

STUDY MATERIAL FOR PG SEMESTER-II, ENGLISH, PAPER- CC-6, UNIT-IV (a)

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POEM: A GRAMMARIAN'S FUNERAL

POET: ROBERT BROWNING

A GRAMMARIAN'S FUNERAL AS A DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

A Grammarian's Funeral by Robert Browning was published in the poetry collection *Men and Women* in 1855. The poem describes the life of a Grammarian who dedicates his life for the cause of learning. The speaker of the dramatic monologue 'A Grammarian's Funeral' is the disciple of the grammarian. In his speech he glorifies the ardent devotion of his master, the grammarian. He argues in favour of meditative life and high ideals. It is a long poem of 148 lines written in the form of dramatic monologue that describes the movement of a funeral procession from the plain to the mountain top. A dramatic monologue, as a poetic device, is basically a long speech delivered by one person. The basic features of dramatic monologue are:

- A single speaker
- Passive listener or listeners whose presence is conveyed through the speaker himself.
- The speech begins at a critical point.
- The purpose of dramatic monologue is to take a deep insight into the character of the speaker.
- It also reveals the motive and intention of the speaker.

According to Robert Langbaum '*the dramatic monologue must have not only a speaker other than the poet but also a listener, an occasion, and some interplay between speaker and listener.*'

Robert Browning used and perfected this form in his works. Some of the most popular dramatic monologues written by Browning are, *My Last Duchess, Andrea Del Sarto, The Bishop Orders His Tomb, Caliban Upon Setebos, Porphyria's Lover, A Grammarian's Funeral* and others.

The poem **A Grammarian's Funeral** begins at a critical situation. The occasion is that of the funeral of the Grammarian. The speaker who is the disciple of the grammarian reveals that the corpse of the dead master has to be carried to a suitable place for burial. As the funeral procession moves the speaker reveals the details of the grammarian's life. It is decided to carry the corpse to the top of mountain as it suits the man who dedicated his whole life for the pursuit of knowledge. The Grammarian was a scholar and, hence, the place of burial should be a specific one. They decide to carry the corpse far away from the plain because it did not match with the stature of this scholar. The common fields and dark villages were symbols of darkness and ignorance. Here, everyone's desire is limited to common pursuit. The people, here, are bound to their stake like animals. They decide to carry the grammarian's body to the mountain peak which symbolises light and learning.

*Leave we the unlettered plain its herd and crops;
Seek we sepulture
On a tall mountain, citted to the top,
Crowded with culture!*

The disciple chooses the topmost peak of the mountain which is lit by the light coming from a citadel. The place seemed to be suitable for a man with 'rarer' and 'intenser' thought. The leader of the disciples praises his master for his lofty thoughts. As the procession moves further the leader instructs other disciples to move with head held high because they were carrying a man who spent his life in honest pursuit for knowledge. There must be respect and honour shown to this true learner. The speaker praises his master for his dedication with respect and sympathy. The scholar lost all his youth for the sake of learning. The grammarian possessed the beauty of Apollo, the Greek god of beauty and lyric, but he lost the grace due to his constant involvement in learning. He spends his life in learning

and before he could realise about the spring of youth of his life, he was soon overtaken by winter, that is, old age. The lines below give an account of his life:

*He was a man born with thy face and throat,
Lyric Apollo!
Long he lived nameless: how should spring take note
Winter would follow?*

The erudite scholar very soon began to suffer with disease and became weak. The quest of knowledge led to hard toil that left the grammarian '*cramped and diminished*'. The energy was reduced. But the enthusiasm was not lessened. He gathered himself to work sincerely. The old man was aware of the fact that he had grown old and death is inevitable. He was proud of his work as it was his way. He ignored the one who pitied upon him. Like a true learner he concentrated on his work and engaged himself in exploring the mystery of life. He desired to read the scholarly books and discover what the great sages and philosophers found about universe. The speaker admires his master's efforts and eulogises the grammarian's choice of working for high aims. The grammarian left the life of enjoyment. The speaker says:

*Left play for work and grappled with world
Bent on escaping:
"What's in the scroll," quoth he, "thou keepest furled?
'Show me their shaping,
'Theirs, who most studied man, the bard and sage,-
Give!" - So he gowned him,*

The master delved deep into the scholarly pursuit and memorised every bit of those treasures of knowledge. He devoted long time in study which ultimately resulted to further deterioration in the health condition of the grammarian. He became bald and his eyes became weak. Even his accents began to falter. The disciple praises his master's commitment to his passion. He confined himself for the attainment of knowledge with intense devotion. Any other person would have discarded the books and would have come out of seclusion to enjoy the life. The grammarian paid no heed to anyone's idle talk. The time to enjoy the life had not yet come because he had to learn a lot. Patience was required because the man wanted to acquire every bit of knowledge, no matter how sick he becomes. For the sake of learning he rejects the idea of enjoying life. In these lines of the poem, passion of learning is compared with the act of eating a feast to the crumb. The speaker narrates:

