

Tale of A Tub: A satire on corruption in religion & learning.

<sup>B.A. (H) Eng - Part II - Paper IV</sup>  
Jonathan Swift's objective in writing 'Tale of

'A Tub' is quite evident from his own explanation in 'An Apology' to the Tale. He points out that his objective was to be a satire the numerous and gross corruption in Religion and Learning. By the corruption of Religion he implies the corruption of Roman Catholic Church and the Dissenters. By the corruption of Learning is meant the corruption of modern learning and writers as opposed to the ancient one. The corruptions of Religion are exposed through the allegory of three brothers with their coats, while those of Learning are dealt in digressions.

As a matter of fact, the Tale is an allegorical story of the Church, right from the days of Christ down to the various dissensions in Europe. The allegorical characters are an old man and his three sons. The old man stands for Christ and the sons, Peter, Martin and Jack, represent Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and Dissenters, respectively. Before his death, the old man gave Coats (Religion) to his sons which were to grow by wearing and directed them not to permit any change in them. He also gave them his will, the Bible, and instructed them to live united and strictly follow the tenets of the will. But the sons disobeyed their father. They fell into the clutches of their ladies, the Duchesse d'Argent, Madame de Grands Teters and the Countess d'Orgueil - representing Covetousness, ambition and Pride. Consequently, they transformed themselves into fashionable Cavaliers. In their anxiety to get the favour of the

(2)

world, they locked the Well. Thus the original tenets of Christianity were ignored and Religion was exploited by the brethren as it pleased their whims. When the Bible was neglected, Religion had to degenerate in the hands of profligate Clergy.

The sons became fashionable, but their coats were plain with no decoration. So, in defiance to their father's instruction, they decorated their coats with different articles of fashion. These decorative articles symbolise inclusions of superfluous elements in religion. For example, 'Shoulder Knobs' symbolises elaboration of rituals and pageantry in the Church. 'Silver and gold Laces' and 'fringes' stand for clergy's ardent love for money. Figures of men, women and children show the additions of idols in the Romish Church. Peter, being the eldest son, brought about all such innovations in the Church. He read more meanings in the original Text than was warranted, ~~that~~ thus using the Bible as a convenient expedient.

Peter became more arrogant and introduced various new things in the Romish Church. Some of them were the inventions of Purgatory, prescription of penances, Confession and indulgences of sinners, Papal Bulls and the doctrine of Absolution of even murderers on payment of money. Swift humorously terms them as the projects of brother Peter. As a result, the Pope gathered all power and called himself the Vicar of Christ on earth. He often regarded himself as God Almighty and sometimes the Monarch of the Universe.

(3)

See Swift's invective against the Catholic Church, where he refers to the sprinkling of holy water on the subjects as a preservative:

"For Peter would put in a certain quantity of his powder pimper limpsomp, after which it never failed of success. . . . The patient who was to be pickled, if it were a horse would infallibly be preserved from all spiders, rats and measles."

The outrageous and tyrannous behaviour of Peter compelled Martin and Jack to break away from him. This signifies the reformation and the open break with the Church of Rome. Now Martin and Jack stripped off the decorative articles from their coats. They tried to return to their original state. Here, Martin was moderate and did not meddle with the coat, whereas Jack behaved as an extremist and zealot. In a state of fit, he rent the main body of the coat. Thus, the Dissenters were reactionary and in the name of purification, they damaged Religion. Swift's anger is obvious in his contemptuous reference to Jack's clumsy actions:

" . . . in a great rage, he tore off the whole piece of cloth and all, and flung it into the Kennel. . . . "

Swift also paints a disgusting picture of numerous dissenting groups among the Puritans. He describes them through various nick-names, such as mad Jack, Jack the Balot, Knocking Jack, Jack of the

Tarantule: a kind of spider.

(4)

North etc. In fact, Marlin was careful and kept the coat intact, while Jack was violent and distorted the coat by rashly removing the decorative articles. Jack became so frantic that he started hating even painting and music.

"He was troubled by a disease, reverse to that called the slinging of the tarantule; and would run de-mad at the noise of music."

Thus, it is quite clear that Swift here satirises Corruptions in Religion and Learning. He becomes a little more harsh towards the innovations of Roman Catholic Church and distortion of Religion by the Dissenters. In Learning, his sarcastic comments are found in digressions when he talks of his contemporary writers and critics who are shallow bal-puffed with pride.