CHAPTER -II

PYRAMUS AND THISBE

Henry James' Pyramus and Thisbe is his first dramatic composition. It appeared in April 1869 in the issue of the Galaxy. The title of the play is derived from the play within a play in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream. This play may be characterized as James' dramatic exploration.

Pyramus and Thisbe is a one-act play with only two characters. The play is knit between Stephen Young, aged thirty three, who works as a journalist, and Catherine West, aged twenty six, who works as a music teacher. Both of them are neighbours in an apartment. They represent the middle class people. It can be observed that James had identified himself with Stephen Young, the protagonist of the play, as this character is a true representation of James' early manhood.

The play is set in Catherine West's apartment. The opening dialogue by Catherine, being a Soliloquy, reveals her suffering as a music teacher and most importantly from the inconvenience created by her neighbour, Stephen. Stephen being a chain-smoker loves to do his work by lighting a cigar. The smell of tobacco from Stephen's dwelling becomes a matter of
concern for Catherine as she hates the smell of it. She starts cursing Stephen on her birthday and speaks about the inconvenience created by him.

.....what a poor girl do (shuts her window with a loud crash)

There! perhaps he'll hear that! what am I to do?

I cannot go to my lessons smelling like a bar-room;

and certainly I can't ask my little girls to come and

take their lessons in this blinding cloud of smoke. Pshaw!

its worse with the window shut than with it open. If I'm

doomed to suffocate. I might as well do it comfortably. (Raises

the window violently) 1

Catherine keeps worrying about her age which is making her tired and tired by teaching music and not achieving anything in music. She is also concerned about her meagre earnings and miserable life in the apartment besides her neighbour who turns night into day with his pipe. She decides to forget all her worries and sits at the piano to play furiously.

While Catherine is playing, Stephen enters her apartment with a small bouquet and appreciates her music. She in turn scolds him for

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tress-passing. Stephen presents the bouquet and reveals the fact that it was wrongly sent to his address as it belongs to her. Conversation slowly grips between them and they begin to exchange their respective views on manners, habits of life and so on. Catherine says to Stephen that she hates smoking like anything and even she dares to put the bouquet near his nose and asks him to sniff. The result was the smell of tobacco. Stephen takes the comment lightly, and reiterates his stand on his habit of smoking:

Dear me! Do you really object to smoke?

Catherine. Object to it? I hate it!

Stephen. And you ever perceive my pipe?

Catherine. Constantly, Mr. Young

Stephen. Alas! What a terrible neighbour I am!

I'm extremely sorry; but what can I do?

I strongly suspect that I can't give up talking, and I'm profoundly convinced that

I can't give up smoking 2

With the terrible answer of Stephen. Catherine tells him that she would rather move away and take another dwelling. Stephen says that

2. Ibid., p.76
he hates music and tells her that the music from her piano disturbs him a lot whenever he sits to work. James here tries to picturize two different personalities with different wave lengths in such a beautiful manner that as the play moves on they differ on various matters and at one point they start to compromise. During the course of their conversation humour arises all of a sudden. Knowing his hatred she laughs at Stephen and says,

Catherine . (Laughing) so you detest music, Mr. Young?

I don't know why I should laugh; I feel much more like crying. Its too provoking. I protest I don't understand it. I don't see what such people are made up of.

Stephen. Of good flesh and blood, Miss west

Catherine. Yes, and not much else 3.

Manfred Mackenzie feels that James uses irony in the service of melodrama. mes has used rich Irony as rhetorical device, to register the spoken and the tacit reaction of the speaker towards somebody or towards some object.

3. Ibid., p.77.
Stephen further explains Catherine about the inconvenience created by her. He says that he loves absolute silence while working but with the emission of noise from her piano he is not able to scribble anything for his journal as it disturbs him like anything. James, in this play, bring out an open confrontation between absolute silence and absolute noise representing Stephen and Catherine respectively. James made use of symbolism in the play as we can observe this in an occasion.

Stephen. Why, there's something between absolute silence and - absolute noise 4

The two characters in the play stick to their own ways of living. Catherine intends to disturb her neighbour with her music but she suddenly starts changing her intention thinking that it is bad manners to retaliate when the other person is creating a trouble to her. So, she decides to shift her lodging but by then she would have developed a passion towards Stephen but with the advent of tobacco in between she again sticks to her earlier stand to keep him off.

At this juncture Catherine finds a parcel on her table which is labelled on Stephen's name. This adds fuel to her hatred and angrily

4. Ibid., p.77.
takes that parcel to throw it away at his door-step;

Catherine. (Pointing to the package) Be so good as to possess

yourself of your own property. How it came here

I'm at loss to say.

