



A. E. Coppard's *Fifty Pounds*: An Examination of the Loneliness of Two Minds

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Abstract: *Fifty Pounds* is an excellent short story by A. E. Coppard. The story concerns two characters namely Philip Repton and Eulalia Burnes (Lally) who love each other and are living together without matrimonial bond. Their relationship begins after Repton finds Lally in distress and helps her. Thus, they were lonely before they met each other. This article seeks to explore how the sense of loneliness is a dominant theme in this story. If read thoroughly, it is noticeable that the story begins with the idea of loneliness and ends with the same idea. They feel loneliness even when they are together as despite being together for several months, they are unable to understand each other as somehow, they are more concerned about themselves and their own thoughts and minds rather than that of the other person. The titular fifty pounds is largely responsible for their future life of loneliness. Then, their loneliness is the result of their ego, misunderstandings, emotional aloofness and rash judgements. Circumstances are also responsible for their feeling of loneliness. How much they struggle to endow their lives with a meaning by trying to lead a peaceful and happy life together, they fail in their attempts. Thus, this article also explores how their fight against loneliness reflects their enactment of absurd life.

Index Terms - Loneliness, fifty pounds, misunderstandings, circumstances, absurd.

I. Introduction

The story *Fifty Pounds* by A. E. Coppard deals with the relationship between two people, namely Philip Repton and Eulalia Burnes (Lally). They are in love and are living without the bond of marriage. The story revolves round the idea of loneliness. They had been lonely before they began their journey together. But after spending several months together they are separated because of some of their inherent nature as well as certain circumstances which they find overwhelming and uncontrollable. The fifty pounds of the title plays a crucial role in their relationship. Though Repton may seem selfish because he keeps Lally's money without making her aware of this, it cannot not be the case. If he were such a kind of person, he would not have helped her in her time of distress or would not have loved her at all and that also to the extent of madness. Repton also has his faults in not realizing the love of Lally and vice versa. Guided by their own thoughts and feelings they try to make the other person happy in their own way, but they cannot realize that that may not make the other person happy. Their ego and misunderstandings cause a breach in their relationship and lead them to their lives of loneliness.

II. Scope of the Research

Fifty Pounds by A. E. Coppard is an excellent story that opens immense possibilities for the exploration of the human mind. But very few analyses of the story have been made and those also, in a way, are not in detail. And again, no attention has been given to a specific aspect of the story, i.e. loneliness of the two characters who are extremely sensitive to each and every situation, word (spoken by the other person) or incident in their lives. The research seeks to explore how loneliness is a key point here as the story revolves round the idea of loneliness. The aim of the research is to make a thorough analysis of the sense of loneliness

with an interpretation of the two sensitive minds from different aspects. Within this scope, this article also includes various textual quotations as well as quotes of different writers or critics.

III. Analysis of the Essence of Loneliness along with the Inherent Nature of the Characters

Money acts as a powerful mediator in Repton and Lally's relationship. It was money (or the need for money) that brought them together and later this same entity breaks their relationship. He came to her like an angel who "... picked her up at a time when she was drifting about London without a penny in her purse, without even a purse, and he had not yet put her down" (Coppard, *Fifty Pounds* 157). So, the need for money helps them find their partner for each other. Thus, they have become close because of the need for money and again this need for money sets themselves apart from each other. Even the very title of the story *Fifty Pounds* hints at the fact that it is this fifty pounds that largely shapes their relationship. And at the end, they return to their respective worlds experiencing loneliness once again.

