

THE DEAR DEPARTED

- By Stanley Houghton

PLOT – The Dear Departed

The play 'The Dear Departed' presents an interesting situation that has tragically become a common place in the world of today. The scene of the play is set in the sitting room of a small house in a lower middle-class district of a town. The setting of the play reveals that Mrs Slater, a plump an active lady is in mourning and she is getting ready to receive some guests.

It is revealed that Victoria's grandfather has passed away and the Slater family is getting ready to receive Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Ben. Victoria expresses surprise at this news because her aunt and uncle had not paid a visit for years all together. Mrs. Slater reveals that they are coming over to talk about grandfather's affairs, on hearing of his death.

Everyone starts blaming the old man for not paying his premium. Victoria is instructed to go over to grandpa's room to get the receipt of the premium. But, she entered looking dazed. She gives the shocking news that Grandpa was active and moving around.

After sometime, Mr Abel enters and is surprised to see all his people gathered. He is curious to know why they are wearing mourning dresses. He reveals that he was well and just had a slight headache. Perhaps, his rest must have been mistaken as 'death' by his people. Mrs Jordan makes up some story to pacify him. The husbands join their wives in hurling (throw) accusations at each other.

Abel discovers the greed that his daughters have, and declares that he was going to change his will and all the money will go to the one, in whose house he dies. Both daughters fight with each other to keep their father.

Abel candidly watching all the fun and makes an announcement which shocks everyone. On Monday, he would go to the lawyer and alter his will, and then he would go the insurance office and pay his premium. After that he would go to the church and get married to Mrs Shorrocks.

Long answer questions:

- 1. How does the 'spat' between the two daughters lead to the grandfather discovering the truth?**

Ans: Mr Abel Merryweather recognizes his bureau and wants to know the reason for its shifting. Mrs Slater has already told her sister that the bureau belonged to them. This lie is enough to set tongues wagging and tempers escalating. Mrs Jordan accuses her sister of stealing her father's things, thinking him to be dead. That is when Mr Abel discovers that they had gathered there for the official mourning of his death.

- 2. Compare and contrast Henry's character with his wife.**

Ans: Henry is timid and honest by nature. Soft at heart, he tends to get bullied by his dominating wife. Initially, he protests against stealing the grandfather's slippers and bureau but when Mrs Slater forces him, he gets carried away. He is a worried looking man who believed what his wife says and ends up supporting her. Mrs Slater by contrast is vain, pretentious and greedy. She makes the plans and he executes them with his wife's help of course.

- 3. What is the significance of the play? Bring out the irony inherent in it.**

Ans: The title is very appropriate and packed with irony and wit that makes a farce of all relationships. Children like Slaters and Jordans are a blot on humanity and in the bonds of love and affection. They never cared for their father and they considered him a burden. For both the daughters, father's death is a kind of competition to outshine each other in dressing. There is no mourning in their hearts, but both daughters compete with each other to wear the best mourning dress. Mrs Jordan is keen to have tea and snacks rather than looking at her dead father. Accusations are hurled at each other, death announcements are planned, but no one spares a thought for the father. It is only granddaughter Victoria, who is a sole witness to this game of pinching things and benefits. In a lighter tone, Mr Abel had sensed the mercenary nature of his daughters and outwits them in their planning. The play ends on a humorous note but outlines a very tragic and pathetic concern – care of the elderly that is a glaring and ugly reality of today's world.

PRACTICE EXERCISES:

I. General Questions:

1. Why does Mrs Slater instruct Victoria to change her dress?

2. Why were Mr and Mrs Jordan visiting the Slaters after so many years?

3. "For myself it's such a relief to get into the black." Who makes this remark and what is the context?

4. Henry says "I suppose it's in the family." Why does Henry make this comment and what does it reflect about the two sisters?

5. Describe the reaction of Slaters and Jordans when Mr Abel Merry weather walks in the parlour.

6. Why are Amelia and Elizabeth reluctant to tell the truth to their father regarding their mourning dresses? What stories do they cook up to convince their father?

7. What is the most surprising announcement made by Mr Abel in the end? How does it affect the other characters?

II. Reference to Context:

1. "It would never do for them to find you in colours."
a. Identify the speaker and the listener.

b. Who is referred to 'them' in the above statement?

c. What is the context in the above remark?

2. "No, my child, Grandpa gave it to your mother before he died."

a. What does 'it' refer to?

b. What impression do you form of the speakers from the above statement?

c. What do you think will be the impact of the above statement on the listener?

3. "He's done it on purpose, just to annoy us"

a. Identify 'He' and 'us'.

b. Mention the context of the above remark.

c. What mistake has the person mentioned made?

4. "Drat me if that isn't my clock too. What the devil's been going on in the house?"

a. What is the confusion regarding the clock?

b. What exactly has been going on in the house?

c. Who is the speaker and whom is he addressing?