



# ALAGAPPA UNIVERSITY

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KARAIKUDI – 630 003



# ONLINE PROGRAMMES

**M.A. [English]**

**I - Semester**

205211

**POETRY**

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## INTRODUCTION

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### NOTES

Poetry cannot really be defined in specific terms. It is a form of expression that involves vivid imagination and creativity. Poetry, irrespective of the form it takes, helps us come to terms with not just change but also joy and sorrow. It helps us appreciate nature and the extraordinary energy and beauty that exist in the mundane objects, activities and routines of daily life.

Poetry, simply put, can be said to be any literary work which is used to express feelings and ideas. The use of a distinct style and the play of words to form a pleasing rhythm make reading poetry a very pleasant experience. This genre of literature has evolved over the years showing a marked difference in the works of modern poets and ancient poets. This book helps students appreciate the popular works of poets such as Wordsworth, Robert Browning, Emily Dickinson, A.K. Ramanujan, Jayant Mahapatra, Wole Soyinka and several others.

This book, *Poetry* has been divided into fourteen units. The book has been written in keeping with the self-instructional mode or the SIM format wherein each unit begins with an Introduction to the topic, followed by an outline of the Objectives. The detailed content is then presented in a simple and organized manner, interspersed with Check Your Progress Questions to test the student's understanding of the topics covered. A Summary along with a list of Key Words, set of Self Assessment Questions and Exercises and Further Readings is provided at the end of each unit for effective recapitulation.

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**BLOCK - I**  
**POETRY I-IV**

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*Edmund Spenser and  
John Donne*

**NOTES**

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**UNIT 1 EDMUND SPENSER AND  
JOHN DONNE**

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**Structure**

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**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

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Edmund Spenser wrote *Prothalamion* as a song celebrating the marriage of Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset. The theme of celebration in the poem featured the River Thames, the river has been used not only as a symbol but it provides the setting as well. The poet has drawn the images and vision of beauty from the river, like nymphs gathering flower crowns for the two sisters. The narrator has used various classical deities in order to elevate the poem. Written in a long verse, in *Prothalamion*, Spenser uses a continuous thought. There is a sense of completeness where Nature is paired with the supernatural. Poet's ability to bring in numerous images makes this a beautiful poem.

*The Canonization* is a poem written by metaphysical poet John Donne. Though, it does relate itself with the intricacies of romantic love: the narrator shows us the new aspect of love as an all-consuming feeling. The title of the poem has two motives: while the speaker claims that his love will canonize

## NOTES

him into a form of sainthood, the poem by itself serves as a canonization of the lovers' pair. His love poems and sonnets are marked by multiplicity of attitudes and moods.

Written in a light verse, John Donne's *The Sun Rising* is an amusing poem. It is a sincere expression of the poet's deep sense of the beauty and perfection of his loved one. Its final objective is to express the poet's feeling of happiness and completeness in the possession of his mistress. The tones of the poem, and the changes and developments of the tone, are of great importance. The poem begins with a rhetorical arrogant address and treats the sun irreverently. The poet claims that, with a wink of his eyes, he can eclipse and cloud the sun. Love transcends time, and so the poet-lover feels a scorn for the sun which is an index of passing time.

The unit aims at understanding these poems written by Edmund Spenser and John Donne and also critically analyze them.

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### 1.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand poems written by Edmund Spenser and John Donne
- Evaluate and critically analyse Edmund Spenser's *Prothalamion*
- List metaphysical poems by John Donne
- Explain the theme of John Donne's *The Canonization*
- Understand the treatment of love in John Donne's *The Sun Rising*

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### 1.2 EDMUND SPENSER: ABOUT THE POET

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Edmund Spenser is famous for his impressive poem *The Faerie Queene*. In this poem he has presented a fantastical allegory which celebrates the Tudor dynasty and Elizabeth I. The exact date of his birth is not known, it was sometime during 1552 or 1553 and he died very young on 13 January, 1599. He is regarded as foremost creator of nascent Modern English verse, and for his contributions, he is evaluated as one of the finest poets of English language.