From the very beginning of the story the use of the negative terms such as "gloomy", "precarious", "dark", "drooping", "bleak", "drifting about" and "put...down" can be a clue to the fact that in spite of leading their lives together everything is not well in the matter of the relationship between Repton and Lally. Even, one of the articles written by Repton is referred to as "The Futility of this, that, and the other" (Coppard, *Fifty Pounds* 157) that conveys a similar sense. Again, the colour of Lally's hair is 'brown' that may suggest a sense of loneliness and melancholy. Then, there are certain words put into the mouth of Lally and Repton carrying with them a sense that they are fated to be lonely. The very term "damn" uttered by Lally as well the word "deuce" uttered by Repton suggest the impending doom in their relationship. And the moment becomes the turning point in her life when she receives the news that she has been entitled to a legacy of eighty pounds on account of the will of her aunt who has passed away recently. The use of the term "sombre den" (Coppard, *Fifty Pounds* 164) in the context of her being introduced to the white-haired gentleman can suggest that she is going to enter some gloomy and serious part of her life.

Failure to excel in the literary world leads to their failure in relationship based on love. However, they try to be together, they cannot avoid their ultimate consequence i.e. loneliness. A certain line is worth quoting in this context: "Repton had done all he could; he wrote unceasingly, all day, all night, but all his projects insolvently withered, and morning, noon, and evening brought his manuscripts back as unwanted as snow in summer" (Coppard, *Fifty Pounds* 158). Indeed, Repton had tried his best to make a place for himself in the arena of authorship and through this also to maintain their relationship, but he failed in both these as "all his projects insolvently withered". Again, a certain part of this line "brought his manuscripts back as unwanted as snow in summer" also requires interpretation. The rejection of his manuscripts by the editors suggests going "back" to their earlier state – the state of being lonely before they meet for the first time. The phrase "snow in summer" also needs attention in this regard. As is explored by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, summer is always associated with the romance as literary mode. Thus, this phrase signifies the inherent or inevitable coldness ("snow") in the peak of their romantic relationship ("summer").

In the story the loneliness of the characters is the result of their own inherent nature or trait. Their ego, misunderstandings, emotional aloofness and rash judgements are largely responsible for their separation. In the case of Repton, it is his "nervous shrinking pride" (Coppard, *Fifty Pounds* 159) that becomes responsible for his loneliness. He does not possess a spirit to ask for anything he needs as "he was actually too proud to ask anyone for assistance!" (Coppard, *Fifty Pounds* 159) and it accounts for his failure in the literary world and his ultimate state of being a stranger in the field of authorship. This same trait of him is responsible for his loneliness and separation from Lally as his failure in the literary field compels Lally to part from him in search of a job. At the same time, another comment regarding Repton deserves attention here: "Only Lally knew his need, but why could not other people see it – those villainous editors!" (Coppard, *Fifty Pounds* 159). The underlying irony can be noted here. It is quite ironical that not to say of other people (including the editors), Lally who is well aware of Repton's need, cannot understand or realize his need or even his mind at all. So, misunderstandings and ego lie at the very heart of their relationship. Here is a part of their conversation:

'No, no, I can't have that, my dear....'

'But I will!' she cried. 'O, why are you so proud?'

'Proud! Proud!' He stared into the gas-fire,...'You don't understand....' (Coppard, *Fifty Pounds* 159).

So, in a way, Lally cannot understand him. At this moment, indeed, he is not guided by his feeling of pride. He himself expresses his astonishment when Lally accuses him of this trait. All he wants is only to be with her: "I just love you, Lally, that's all, and of course I want to keep you here" (Coppard, *Fifty Pounds* 162).

But, now and then, Lally mistakes his words as an expression of his pride. Again, if Lally is just accusing Repton of having excessive pride in himself, the same can be said of her. Lally is too proud to listen to the earnest and sincere words of her partner and though Repton tries his best to dissuade her from her decision of leaving him to take a job in Glasgow, she remains adamant in her decision as she herself says: "...I've a pride, too, I'm a burden to you" (Coppard, *Fifty Pounds* 160). On the other hand, it must be said at the same time that Repton also is unable to assess her correctly as he takes her literal words too seriously. Certainly, Lally is not too serious when she calls him "proud" as immediately after that she hears him discoursing without any boredom rather with a feeling of love and admiration for him.

