

Paradox, Irony, Nemesis: The Passage to Understand Life and Literature.

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What begins in love may end in hate

What begins in hate may end in love

Every dusk waits for a dawn; Every dawn leads to a dusk

What begins in anger ends in shame

Shame bring rage

Fear is the father of courage

Much learning does not teach understanding.

What do these sentences try to say? Are they ambiguous? Are they puzzling? Are they trying to bring any realization to man?

Statements of this kind are plenty. They try to teach something through contradictions. They are paradoxes. A paradox has two opposite features. It helps to know the importance of the other when we are with one feature. It always forces us to realize the other and makes us seek the other. For example When we experience the bitterness of hatred, we understand the bliss of love. If it were not for injustice, men would not know justice. When we suffer from the cruelty of suspicion, we long for the comfort of trust. In short, when we shuttle between these binary opposites in performing our roles, we pass through the process of learning and understanding life. It is the process of acquiring Common sense. Common sense is not so common. It is the process of acquiring knowledge through the application of mind with the co-ordination of the body. It is a fact as well as an experience. Human life, which is sandwiched between life and death, is a journey through these paradoxes. The realization of these paradoxes in life is

aesthetically sweet. It becomes a passage in which the paradoxes stand on two sides and a man walks between them hopping and stopping.

The paradoxes often get man into a conflict. A man cannot become courageous all of a sudden moment. The conflict with fear makes him courageous. Similarly when he faces humiliation, the conflict with shame triggers the rage in him, and he outbursts in fury. Any conflict, whether it is emotional or intellectual, is a learning process. Sometimes it inspires. Creativity is often born out of a conflict. Muses visit where there is a mutiny of thoughts. All things come into being by conflict of contradictions, and the realization or the sum of things ("the whole") flows like a clear stream. The whole, which is a reality, gives the power of positive thinking and the confidence to face life.

Great players usually play to their power and potentials. At times of expectations and hope, they may knock the spectators back. Ordinary players play to their capacity and limitations. At crisis they measure each step and thereby may be successful. Opportunity knocks the door only once. That was the saying of the past. Now if one solves a problem or an issue, the opportunity is created. Life is not about the things that happen, but it is how one reacts to them.

The play of paradoxes is mysterious, sometimes goes beyond human comprehension. Always the wrong one comes before the right one as hatred precedes love. Men and women often quarrel in hatred before they fall in love with each other. Lust's labour fails to bring love and love's labour drives out lust. Lustful infatuation paves way for the spiritualization of love. Juliet is right in saying, "My only love sprung from my only hate". Sometimes wrongness of the right makes one settle with the rightness of the wrong, as when friends fall apart, never get close again. "Real friendship once ended cannot be mended".

When experience outgrows one is forced to go for a new thing. Once we reach the state of satiety, we are anxious to cross over the other to become insatiable again. "Heard melodies are sweet, sweeter are those unheard". Marriage can be termed in a funny way as going to a hotel, having ordered one's menu, still longing for the menu of the next table. It is paradoxical that we like tragedies more than comedies though the tragedies evoke pity and terror on us to bring cathartic effect "Our sweetest songs are those that tell our saddest thoughts". Even a strong-willed person would say, "I can resist anything except temptation". We condemn many things as actions of madness, though they are activities of "madness yet there is a method in it". Every action is motivated, or intentional, yet some are unintentional. All things are difficult

before they are easy. Every child owns a parent, yet some are disowned. Man is born free, yet in chains everywhere. The change of a place is only a change of a prison. An artist produces a wonderful piece of art. The creator dies. The created lives forever. The created outlives the creator. The product that comes from “me alive” keeps “me alive” to posterity. Achievers never expose themselves, but their achievements expose them.

Man is gifted with six senses. The five senses help one observe the world and store everything in the memory. The sixth sense edits, analyses and reasons out what are stored in memory. The function of the sixth sense determines the quality of a person. If one of the five senses happens to be ineffective, the sixth sense becomes more effective. Such is the case with the handicapped persons. Memory, the thin line that differentiates a normal man and a mad man, plays tricks on man. It forgets what should be remembered; it remembers what has to be forgotten. The performance of a person is controlled by the power of the memory. How is that a handicapped person's is more extraordinary memory than an ordinary person's!

Even some of our day-to-day expressions are paradoxical: “clearly misunderstood”, “the exact estimation of the project”, “a small crowd in the corner of the street”, “acted naturally”, “found missing”, “fully empty”, “happily married”, “calm after storm”, “to lose something to gain something” “marrying in haste, repent at leisure”, “Spies do not like spies”. Such oxymoron explains how things are juxtaposed in life. These expressions are the result of the collective unconsciousness of the cultural nuances.

