Life Lessons — Life’s A Dream Essay, Research Paper

Life Lessons

These days, it seems that everything we encounter poses us

with a question; however, there is no more important question to

be answered than Life — what is it? Is it merely the days we

spend here on Earth, or is there some larger life that we all

aspire to? Though none of us can answer these questions, we

continue to plague ourselves with questions such as: What is it

to be alive? As humans are we subject to a predetermined fate,

or do we have free will, or is there really some combination

between the two? Life s A Dream takes these age old questions

and gives us answers; answers that are meant to serve as a lesson

for each of us in how we should live our lives.

Basilio believes the prophecy of the stars to be the fate

for his son Sigismund; thus, he locks Sigismund in a dungeon

depriving him of two very important tenants that are essential to

growth as a human being, social interaction and love. On a

somewhat selfish whim, Basilio releases Sigismund in hope of

defying this destiny; however, he quickly sees that Sigismund s

behavior seems to be fulfilling the prophecy that has already

been laid out by the stars. Basilio decides to re-imprison

Sigismund, forcing his only son back into a dungeon to believe

that his single day of real freedom was only a dream. His

decision is an attempt to keep his kingdom peaceful, but his plan

backfires when the citizens of his country rise against him to

fight for Sigismund, the rightful heir to the throne, to assume

his duty as their king. Sigismund, disoriented and in a state of

suspended disbelief after awakening from a drug-induced sleep, is

freed by the citizens and goes after his crown and revenge upon

his father stating, I am as my stars make me (III, I, 162).

The reader, or audience, assumes that fate is at work and the

prophecy will come true; however, Pedro Calderon de la Barca

subtly foreshadows the reversal of our expectation in Clotaldo s

lesson to Sigismund:

But you would do well, even in your dreams,

To honour those who care for you each day.

Kindness is never wasted, even in dreams,

And gentleness is never thrown away,

(II, ii, 81).

Because of this subtle foreshadowing, we are pleased to discover

that Sigismund has, in fact, learned from his dream and his

advisor, Clotaldo. His remark shows that he denies his own

selfish desire for revenge; thus, not only does he change his

fate by free will, but he manages to restore honor to Poland s

royalty: My soul cries out for vengeance but I see my victory

must be my own surrender (III, ii, 222).

But what does all of this really mean? What are we to learn

about fate and free will? The lessons are in the text, and there

are several embedded in the speeches of various characters.

Pedro Calderon de la Barca must have been a wise man to answer

such puzzling questions in a solitary piece of literary art. I

believe that his assertion, and my own, is that life is a gift,

much like our dreams, and a window to the bigger picture of

eternity, which is our fate:

In this strange world to live s a kind of

dreaming

And each of us must dream the thing he is

Till he awakes. The King dreams he s a King…

For every King that rules men in his King-dream

Must wake at last in the cold sleep of death….

And what is real is nothing, and a man

Is nothing neither…. It is all a dream

(II, ii, 88).

This is the underlying meaning of this play, and thus, the link

to nearly every other play we have read; the ancient Greeks that

taught us of fate, the easterners that taught us that we must

submit to the natural order, the humanity plays that taught us to

have faith in something greater than ourselves (God). Pedro

Calderon de la Barca manages to bring all of these former lessons

together to teach us the duality of this small experience of life

on the grand scale of eternity. Like the Greeks, he teaches us

that fate does exist in death – we will all die; it s an

inescapable fact. Furthermore, like the easterners, he teaches

us to submit to a higher, natural order:

A learned man s the victim of his learning,

For he who has foreknowledge of his fate

Murders himself…, (I, ii, 91).

We are not supposed to know what lies ahead, that s why we are

given free will. If we knew the path we were supposed to take,

we would not have free will. It is this free will that

distinguishes us from all other species; the only predestination

we have is death; our eternity is chosen by us through the

choices we make in this life. This idea lends itself to the

Christian teaching in the humanity plays Abraham and Isaac and

Everyman, asserting that while fate and free will both exist,

what is important is our faith in eternal life and that we live

our lives so that we may die in peace and go to heaven. In

Sigismund s speech at the end of act three, scene one, he

transforms from the student to the teacher when he states:

…What matters is to try

To do what is right.

Then if it is real

Right justifies itself,

And if it is unreal

It does no harm to have

Some credit up in heaven

It may be useful on the day

That we awake and end the play,

(III, I, 165).

Here we learn that life is like a play and a dream; it is short

in comparison to eternity, and serves merely as practice for it.

As Christians, our belief in eternal life in heaven or hell is a

driving force in life that is fueled only by our faith with

absolutely no proof. Because Sigismund treats his new life in

faith that it is not a dream, he will reap the reward he so

desires. It is his fear of being re-imprisoned that parallels

the Christian fear of eternal damnation, both of which are held

in faith to be avoided.

Basilio teaches us through his own error; he thought he

could cheat fate, and when he thinks he cannot, he admits, I ran

away, and ran to what I ran from. I hid a thing, and hiding it I

found it (III, ii, 43). The lesson we gain from Basilio is that

we cannot escape fate, and by asserting that the only fate we

know is death, we realize our mortality and submit ourselves to a

higher order. We use our free will as a compass to guide us

through our life here on Earth and even though we know that we

will die, it is our actions in life that will determine where we

live eternally. Because the evolved Sigismund chooses to deny

himself revenge, he wins himself the crown, and in doing so

restore Rosaura s honour, makes Estrella a queen, and allows

Basilio to watch his legitimate heir assume the role of King.

Therefore, the prophecy is a hoax because the only predetermined

fate is death, and when Sigismund does ascend to the throne he

proves to be even more learned and great than his father.

Each of us should have taken from this play a valuable

lesson on how to live so that our fate may be favorable. I

believe whole-heartedly that this was Pedro Calderon de la

Barca s intention in writing this play. Sigismund, a monster, is

symbolic of his own tormented self, and his moment of desengano

is symbolic of the reconciliation between his own passions and

the higher order:

I believe now that all human lives

Are just like dreams. They come, they go.

Perfection is impossible, we know.

Then noble hearts, show mercy thus,

And for our worst faults gently pardon us

(III, ii, 281).

Barca s lesson for us is the same as it was for Sigismund. The

ultimate fate is death – the only predestination; everything else

is up to us. Should we choose to have faith and live right,

eternal happiness shall be ours.