There is another factor working behind their separation that also cannot be undervalued. Repton helped Lally unconditionally or without any self-interest. He did not expect anything in return. But Lally on her part remembers his favour at a crucial stage of her life. So, in a way, she wants to repay him by doing a favour to him by giving him money. From her part, she is not wrong in her doing as his help has made a lasting impression on her mind and as a result, she is deeply in love with him and that is why she wants to take him out of his depressed situation so that they can lead a happy life together. But, on the other hand, Repton is a person with artistic talent whose sensitive nature cannot receive money as a returned favour and at the same time he cannot hurt her openly as he loves her too much and so he does not tell her anything about the fifty pounds. His silence makes Lally analyze him negatively. Thus, they misunderstand each other and their misunderstanding leads to their separation and loneliness.

Repton and Lally's emotional aloofness also becomes largely responsible for their life of separation and loneliness. Neither of them can truly realize the intensity of the feeling of the other and this leads towards their separation and loneliness. So, even though they live together, in a way, they are lonely. In spite of being together for several months, they are somewhat reserved in the expression of their feelings and minds. They cannot talk to each other openly as they are too concerned about their own thought process, their ego, their attitude and in doing so they are almost oblivious to the other person's thoughts, needs and requirements. These traits inherent in their characters are also responsible for their misunderstanding, separation and the consequent loneliness.

The reason behind their loneliness may also lie with the persons' altogether different temperaments. Repton aspires to be a writer. He does not want to equate creativity with money and that is why when he receives money from Lally he becomes totally silent on this matter. Though he realizes the genuine and innocent intention of his beloved, inwardly he feels deeply hurt by her doing. He is also overwhelmed with terrible agony, realizing the imminent breach in their relationship as he cannot bear loneliness and so the day before her departure he adores her. On the other hand, Lally is content to lead a simple, happy, prosperous and peaceful life and yearns for a true romantic relationship with him. She also feels deep shock seeing him adamant as she also wants to be in his company and fears loneliness. But in the end, she herself becomes determined to leave him as "No woman waits to be sacrificed, least of all those who sacrifice themselves with courage and a quiet mind" (Coppard, *Fifty Pounds* 175). So, she parts from him even though this may take her to a state of utter loneliness. Thus, the conflict between their temperaments causes their separation and loneliness.

Circumstances are also responsible for the characters' loneliness. It is adverse circumstances that bring Repton and Lally together and at last, they drift away from each other in a crucial situation. Both of them want to make the other happy within his/her own dream world – Repton, by earning fame in literary world; Lally by earning money through getting a job. But they cannot realize the fact that the matter that pleases oneself may not please the other. Again, they are too sensitive to each pain, blow or sorrow of life and in a way this trait also leads to their state of loneliness. At certain point Lally says – "It will never be any different, I feel it will never be different now, and it terrified me" (Coppard, *Fifty Pounds* 161). And these words of Lally reveals her lack of patience and her intense sensitivity to pain. Repton also, says, "I've so many misfortunes, I suppose I can bear this, too" (Coppard, *Fifty Pounds* 163). This also reflects his deeply sensitive and mournful reaction to life's sufferings.

IV. The Ending and Its Significance

Earlier in the story Repton is described as such: "...he was like a wounded animal that hid its woe far away from the rest of the world" (Coppard, *Fifty Pounds* 159). Thus, Repton cannot disclose his mind and heart even at last. He cannot disclose his mind in front of the editors, and he cannot reveal his heart even to his beloved Lally though this may result in losing her. He has been deeply hurt by Eulalia's decision to leave

him for a job and continually he has tried to change her mind. But after continual failing in this regard also, he inwardly changes his mind and decides not to interrupt her in her new journey of life though it may cause profound shock in him. But Lally misunderstands him and passes rash judgement on him: "So that is what he is like, after all. Cruel and mean!" (Coppard, *Fifty Pounds* 170). The reader can see through the terrible pain he is undergoing when he says this to Lally before her departure: "What time does your train go?" (Coppard, *Fifty Pounds* 175). So, Lally is quite unable to understand him, and she decides to leave him. On the other hand, Repton also can be accused of not understanding Lally. He is unable to realize the deep and sincere love of Lally for him and that is why he cannot understand that she is willing to leave him for a job only to take themselves out of the crucial situation. Thus, not only the outward circumstances, but their inherent nature is also responsible for the ending, incorporating loneliness for both.