When chance intrudes man becomes a puppet, and one wants to echo, “as flies to wanton boys are we to gods” .Given in a circumstance man may not know exactly what he wants, what is he doing, and what is he speaking. We are not what we are. “What it is” becomes “What it is not”. Now the irony enters. Sometimes what you want may not be what you get, but in the end what you get may be much better than what you wanted. Similarly what cannot be cured must only be endured.

What is irony? Aristotle used a term called “eironia” as opposite to ‘alazoneia’ to denote a figure in rhetoric: to blame by ironical praise or to praise by ironical blame. For Cicero, it was a pervasive habit of discourse. Quintilian made it an elaboration of a figure of speech into an entire argument. Now in modern context it is defined as ‘saying the contrary of what one means’ ‘saying one thing but meaning another’ ‘praising in order to blame and blaming in order to praise’ ‘mocking and scoffing’. Schlegel says “Irony is a form of paradox and Paradox is the

condition *sine quanon* of irony, its soul, its source and its principle”(Irony: 24). Irony has basically a corrective function. It is like a gyroscope that keeps life on an even keel or straight course, restoring the balance when life is being taken too seriously or, as some tragedies show, not seriously enough, stabilizing the unstable but also destabilizing the excessively stable. Goethe says, “Irony is that little grain of salt that alone renders the dish palatable” (Irony: 4) and Kierkegaard adds that ‘as philosophers claim that no true philosophy is possible without doubt, so by the same token one may claim that no authentic human life is possible without irony’ (Irony: 4).

Irony, which was once thought of as being practised only locally or occasionally, has now become more generalized seeing all world as an ironic stage and all mankind as merely players. It could be thought of as the permanent and self-conscious commitment, unconscious act. It could be seen as obligatory, dynamic, and dialectical. Irony is not a property of the language but is the function of the expectations with which we approach it. Certain events or actions demand an exclamation ‘What a coincidence’. Now such actions have led many people to say ‘How ironical’. In a way ‘How ironical’ has ousted ‘What a coincidence!’. That is why it is said, “The importance of being ironical, however, cannot be established without establishing the importance of being earnest” (Irony: 4). The unsinkable “Titanic” got sunk. What an irony it was! Everyone thinks that there is enough time to live but never knows which moment is last. The Present is often neglected and wasted for the sake of tomorrow.

Irony plays a part in everyday life. “Smoking is injurious to health”. These words are printed in every cigarette packet. Do smokers refrain themselves from smoking on reading these lines? How many smokers do realize that they burn a cigarette only to be burnt. The butt of a burning cigarette seems to tell its bearer, “today its me, because of you, tomorrow its you, because of me.” Bad habits die hard. Good habits are hard to cultivate. Man created religion only to unite people. But today the people are divided and disunited by religion. It is often said that Man is the most wonderful and the most complete form of all the creations of God, but it is Man who disobeyed God.

It is often said that beauty invites danger. Beauty does not lie anywhere outside. It lies in the beholder’s eye. Beauty never creates love, it is love that creates beauty. Nothing is interested when one is not interested. To that extent, all feelings including spiritual are internal, though

appear to be external. If you are happy inside, the place where you live will be happy and peaceful. A realization of this makes one mature. The sign of maturity is seen not when a person starts speaking of “Big things”, actually it is when a person starts understanding “small things”. A complete man is God, otherwise he is an incomplete God. Time decides whom we are to meet in our life. Our heart decides whom we want in our life. Our behavior decides who will stay in our life till the end. We should not ask for the time of arrival at the time of departure. For, most accidents happen not in the beginning of the journey but towards the end of the journey. The bad people hate you even for the GOOD in you, the good people love you even after knowing the BAD in you. There isn't a wrong time to do a good thing.

The direction of the liquid is always towards the empty space, but it does not happen with money. We all know Poor man runs after his daily bread, but the rich man runs to digest it. When you are a bachelor you see only happy couples, when you are married you see only happy singles. A lot of things go unquestioned. A lot of questions go unanswered. Silence is the best answer for all questions. Prayer does not change God, but it changes him who prays.

