speak aloud when they are alone",

but we must accept soliloquy as a necessary Elizabethan stage convention. The special purposes for which Shakespeare introduces them may be summed out as follows-

- a) to explain and illuminate the central protagonists and to throw light on their subterranean aspect
- b) to supply details for interlinking different strains of the plot, and
- c) to aid in keeping up the essential unity by tracing sequences of cause and effect.

The character of Macbeth, for example, would remain an enigma without his soliloquies. But at the same time we must guard ourselves enough against an unqualified acceptance of character estimate through soliloquies. Self deception, special pleading and wrong assessment are quite within the range of possibility even when a man unfolds his soul to himself in privacy of self communion.

Macbeth's soliloquy "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" comes when he hears the cry of women in Act V Sc. V lamenting over the death of Lady Macbeth. His initial reaction reveals that he has now been completely inured to bloodshed and pain. His once delicate sensibilities seem deadened, but the soliloquy gradually exhibits that his imagination has now been driven inwards working in the profound realization of momentary moves and the enunciation of a philosophy of world weariness that is almost cosmic in grasp and range.

His wife's death, it is often argued, means nothing to Macbeth, often taking a cue from his worlds:

“She should have died hereafter”.

However, the line is richly ambiguous. Macbeth grasps for meanings; he tries to conceive a time when he might have met such a pathetic situation with something more than indifference. But then the world seems utterly devoid of significant relations, and death is merely a meaningless repetition. Macbeth therefore compares life to a drama on the stage to convey the illusoriness. In saying “Life’s but a walking shadow”, Macbeth echoes the Bible, not to contrast the insubstantiality of life on the life hereafter. For him, life ends in ‘dusty death’, ‘shadow’ suggests ‘actor’, for the ‘actors’ were often spoken of as shadows, mere imitations of life. Life is a ‘poor player’ to the actor, no matter with what violence of passion he conducts himself, finds little time on the stage and then is reduced only to a rapidly disappearing memory. Just so with life itself; the real thing is just as transitory as the mimicry. Even more horrible and pathetic, it is not even a coherent work of art, but a wild, confused, babbling of an idiot, a story without a meaning. This is what Macbeth has finally come to feel. Behind the semblance of harmony in life is the ultimate reality of nothingness.

The soliloquy thus pierces into a vast terrifying desert within Macbeth. The poetry is so fine that one can almost be bullied into accepting an essential ambiguity in this final speech of the play. One may feel that Shakespeare was expressing his own philosophy in these lines. We may also find an echo of the pessimistic Catullus –“Once the brief candle is out, waits a night of unending sleep.” The Book of Job from the Bible has its ring too-
“Our days in the earth are shadows”.

In the final analysis, however, we should not interpret the soliloquy, as done by Shaw and others to be Shakespeare’s own pessimistic idea of the universe. In fact, they are the words of Macbeth exclusively, of one who has betrayed life for the equivocal and the illusory, and thus has robbed life of its meaning. Life seems meaningless to him as he has turned his back on those values which alone give significance to life. Perhaps Shakespeare here restores the meaning of life by showing that Macbeth’s annihilation results from his own crimes. After all as T.S Eliot says in ‘The Rock’:

“Without the meaning there is no time”.