During the latter part of the sixteenth century Spenser published several short poems about love and sorrow. He published a collection of poems titled as *Complaints* in 1591; the tone of poems of this collection were mournful and mocking complaints. In 1595, the poet published *Amoretti and Epithalamion*. It was a collection of eighty-nine sonnets which commemorated his courtship of Elizabeth Boyle. In "*Amoretti*," Spenser praised his beloved he used subtle humour as well as parody for this purpose. In "*Epithalamion*," he deals

with the apprehension which is felt in a romantic and sexual relationship. The collection was written for his young bride, Elizabeth Boyle. It has been assumed that the apprehensions reflected in the poem could have been the anxieties of the poet himself and this could be the reason for his failure to complete his most significant work, *The Faerie Queene*. Subsequently *Prothalamion* was released by Spenser it was written as a wedding song for the daughters of a duke, supposedly in hope to get favours in the court.

In spite of being well read in classical literature, scholars felt that Spenser's work was not traditional rather he had a very distinctive style. Spenser tried to follow ancient Roman poets like Virgil and Ovid; he had become familiar with their work while he was in studying. However several of his popular poems were remarkably different from his forerunner. He knowingly used archaic language in his poems as he greatly inspired the language of earlier works like *The Canterbury Tales* of Geoffrey Chaucer and *Il Canzoniere* of Francesco Petrarca.

Charles Lamb referred to Spenser as “the Poet's Poet” and he was greatly admired by John Milton, William Blake, William Wordsworth, John Keats, Lord Byron, and Alfred Lord Tennyson, and many more. In 1590, Walter Raleigh, one of the contemporary of Spenser wrote a commendatory poem to *The Faerie Queene*. Through this he regarded Spenser's work to be most valuable and admired his contributions to the English language. John Milton has regarded Spenser as sage of poetry in his *Areopagitica*, “our sage and serious poet Spenser, whom I dare be known to think a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas”. Alexander Pope during the eighteenth century equated Spenser to “a mistress”, as he felt that in spite of all her faults they are loved.

### 1.2.1 *Prothalamion*: Critical Analysis

Many describe Edmund Spenser's *Prothalamion* as the best marriage verses of all time, though less sensible than his *Epithalamion*. It is a lyrical and runs softly as musical rhyme. The entire verse is a pure magic: “Sweet Thames run softly till I end my song” which symbolizes life on earth to be steady in order to be able to listen to the eternal song. The artistic imagery, sweet music and lyrical power make *Prothalamion* an unparalleled product of the Renaissance. The poem brings a mode of five stresses which embraces the tonal quality of rivers and water bodies.

Through the verse, Spenser reflects fine classical imagery. The atmosphere of the poem brings in serene bliss, earnestness and joy. The poet brought in conventional imagery such as flowers, birds, rivers and woods. Two swans, represented as the daughters of Somerset, the brides. The swans embody purity, eternal bliss and contentment. With more classical imagery, Spenser adds the fights at the Spanish Armada by the Earl of Essex, Spenser's birth and livelihood in London. The moon (Cynthia), Venus, Nymphs, Cupid

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and Twins of Jove, Jupiter and Leda are other classical images which Spenser uses as metaphors. He also talks about the Muse (Goddess of Poetry) here meaning Spenser himself, to author a verse of merit to the Earl of Essex.

Dr. Johnson says that *Prothalamion* holds autobiographical lines of Spenser. As a Renaissance poet, Spenser shouldn't have done that and historical references do not always prove fruitful and enjoyable when it comes to poetry. Moreover, Spenser fails to bring the actual scene of marriage and instead concentrates more on the descriptive verse. Eventually, the content becomes less factual and dreamier with absence of the real brides. Significantly, *Epithalamion* revolves around the lovely wedlock of Spenser himself, thus making it more realistic and appealing.