Admitting all these essences, there can be another hidden meaning in the way the story ends. They part so that they can be together again after realizing their faults and can begin their life together anew. So, they think of leading their lonely lives after the relational turmoil with the mutual hope that after being separated, the other person would be aware of the limitations inherent in him/her after going through a kind of self-reflection and thus ultimately they would be able to resume their much more perfect lives together full of mutual understanding and faith. Thus, it can be said that they embrace their lonely life in the hope of being united again with the deepest realization of the meaning of life and relationship.

V. The Reflection of Absurdism

In a deeper level, the story raises such question as to whether the characters' loneliness points towards absurdism or not. The answer is, yes. According to the French existentialist Albert Camus, human beings' condition is like that of Sisyphus of the Greek myth who was condemned to move a boulder up a mountain only to descend and start again and again without an end. To quote his own words: "The workman of today works everyday in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd" (Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*). In a way, Repton and Lally's situations and their fight against loneliness reflect their enactment of absurd existence. Indeed, Repton's continual attempts to make a place for himself in the literary field and thus being able to be in the company of his beloved and his continual failure in this matter make a point for his absurd existence like Sisyphus of the Greek myth. Their fight against loneliness also proves futile as they are destined to be lonely in a universe which is devoid of any value or meaning. Again, Lally's search for identity brings nothing for her as it would be unable to endow her with peace and real happiness as it involves the loss of the company of Repton leading her to loneliness. In fact, Repton's endeavour to be an author or Lally's effort to secure a job for herself represent, in the words of Camus, "not the best living but the most living" (Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus, Absurd Freedom*).

M. H. Abrams writes in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, while presenting existential theories of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus that "...there was a widespread tendency...to represent human life – in its fruitless search for purpose and meaning, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end – as an existence which is both anguished and absurd" (Abrams, *Glossary* 1). In their attempt to fight against loneliness Repton and Lally move from a 'nothingness' to another 'nothingness'. In their endeavours to endow their lives with a sense or meaning they are in search of peace of mind by being together, but all this makes no sense as they are unable to find peace and happiness as they are fated to be lonely. Their fight against loneliness also turns futile. Thus, while they try to endow their lives with a sense or meaning, they fail and this very fact points towards the futility or absurdity of their existence on earth. Their attempts to find something for themselves come to nothing as all their attempts lead them only towards loneliness, destroying the peace and happiness of their lives and this reflects the essential absurdity of their existence. Probably they want to embrace their absurd condition by parting with each other.

In a way, the story can also be seen as a continuous attempt of the modern people to fight loneliness. They try their best to be together, but they fail to do this. In their attempt to avoid loneliness they are engaged in talking, blaming each other, or even saying something that may hurt the feeling or sentiment of the other person. As all their efforts go futile, these reflect their absurd existence.

VI. Conclusion

The events of the story *Fifty Pounds* are arranged in such a manner that the people begin with loneliness and end up in loneliness. By arranging the plot in such a manner, the author, perhaps, seeks to convey the fact that loneliness is inevitable in the life of the modern men and women who strive for achieving something in their life whether it may be a certain ideal or identity or even love. Thus, Repton cannot imagine “that she would be the first to break away” (Coppard, *Fifty Pounds* 163). Similarly, in the case of Lally, “it was the crushing of an ideal in which love had had its home” (Coppard, *Fifty Pounds* 174). Their ego, misunderstandings, emotional aloofness and even, the circumstances are largely responsible for their future life of loneliness. As Camus says, “The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness” (Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus, Absurd Freedom*). However they try to endow their lives with a meaning, all their attempts end with a sense of futility or absurdity as all these (their attempts) result in loneliness.

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