Certain actions are not the same as we think. Writing is not writing, Writing is telling; nature is telling; reading is telling. When you read a book, you are inside it; It is inside you; there is no longer either outside or inside. Hence, everything not only is in everything else but also acts upon everything else. Even when it is about a sentence, a sentence neither means anything at all nor does it always mean the same thing. It always has the meaning that has been conferred on it by the situation in which it is uttered. There are no inherent constraints on the meanings a sentence may have. The following words of Macbeth present a wonderful dramatic imagery, but they convey a different meaning in the dramatic context in which they are uttered.

Two truths are told
As happy prologues to the swelling act
Of the imperial theme (I,iii,125)

What is criticism? Critics try to make the world agree with a disagreement or disagree with an agreement. Sometimes they subjectively object a thought or objectively dissect a subjective thought. At other times they answer a question or question an answer. In short, it is an

activity that is oscillating between two possibilities: a union without comprehension and a comprehension without union.

The people in film industry or in theatre experience a terrible irony. The medium, whether it is a film or theatre, takes them to the ordinary masses. The more they work, the less they are in contact with people outside. The popularity which they gain through the media defies a common touch with the ordinary people. The choice turns into a force. Loneliness, by choice is sweet, by force is bitter.

. Laugh like as you have cried; Play like you have never lost; Love like you have been hurt; Live like there is no tomorrow. Love thy neighbor. Good fences make good neighbours. Such statements of moral become ironical in real life. One is reminded here of the stories of Somerset Maugham, particularly, "The Ant and the Grasshopper" and "A Friend Indeed".

The importance of irony in literature is beyond question. All art, or all literature, is essentially ironic. All good literature must be ironic. One needs only to list the major writers in whose works irony is significantly present. Wordsworth's cup of imagination never overflows. According to his theory, poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, and at times, a recollection of emotions in tranquility. Artistic creation has this kind of contradictions and they are complementary also. At first artist is imaginative and inspired, and then he becomes reflective and critical. In his creation he is imaginatively critical. Though the man and the artist are one and the same, they are dichotomized, and this dichotomy is apparently clear in the writings of V.S. Naipaul. The expatriate writers are mostly nostalgic. They are physically alienated from their homeland, but psychologically attached to it.

Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* to tell the whole world about "the justifying ways of God to man." But at the end the whole world found Satan as the hero of the epic. Dr. Johnson attacked Milton vehemently for the failure of his purpose. To prove his innocence and his puritan mind Milton again wrote *Paradise Regained*. The irony is the *Paradise Lost* has gained him a great place in the history of English Literature. *Paradise Regained* has failed him.

So far irony is seen in terms not of someone being ironical, but someone being the victim of irony, attention thus shifting from the active to the passive. The victim could be either the butt of an ironic remark, whether made in his absence or not, or the person who has failed to see the irony, whether he is the butt of the irony or not. It is Shakespeare who has brought out the

dramatic effect of irony in most of his plays. In Shakespeare's "*Macbeth*" one finds many examples: King Duncan has become the victim of irony on many occasions:

What he (Macdonwald) hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won.(I,i,70)

"It (Macbeth) is a peerless kinsman" (I,iv,58)

"O, Valiant cousin! worthy gentleman!" (I,ii,24)

Lady Macbeth also becomes a victim:

These deeds must not be thought

After these ways: so it will make us mad"(II,ii,33)

King Lear is also a victim, when he says,

"Nothing begets nothing" to Cordelia

Kovalan becomes a tragic victim in, the Tamil epic, *Silapathikaram*, when he arrives at Madurai to sell Kannaki's anklet. Such events of irony bring pain and amusement. Pain on the part of the performer and amusement on the observer

Appearance and reality is ironical. Appearance is always deceptive. "Fair is foul, foul is fair"(I,I,10). The face is the index of the mind but "there is no art to find mind's construction in the face"(I,iv,12)). "Look like innocent flower, but be the serpent under it"(I,v,63). "False face must hide what the false heart doth know"(I,vii,84). "One can smile and smile yet be a villain." "Beware of honey-tongued people." The 'motiveless malignant' Iago is bold enough to say "I am not what I am." There is some evil even in good hearts.

Sometimes irony lies in the act of judging things, where judgment is based on pride, prejudice or passion. Some are very poor in judging people. Mr. Darcy, who in "The Pride and The Prejudice" judges Elizabeth wrongly at the beginning of the novel, changes himself to become a complete man free from pride and prejudice towards the end of the novel. Most of V.S. Naipaul's novels begin with characters entering into a place hoping that the place would give them comfort. They end with characters making their escape from the place disillusioned.

