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ENGL-2630

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12/9/15

Too Loud a Solitude

Bohumil Hrabal’s book, “Too Loud a Solitude”, Hanta is a compactor of wastepaper and books. For 35 years Hanta had been doing this job, but he had also been doing other things, saving the books of famous and influential authors. He sucked up the books like he did with his drinking problem, he got every last drop, “I pop a beautiful sentence into my mouth and suck it like a fruit drop, or I sip it like liqueur until the thought dissolves in me like alcohol…” (1). Hanta also states the fact that, for 35 years, he has been compacting wastepaper and books throughout the whole book many times. Why would he state it so many times that he had been doing that job for 35 years? Does he regret it? Does he enjoy it? It has made me think why he wanted to keep doing this same thing so much. In this paper, I intend to explain why I think Hanta states this fact so many times.

Hanta is a sort of figure that most people do not run into. Mainly because he is never the one to get out much. He tends to either be at his job, saving and destroying books, or he is at home, drinking beer and reading his collection of books he has saved over the years. This has lead Hanta to not really having many friends or interacting with much. The only interaction he has are with the mice in the sewers, and the compactor in which he destroys books. This makes it seem like the reason he states that he’s been working there for 35 years so much, because that it is all he has, and a valid reason for his statement of, “For thirty-five years now I’ve been in wastepaper, and it’s my love story.” (1).

Hanta always saved books from the compactor as he feels the ones that are famous or respectable should be kept safe and should live on. He reads many of the books that he compacts as well, so they may live on in some way. His house is filled with over one ton of books he has saved from the compactor, enough so that they might collapse and kill him. For thirty-five years he has been, “the destroyer of the written word, yet also its perpetrator” (Ramkumar), And maybe that is why he states it so many times, because he wants people to know that he has been this person for so long, and he does not want anyone to forget.

I do not believe Hanta loved his job, but he loved collecting the books and the information. He enjoyed discovering the constant war of the rats and the mice, and compared many things to the poop he found in the sewers. He never paid attention to the compactor more than he did to his surroundings. He could have hated his job, but he went to it anyway because of the benefits he got from it. He could have said he worked there for so long so many times because he wants people to know he hated his job, but loved the books instead.

Hanta was an alcoholic and would always drink beer upon beer when he arrived back home from work. He even claims that he has drank so much, he could fill an entire pool. At the same rate of his alcoholism, he would absorb books as well. He read books so thoroughly that he would get the same feeling as alcohol gave him. It could be that books were some sort of cure for his extreme alcoholism for while he was at work, to calm his mind and keep him sane while he mindlessly destroyed these books for so long. Even though he would go home and immediately open a beer, it could have helped him stop if he had realized he could read more than he drank, and possibly filled a library with the information he gathered from those books for thirty-five years.

Hantas life was quite lonely in a way. He only focused on saving books, and observing the rats in the sewers. He may of not realized how lonely he was because, “The books are his friends, occupying his house…” (Auerbach). He could have easily forgotten the real world because he was so absorbed in his books, and so engaged in keeping them with him that he felt like he did not need anything else, and for thirty-five years he did that. For thirty-five years, he wanted us to see his loneliness.

It is surprising to me that Hanta never really seemed bothered by the fact he was destroying so many books. He loved reading them and saving them, but he never clearly expresses if he hated destroying them, or if it didn’t bug him if the book wasn’t good, famous or influential in any way. Was Hrabal trying to say something about Hanta and his personality? Did he want us to think maybe for all this time Hanta really did regret destroying these books by his own hands, or did he want us to think that Hanta did not care, and was just doing it for the money, and maybe to get free books. It is a question that I get every once in awhile thinking about the book. Maybe Hanta wanted to tell someone, but he never got the chance.

Hanta learned a lot from being a compactor. Not from compacting, but from the books he was able to read over the years. “From his ton of salvaged books he has gleaned an encyclopedic knowledge of classical learning and contemporary philosophy…” (Corbett). Corbett references the ton of books in his house, and states that he has encyclopedic knowledge, which is a pretty heavy statement. He is saying that Hanta has learned a world of knowledge that others may not have even bothered to learn. In a way, Corbett says that Hanta is the one person you would go to if you wanted to learn about classical learning and philosophy, by calling it an encyclopedic knowledge. Hrabal could have wanted us to know that Hanta wanted to state that he wanted us to know he has gained thirty-five years of knowledge from these books.

Hanta also observed rats in the sewers, and the little war they had going on with the mice. Hrabal could have kept talking about this war between the mice and the rats to show what was really going on in the world at the time Hanta was in. The socialists had just started their reign in Prague and wanted to rid of the art and books, but there were people who did not want any of that. You could call the socialists the rats, and the people the mice, as the socialists were always the bigger people in the situation. Hrabal wanted us to know that Hanta saw this for thirty-five years and saw a connection possibly with what was going on outside of the compactor.

Towards the end of the book, Hanta visits a new compacting press nearby and he can not believe what he sees, “By now I had calmed down enough to realize that the machine compacted and baled whole runs of books, and through glass walls I could see trucks pulling up with boxes of books piled to the brim, the entire printing of a book going straight into the pulper before a single page could be sullied by the human eye, brain or heart. Only now did I see the workers at the foot of the conveyor belt tearing open boxes taking the virgin books out of them, pulling the covers off, and tossing the naked insides on the belt, and it didn’t matter what page they fell open to: nobody ever looked into them, nobody even dreamed of looking into them, because whereas I stopped my press all the time, they had to keep the beast full and moving. It was inhuman.” (Corbett). This quote just shows Hantas feelings after seeing this new press. The amount of effort people had to put into it was less than his, and it just seemed like they didn’t care about what they were throwing out. They just did their job without even taking a look at the book. For thirty-five years, Hanta had been compacting and reading, only to be replaced by people who don’t care.

If Hanta wanted us to know something by repeating the phrase, “For thirty-five years now I have been compacting wastepaper…” (1), he never said it clearly. From what you can see, he really seemed down that all of this was happening, and he did not want this to be his life anymore. It seems as if he regrets doing this for thirty-five years, and wanted to put an end to this cruel treatment. Hanta did put an end to it, by closing off his own story and doing to himself, what he had been doing to wastepaper for thirty-five years.

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