Stephen. Why, its evident; your flowers and my tobacco

arrived together. The young woman who brought

them committed the pardonable error of giving

you my parcel, and me yours." 5

Knowing her mistake, Catherine feels sorry for having disturbed Stephen. He then tells about a letter that he had received from the owner of their apartment. The content of the mailer says that all the boarders of his apartment have to vacate their dwellings as he had disposed his property to others. By knowing this fact Catherine fears that she would be rendered shelterless. Stephen promises to help her in searching an apartment. She then tells him on how she is suffering consequently on her birthdays since five years. She further says that she had developed a sort of attachment to their dwelling despite its miserable condition. She becomes philosophical at this juncture and says:

5. Ibid., p.79.
Catherine. O stupid man! There's difference between missing the past and losing for the future we get used to be without the things that have passed away. We never get used to being without things that have not yet come; we end ceasing to think of those; we never cease to think of these; and, as regards them least, we are never contended. 6

James' application of philosophy can be viewed from these lines. We see a mature philosopher in him. His appeal is to the mind but it will be difficult for a common reader to understand James' philosophy.

As the play goes on the relationship between Stephen and Catherine come closer and closer. They come to an understanding to help each other in finding an apartment of their own choice. James starts this play with an abstraction but it is not merely a thesis or moral idea. It is a dramatic situation, a human relationship that James brings as we can see in the following lines,

Stephen. Oh, I'm terribly hungry

6. Ibid., p.80.
Catherine.  Dear me, if it's as bad as that you'd
better go at once to your eating house.

Stay; do you like sardines?

Stephen.  Particularly

Catherine.  And guava jelly?

Stephen.  Extravagantly.

Catherine.  Well, then, perhaps we can blunt the
edge of your vivacity. 7

It is the art of James that he arranges the objects (of the persons and inci­
dents involved) by likeness and opposition and by balance and cross­
reference, with all regard to emphasis and proportion.

Symbolic comedy is displayed through out the play during the con­
versation between Stephen and Catherine as one can observe during a chat
at tea,

Catherine.  How do you like your tea?

Stephen.  Strong, Please - as strong as Samson Unshorn

Catherine.  You mean by that, I suppose, that you want
neither cream nor sugar?

7. Ibid., p.81.
Stephen. Cream and sugar are the wiles of Delilah.

Catherine. I must say, then, that Delilah is a much abused person.

Stephen. It no more than natural that you should stand up for her. You yourself, Miss West.

James' thorough knowledge of the classics had made him bring the classical characters.

James' curiosity to apply hard words can also be observed in the play. His zeal to acquire more and more knowledge and strong desire to bring out a good piece of art perhaps may be the reason to apply hard words as one can see during the conversation of Stephen and Catherine;

Stephen. Really, then, I hardly know whether your implacable attitude was the more the less to your credit.

Catherine. Implacable? You use hard words; not that I admit, however, that I was not quite right.

Stephen. Oh! It was very becoming. Of course you felt no

8. Ibid., p. 81
sordid human passion. You figured simply your

divine protectress - the canonized Muse - Outraged,

insulted, discredited; but cold, relentless and

dispassionate. I confess that I felt a good earthy spite. 9

Stephen, inwardly doubts her of having a lover. This notion
comes into his mind by seeing the bouquet. He thinks that it might have
been sent by her lover; which is not true. The bouquet was sent by one of
Catherine's pupils. Stephen unknowing this fact asks her to throw away
the flowers in it. James implies suspicion in the mind of Stephen. Despite
his doubt, Stephen expresses his love which in turn turns back as Cather­
ine Snubs initially,

Stephen.  Desperately so, I'm a lover

Catherine.  Oh, oh!

Stephen.  Ofcourse, you don't believe it.

Catherine.  Ofcourse? (A pause) Excuse me you are
    no lover

Stephen.  Ofcourse you do, then 10

Stephen further says that he had developed a passion

9. Ibid., p.81.
10. Ibid., p.84
towards Catherine since a month and with her presence he had cleared up all his misty doubts and dusky illusions. Catherine aptly agrees his proposal and says that both of them are singularly conscious of each other's idiosyncracies. She reveals the suspense of Stephen's doubt in a symbolic way,

Why, like that of Viola's love in

"Twelfth Night," It's well nigh blank,

my lord!" It was sent me as

a birthday token by a pupil, a

very good little girl of ten" 11

The play thus ends with a happy note that they decide to live together by compromising on each others ideals. Catherine lights cigar to mark the beginning of a new life and Stephen too tells her that he would assist her in her field of music.

Though it is James' first dramatic composition, he had succeeded in transmitting the events of the play through the minds of the chief protagonists. Pyramus and Thisbe has a rich symbolism, philosophy, mild suspense which indeed can be considered as an epigrammatic comedy.

11. Ibid., p.84.
Though *Pyramus and Thisbe* is a simple two-character conversation piece it gives an abundant humour and an account of neighbourly inconveniences and compromises paring the way for a permanent wed-lock.