### 1.2.2 Summary of the Poem

Spenser has written his poem, *Prothalamion* in the conventional form as it is a marriage song. The poet starts the poem by describing the Thames River, where the poet has located two beautiful maidens. The poet continues to admire the two maidens and gives them his blessings for their forthcoming marriages. In the first two lines of the poem,

*Calm was the day and through the trembling air  
The sweet breathing Zephyrus did softly play.*

The poet describes the day when he started writing the poem. He was standing on the banks of the Thames River and he found a group of nymphs collecting flowers for the new brides. The poet tells the readers that the nymphs are collecting flowers to make the bridal crowns for Elizabeth and Katherine. The poet uses the swans in the river to describe the myth of Jove and Leda. As per the myth, Jove falls in love with Leda and courts her by guising himself as a swan.

The poet felt that the Thames River has helped him by not only providing an ideal setting for his wedding song but the river has also helped in becoming the symbol in his poem. The soft flow of the river has provided the tempo of the poem and its beauty has helped in describing the beauty of marriage.

*"Sweet Thames run softly till I end my song."*

On several occasions the poem has been grouped with Spenser's poem about his own marriage, the *Epithalamion*. The poem is a long verse which was meant to be a wedding song for the duke's daughters. Spenser has used continuous thought instead of a divergent one. The narrator of the poem is the poet himself; Spenser did not follow the tradition and have one of the guests as the narrator or create a wedding director for the task in the poem. However, in an emblematic Renaissance style, the poet has addressed the Muses and referred to Titan, Jove and Venus. The stanzas of the poem are structured on the model of the Italian Canzone.



The use of continuous thought by the poet has helped in providing a sense of totality; the poetry starts before the dawn and advances into the day of the wedding and moves into the night with the newlyweds consummating their marriage along with the images of sun and night. These have been called upon the poet in order to watch over his bride and himself. In order to aid the sense of totality, the poet has used the motif of pairing the mortal man with the paranormal:

*And let fair Venus, that is queen of love,  
With her heart-quelling son upon you smile,  
Whose smile, they say, hath virtue to remove  
All love's dislike, and friendship's faulty guile  
For ever to assoil.*

The poet has included Christian symbols with pagan imagery and the Nature has been combined with the paranormal.

*Them heavenly born, or to be that same pair  
Which through the sky draw Venus' silver team;*  
The poet is referring to the swans in these lines.

### 1.2.3 Themes Used in the Poem

The poet has used numerous themes in his verse.

- (a) Several lines have been devoted to the beauty of nature as the poet has mentioned pastoral, sea, rivers and streams repeatedly in the poem. The following lines clearly exhibit the nature and its beauty:

*Along the shore of silver streaming Thames,  
Whose ruddy bank, the which his river hems,  
Was painted all with variable flowers,  
And all the meads adorned with dainty gems,*

- (b) The theme of marriage and togetherness :
- Received those two fair birds, their love's delight;  
Which, at th' appointed tide,  
Each one did make his bride*

- (c) Poet has used mythology and Christian folktale in few of the lines such as:

*Nor Jove himself, when he a swan would be*

- (d) The theme of political corruption is found in the following lines:

*In prince's court, and expectation vain  
Of idle hopes, which still do fly away*

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Spenser mentions his losing favours from the Earl of Leicester and the prevailing level of corruption in the courts.

There is no denying the fact that Spenser's *Prothalamion* is a wedding song, but at the same time, it presents an image of joyful celebration. The poet has been able to achieve this because of the melodious verse with its balance and lyricism. Spenser has proven that he is capable of summoning the impressive images of God, nature and its beauty, feeling of companionship and love effectively all through the poem.

### Check Your Progress

1. Why is Edmund Spenser primarily famous for?
2. List some of the themes of Spenser's *Prothalamion*.

## 1.3 JOHN DONNE: ABOUT THE POET

John Donne (1572-1631) was born in the Elizabethan England. He was born into a religious Catholic family in 1572. He was an extremely devout man who was persecuted as he was a Christian. Though Donne is reputed for his sonnets and love song, he had, in his early life, written religious poetry as well. His love poems and sonnets are marked by multiplicity of attitudes and moods. Metaphysics is a part of philosophy dealing with any subject that surpasses its traceability through the senses. Therefore, the mind, the time, free will, God and here, love, are all matters of metaphysical thought. *The Good Morrow* is a key sample of one of Donne's metaphysical poems.