What is life? If it is full of irony! Everyone wants to escape from the disillusionment of irony and wants to echo with Auden:

In 1945 Auden wrote:

Can I learn to suffer

Without saying something ironic or funny

Everyone will not get everything, but get everything that they deserve. Similarly one should not try to covet what others deserve. When one dares to do so, evil is born. A divine justice or a sort of poetic justice becomes essential to keep faith in divinity to destroy evil. Nemesis is different from Paradox and Irony, but its effect, like the other two, is one of contradiction. The evil doers believe that no one has the power to account their evil and that they can escape their punishment easily. But Nemesis brings them their deserved punishment. Such persons may escape God’s wrath, but not Nemesis. It is certain that unnatural deeds do breed unnatural troubles. Life appears to be an echo sending back what one has given.

The word *Nemesis* originally meant the distributor of fortune, neither good nor bad, simply in due proportion to each according to what was deserved; then, *nemesis* came to suggest the resentment caused by any disturbance of this right proportion, the sense of justice which could not allow it to pass unpunished. The name *Nemesis* is related to the Greek word meaning "to give what is due". If one wants to put in Newton’s terms every action has its equal and opposite reaction. One cannot be inactive. One action leads to another. Action is suffering. It is like a boomerang which can fly in a circle and can come back to the thrower.

The poet Mesomedes wrote a hymn to Nemesis in the early 2nd century, where he addressed her

Nemesis, winged balancer of life,
dark-faced goddess, daughter of Justice,

Thiruvallur has wonderfully said,

If, ere the noontide, you to others evil do,
Before the eventide will evil visit you.

It is a kind of punishment or defeat that is deserved and cannot be avoided. If you neglect your parents, your children will neglect you. When a man points a finger at someone else, he should remember that four of his fingers are pointing at him. “Judge ye not, lest ye be judged” Shakespeare has wonderfully brought out the working of *Nemesis* in this world in “*Macbeth*”

But here upon this bank and shoal of time,
We’d jump the life to come, - But in these cases.
We still have judgment here

We but teach Bloody instructions, which,
Being taught, return to plague the inventor:

This even-handed justice
Comments the Ingredients of our poisoned chalice
To our lips. (I,vii,5-14)

Not only this, Shakespeare has shown that Imagination is an instrument of Nemesis. Even before murdering Duncan, Macbeth imagines about the murder. He suffers in the hallucination of the dagger before it is used.

“Present fear are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical.” (I,iii,138—139)

Shakespeare has portrayed the workings of *Nemesis* in the play. Macbeth has his Nemesis even before the act of the murder. (The dagger scene) After the murder his Nemesis is immediate. His feeling of guilt is exposed.

Sleep no more. Macbeth does murder sleep (II,ii,34)

What hands are here? Ha! They pluck out mine eyes,
Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red’(II,ii,59-63)

At this moment the noble Macbeth is dead. He lives after the murder only to become more and more evil, and finally to be eliminated from this world.

To Lady Macbeth Nemesis visits a little late, and it is very appropriate.

A little water clears us of this deed How easy is it then
Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?
!(V,I,30)

It is the nemesis of “A little water clears us of this deed”(II,ii,66)

What is done cannot be undone(V,I,55)

is the nemesis of “What is done is done”(III,ii,34)

Her sleep-walking scene and her blabbering is the nemesis of

“These deeds must not be thought

After these ways: so it will make us mad” (II,ii,33)

What Macbeth feels earlier, she feels later

Here’s the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of

Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh! oh! oh!(V,I,40)

One can understand her pain in this passage. Moreover the nurse’s comment is poignant

She has spoke what she should not,

I am sure of that : heaven knows what she has known.

Infected minds to their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets(V,I,60)

Paradox is a fact and a realization . Irony is a fact and an experience. Irony is the analysis of thesis and antithesis. Nemesis is a fact and a reaction. All these can be termed as the laws of contradiction. They bring an understanding out the contradictions and thereby a reconciliation.

They bring some kind of edification on the part of the performer and observer. Patience and caution are the key words to understand the workings of these laws of contradictions. Patience and caution will also save one from the onslaught of these things. Art imitates Reality; Reality imitates Art. Representation gives insight into Reality. Reality often becomes a Representation of Life. An understanding of literature is an understanding of life. Literature teaches with delight. Literature offers one a chance to get acquaintance with the best to have an understanding of life. These laws of contradictions have a positive effect. Light is invisible, but it makes things visible. Similarly they are lights making many things visible in life and bring an insight into literature.

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