*"Even to the crumbs I'd fain eat up the feast,
'Ay, nor feel queasy!"*

The speaker while narrating the speech acquaints the listener with the lofty ideals of his master. His master believes in knowing life before living. There must be a plan. Life is like a building that has to be planned before construction. When a building is constructed its structure and its design is planned. The required materials are gathered to implement the plan step by step. Stone is broken by the steel into required shape. Then the bricks are plastered by the cement. Similarly, to live life it is necessary to have the knowledge of life. So, the grammarian learned to live. In other words, it is important to understand life. Before enjoying the life the grammarian decided to have knowledge of life. For him there was no end to learning. As it is expressed in these lines:

*Image the whole, then execute the parts-
Fancy the fabric
Quite, ere you build, ere steel strike fire from quartz,
Ere mortar dab brick!*

Meanwhile, the speaker passes instructions to the fellow disciples who are carrying the corpse. Browning uses brackets for instructions, like (*Here's the down gate reached: there's the market-place Gaping before us*), (*Hearten our chorus*), (*Caution redoubled*) and so on. These instructions reveal the movement of the procession as well as the places they reach. The speaker praises his master for his unique grace. The grammarian's strong faith in God made him more firm in his pursuit. He was unperturbed on the issue of time. Time passes quickly for ordinary people because enjoyment and pleasure become the main goal of their life. They are afraid of missing the enjoyment of life forever. On this the grammarian replies, "*What's time? Leave now for dog and apes! 'Man has forever.'*" Time and its passage were irrelevant issues for such scholars. The limitation of time was not for those who were seeking high ideals. Men are not like animals that live and die. They are immortal beings.

Earnest deeds done in this life will never be wasted. God definitely showers his blessing on those who make effort. Time slips for those who lack faith in God. Therefore, it is truly mentioned in the following lines:

*That before living he'd learn how to live-
No end to learning:
Earn the means first-God surely will contrive
Use for our earning.*

He was suffering from diseases like calculus (painful disease) and tussis (bronchial disease). However, such diseases did not discourage him. He became weaker. His eyes became weak but he would not take the advice for rest from his disciples. The old scholar having full faith in god deeply involved himself in his work. He starts working more energetically and fiercely. His energy is like that of a dragon. Dragon is used to symbolise the intense spirit of the grammarian. His soul was thirsty for knowledge. Like a 'soul-hydroptic' the scholar desired to suck each and every drop of knowledge. The speaker praises his master's high aspirations and endless pursuits which was not limited like ordinary people. The ordinary people enjoy the worldly pleasures like money and fame. He admires his master's ardent faith in god. The grammarian did not favour immediate gains because it was not a gain at all. He was a man of high thinking so failure on earth did not dishearten him. He was not satisfied with worldly gains. He believed that his honest work will be rewarded in heaven. The speaker describes his master's way in the following words:

*That low man seeks a little thing to do,
Sees it and does it:
This high man, with a great thing to pursue,
Dies ere he knows it.*

The grammarian struggled hard to settle the problems relating to Greek particles like 'Hoti' and 'Oun' which meant 'because' and 'therefore'. As a grammarian his achievements were remarkable. The man struggled with death but did not give up. He kept on persevering to the last moment of his life. At last, passing through the dark plains, the funeral procession finally reaches the mountain top where the grammarian was to be buried. The place was the most suitable one as it was visited by birds like swallow and curlews that were high flying birds. The ideals of the dead grammarian were also lofty and high like the high soaring birds. He was an enlightened man. Hence, the place was a proper one. This place was amidst nature's aspects like, stars and meteors, lightening and storm. The clouds also were near. The silence, beauty and purity made the place best for a man who lived with high ideals. He sacrificed the comfortable ways of common man's life and opted to lead a life of austerity.

The speaker's eulogy establishes the grammarian as a man of faith and as a man of high and lofty ideals. The dramatic monologue also reveals the speaker's own motives, attitudes and beliefs. The way the speaker upholds the ideals of his master rejecting all arguments gives an account of his own devotion and dedication towards his master.

Robert Browning's use of dramatic monologue very effectively presents the personality study of the speaker through the ideals he upholds. The message of immortality of soul, faith in God, ideals of hard work and hardships in achieving such goals have been depicted in the long poem of Browning.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Poem: **A Grammarian's Funeral**
 - Collections: *Men and Women*
 - Published: 1855
 - Poet: Robert Browning
 - Period: Victorian Age
 - Form: Dramatic Monologue
 - Narrator: One of the disciples
 - Lines : 148 lines
 - Theme: Attainment of knowledge
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