According to John Dryden, he affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of love. In this, Mr. Cowley has copied him to a fault. Probably, the only writer before Dryden to speak of a certain metaphysical school or group of metaphysical poets is John Donne, Drummond of Hawthornden (1585–1649), who in one of his letters, speaks of 'metaphysical ideas and scholastic quiddities'.

John Donne is renowned for using conceits in his poetry. In *Valediction: Forbidden Mourning*, Donne tells his beloved not to shed tears and sighs because when she sheds tears she actually sheds her lover's blood and when she sighs, she sighs his soul away. Thus use of conceits leaves unforgettable impact of a poem. Donne incorporates the Renaissance conception of the human body as a microcosm into his love poetry. The Renaissance saw several people thinking that the macrocosmic physical world was reflected in the microcosmic human body. They believed that the body is ruled by the intellect just like a land is ruled by a king or queen.

He has also written Holy Sonnets. John Donne makes a plea to God which paradoxically mingles destruction and creation:

*Batter my heart, three-personed God; for You  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend:  
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.*

Here, paradox compels readers to think differently about the relation of God to men and women. In this it serves an intellectual function: to adjust the beliefs and values according to which the paradox first appeared contradictory.

### 1.3.1 John Donne's *The Canonization*: Summary

*The Canonization* is a poem written by metaphysical poet John Donne. It was published for the first time in 1633. It demonstrates Donne's wit and irony. In this poem one friend addresses another. Though, it does relate itself with the intricacies of romantic love: the narrator shows us the new aspect of love as an all-consuming feeling, for example lovers give up all other activities just to enjoy each other's company. In this case, love is harshness, which is the main conceit in the poem. The title of the poem has two motives: while the speaker claims that his love will canonize him into a form of sainthood, the poem by itself serves as a canonization of the lovers' pair.

In the poem, the speaker asks his addressee to remain calm, and permit him to love. If the addressee cannot put hold on his tongue, the speaker tells him to condemn him for other short-comings (other than his inclination to love): his gout, his palsy, his 'five grey hairs', or his ruined fortune. He chastises the addressee to take care of his own mind and his own wealth and to deem his position and replicate the other nobles ('Examine his Nobility or his Grace/or the King's real, or his stamped face/ Contemplate.') The speaker is least concerned about what the addressee tells or does, providing he lets him love. The speaker asks metaphorically, 'Who's wounded by my love?' He tells that his groans have not sunk ships, his tears haven't flooded places, his unfeeling have not chilled spring, and the fervour of his veins has not supplemented to the list of those killed by the plague. Soldiers still find battles and lawyers still find controversial men, despite the emotions of the orator and his lover.

The speaker says to his addressee to 'Call us what you will,' for it is love that fabricates them so. He tells that the addressee can 'Call her one, me another fly,' and that they are also like candles ('tapers'), which burn by feeding upon their own selves ('and at our own cost die'). In one another, the lovers find the eagle and the dove, and as one ('we two being one') they make clear to the enigma of the phoenix, for they 'die and rise the same,' at the same time as the phoenix does—though unlike the phoenix, it is love that slays and brings them back to life. He says that if they are not competent

*Edmund Spenser and  
John Donne*

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enough to live by love they will die by it, and if their prodigy is not robust ‘for tombs and hearse,’ it will be fit for poetry, and ‘We’ll build in sonnets pretty rooms.’ A well-twisted urn does as much impartiality to a lifeless man’s ashes as does a huge tomb; and by the same token, the poems about the speaker and his lover will render them to be ‘canonized,’ admitted them to the sainthood of love. All those who pay attention to their story will plea to the lovers, saying that countries, towns and courts ‘beg from above/A pattern of your love!’

### 1.3.2 Form and Stanzaic Pattern

All five stanzas of *The Canonization* are metered in iambic lines changing from trimeter to pentameter; in each nine-line stanza, the first, third, fourth and seventh lines are in pentameter, the second, fifth, sixth and eighth in tetrameter, and the ninth in trimeter. (The stress pattern in each stanza is 545544543.) The rhyme scheme is ABBACCCDD in every stanza.

