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CLASS : X

SUBJECT : ENGLISH LITERATURE

POEM - 1

HAUNTED HOUSES

BY : H.W. Longfellow

Critical Analysis :

Haunted Houses was published in 1858 in the Birds of Passage collection of Longfellow's poems. It is acknowledged by many critics that it may have been influenced by the loss of Longfellow's first wife to a miscarriage when he was 24 years old. But it foreshadowed an even more devastating loss when his second wife, Frances, with whom he had lived 18 years of happy marriage, died only a few years after its publication when her dress caught fire while sealing a letter with wax.

Longfellow is most likely thinking of houses in Cambridge, Massachusetts where he lived for many years. Longfellow's assertion in the poem is that all houses are haunted but they are comforting rather than menacing because of the fact that those we have loved and lost can still walk into our houses and our lives, so long as they live in our memories.

THE POEM IN DETAIL :

STANZA-1 : The speaker begins with a simple but surprising statement that all

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houses in which men have lived and died are haunted, i.e., they are visited by the ghosts or spirits of earlier occupants. The poet has dispelled the conventional image of ghosts by describing them as 'harmless phantoms' who are busy with errands and move purposefully around the house as they did when they were living. Further, they come and go without making any sound.

STANZA 2:

The speaker says that these ghosts are 'impressions on the air' that cannot be felt (by touch). They can be present anywhere in the house: at the doorway, on the stairs or along the passage when they come and go. Though they cannot be seen, their presence is felt as a 'sense of something' moving to and fro.

STANZA 3:

The presence of the ghosts can be perceived when they join the guests at the dining table and make the number of guests more than those invited by the hosts. In fact, the brightly lit hall appears crowded by these unwanted guests, who remain as silent as the pictures or portraits hung on the wall. The poet uses simile to bring out this similarity.

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STANZA 4:

The speaker then goes on to say that a stranger or guest, sitting with the speaker by the fire place, is unable to perceive their presence (ghosts presence) as the speaker does. The speaker is the one, who can see their form (i.e., the impression of their presence) and hear their sounds. He believes that the stranger can only see what is happening in the present but the speaker can see everything clearly from the past to the present. This is perhaps suggestive of the fact that the stranger is the present occupant of the house.

STANZA 5:

The speaker affirms that we (living human beings) do not have any permanent 'title-deeds' for our houses and lands. This is because those who were the owners and occupants earlier they spread their soiled (weary) hands from the forgotten graves to claim the permanent ownership of the properties once owned by them.

STANZA 6:

The world of spirits floats around the human world of 'senses' or the real world like the air of atmosphere envelops the earth. This world (i.e. the world of spirits) passes through

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everything like earthly mists and dense vapours. It is like the vital breath of delicate air from the other world.

STANZA 7.

The speaker here talks about human life. He says that human lives are short and are kept in balance by maintaining 'opposite attractions and desires'. There are two types of instincts - base instincts - that seek worldly pleasures and enjoyment and noble instincts - that aspire for higher and noble goals and spiritual aims. Human beings have to learn to deal with these contradictory impulses to achieve equilibrium or balance in life.

STANZA 8.

The speaker here describes the cause of anxiety and fears in human beings. According to the poet mental disturbances, anxieties and fears of human beings are the result of their earthly needs and high aspirations.

Those human beings who cannot maintain a balance between their earthly desires and high aspirations are affected by these perturbations.

He also stresses the fact that these desires are not the creation of human beings but are shaped by some unknown forces from a remote

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planet in the universe. The poet refers to this 'an undiscovered planet in our sky' to give a reason why human beings are tempted to have more of earthly desires than nobler or spiritual desires.

STANZA 9.

In the ninth stanza of the poem the speaker says that as the moon comes out of the dark clouds, its light falls on the sea waves and forms a floating bridge of light. The world of spirits is connected by the bridge of light to the earth. This bridge is made up of moonlight floating across the sea waves. It is floating because of the water of the sea. Human imagination in a similar way travels across the planks of this 'trembling' bridge into a dark and mysterious world. This bridge connects us (humans) to the spirit of our loved ones, who have gone long ago. The 'unsteady floor' of the bridge can be crossed only by these immortal beings and not the human beings.

STANZA 10.

The speaker here says that there is a bridge of light that connects the 'world of spirits' to the floating bridge created by the moonlight on the surface of the sea. Only spirits are able to cross this bridge. Our thoughts or our

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memories float on the unsteady floor of this bridge that is above a dark abyss (something very deep and profound) or the deep chasm of despair and depression.

The memories of our loved ones keep us connected to them long after they have gone. These memories keep the living beings away from falling into deep sorrow that is like a dark abyss.

Thus the benevolent spirits of our loved ones remain in our heart, our memories and our homes loving, reassuring and protecting us.

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