### 1.3.3 Commentary

This complex poem, spoken apparently to somebody who points to the speaker’s love affair, is showcased in the voice of a world-wise, sceptical courtier who is however totally caught up in his love. The poem at the same time caricatures old ideas of love and coins elaborate new ones, in the end concluding that even if the love affair is not likely in the real world, it can become well-known through this poetry and the speaker and his lover will be just like saints to future lovers.

Consequently, the title, *The Canonization*, presses on the process through which people are inducted into the canon of saints.

In the very first stanza, the speaker indirectly details his association to the world of politics, wealth and aristocracy; by assuming that these are the cultural aspects of his addressee, he discloses his own conditions among such concerns, and he also discloses the extent to which he has moved ahead of that conditions. He thinks that the hearer will leave him by himself and follow a career in the court, toadying to aristocrats, already occupied with favour (the King’s real face) and wealth (the King’s stamped face, as on a coin).

In the second stanza, he sketches modern Petrarchan concepts of love and goes to contempt his addressee, making the statement that his groaning has not sunk ships and his tears have not caused floods. (Petrarchan love-poems were full of claims like ‘My tears are rain, and my sighs storms’.) He also disdains the purposes of the everyday world, saying that his love will not keep soldiers from fighting battles or lawyers from acquiring court cases—as though battle and legal squabbling were the only interests of world exterior to the areas of his love affair.

In the third stanza, the speaker begins spinning off metaphors that will help elucidate the passion and individuality of his love. First, he speaks that he and his lover are just like moths drawn to a candle ('her one, me another fly'), then that they look like the candle itself. They demonstrate the elements of the eagle (strong and masculine) and the dove (peaceful and feminine) caught in the image of the phoenix, dying and rising by love. In the fourth stanza, he finds out the likelihood of canonization in verse, and in the final stanza, he discovers his and his lover's character as the saints of love, to whom posterities of future lovers will appeal for help. All through, the mood of the poem is unbiased between a kind of arch, mature sensibility ('half-acre tombs') and zealous amorous abandon ('we die and rise the same, and prove/Mysterious by this love').

*The Canonization* is one of Donne's most well-known and analyzed poems. It has been widely criticized by Cleanth Brooks and many others. While some argue that it is an anti-political love poem, others assume it is based on Donne's own experiences. But if we decide to isolate this poem from Donne's life, then the poem would be come out to be a sort of quaint, passionate speech-act and a highly intricate defence of love against the corrupting principles of politics.

John Donne's reputation as a poet was restored in twentieth century when his work was rediscovered. Donne's poetry demonstrates characteristics such as unusual verse forms, complicated figures of speech applied to elaborate and surprising metaphorical vanities and learned themes conferred according to peculiar and unexpected series of reasoning. His jarring, unusual meters; his appetite for abstract witticisms and double entendres; his frequent weird metaphors (in one poem he compares love to a carnivorous fish; in another he implores with God to make him pure by raping him); and his procedure of inherent reasoning are all qualities of the metaphysical, assimilated in Donne like in no other poet.

Donne was a man of ambiguities. When he was a minister in the Anglican Church, he obtained a deep spirituality that renewed his writing all through his life; however as a man, Donne obtained a carnal yearn for life, sensation and experience. He is both—a great religious poet and a great erotic poet; perhaps, no other writer (with the possible exception of Herbert) worked as hard to unite and express such odd, mutually jarring passions. In his best poems, Donne combines the conversations of the physical and the spiritual; throughout his career as a poet, Donne gave transcendent articulation to both domains. His opposing proclivities frequently cause Donne to disagree with himself. For example, in one poem he writes, 'Death be not proud, though some have called thee/Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so'. However, in another, he writes, 'Death I recant, and say, unsaid by me/ whatever hath slipped, that might diminish thee'. Nevertheless, his confictions are representative of the influential contrary forces at work in his poetry and in

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his soul, instead of over-romantic thinking or inconsistency. Donne, who lived a legion after Shakespeare, took pro of his divided nature to emerge as the supreme metaphysical poet of the seventeenth century; in the middle of poets of inner conflict, he is one of the best of all time.

### 1.3.4 Critical Analysis of *The Canonization*

In his evaluation of *The Canonization*, critic Leonard Unger stresses basically on the wit that has been shown in the poem. In Unger's reading, the over-emphasized metaphors that the speaker uses serve as 'the absurdity which makes for wit'. In any situation, Unger identifies that, during the course of the poem, its evident wit shows the real message of the speaker: that the lover is dissociated from the world by virtue of his contradictory values, visible in his willingness to give up worldly pursuits to be with his lover. His analysis ends with the cataloguing of the 'devices of wit' that can be seen all; through the poem, besides mentioning that a 'complexity of attitudes', promoted mainly through the use of the canonization conceit, maintains the wit within the poem.

*The Canonization* can be mainly noticed in critic Cleanth Brooks' debates for paradox as vital to poetry, an essential tenet of New Criticism. In his collection of critical essays, *The Well Wrought Urn*, Brooks says that a poet 'must work by contradiction and qualification', and that paradox 'is an extension of the normal language of poetry, not a perversion of it'. Brooks examines several poems to prove his argument, but quotes Donne's *The Canonization* as his chief evidence. According to Brooks, the poem can be read in a shallow manner in many ways; however, the most credible understanding is that, in spite of the wit in his tone and profligate metaphors, Donne's speaker is serious about both love and religion. He does not intend to make a ridicule of religion by praising love at the side of it; at the same time, he does not aim to make fun of love by drawing contradictions between love and sainthood. Instead, Brooks' argument is that, the obvious opposition in taking both critically interprets into a more factual account of both love and religion. Donne's 'inevitable instrument' is paradox, which permits him with 'dignity' and 'precision' to refer to the notion that love can be all that is indispensable in life. Without it, 'the matter of Donne's poem unravels into "facts"'. Brooks sees paradox in a bigger sense and says: 'More direct methods may be tempting, but all of them enfeeble and distort what is to be said. ...Indeed, almost any insight important enough to warrant a great poem apparently has to be stated in such terms.' For Brooks, *The Canonization* symbolizes that paradox is not limited to use in logic. Instead, paradox permits poetry to go beyond the limits of logical and scientific language.

### 1.3.5 John Donne's Treatment of Love

Donne's reputation as a poet of love rests upon his fifty-five love lyrics. They appeared in *Songs and Sonnets* in 1633. Before their publication they had



been widely read in literary circles. They are supposed to have been written at different times. Few of them can be linked to actual persons and events of his life. His love appears in them in different forms. In some, it appears as extreme physical passion. In others, it appears as something cynical, tinged with contempt for woman's unfaithfulness. And in his later poems, when he had married Anne More, his love appears as platonic love.

A critic remarks that Donne's love songs are the expression of his different moods in love. In other words, Donne's treatment of love is very different from the writers of the time. His poetic thought on love is made up of different moods produced in him by love. Love as physical passion in *The Blossom* which is one of his earliest poems. Here he starts with the belief that love is a physical passion. He compares his beloved, Mrs. Magdalen Herbert (a married woman), to a blossom whose beauty is fading fast. Then he expresses his view that without physical reactions, such as kissing and embracing, there can be no love. He writes:

*A naked thinking heart that makes no show  
Is to a woman but a kind of ghost.  
(The Blossom)*

In *Love's Alchemy*, he says that happiness in love is a lie. Lovers' dream of great happiness when they get together, but they get nothing better than the pleasure of a summer's night, which resembles the coldness of winter:

*So lovers dream a rich and long delight,  
But get a winter-seeming summer's night.  
(Love's Alchemy)*

In the same poem, he also says that there can be no spiritual love between a man and a woman. It is because a woman does not possess a mind. He writes that we should not hope for a mind in women. At their best, they are dead bodies invested with souls:

*Hope not for mind in women: at their best  
Sweetness and wit, they are but Mummy possest.  
(Love's Alchemy)*

In *Love's Growth*, he says that the growth of love is a continuous process. So love is a complex thing. Every new experience added to it makes it more complex. Yet it grows in dimensions within its own universe. A single circle in water expands into countless circles, when the water is stirred. In the same way, the circle of love, being stirred grows into countless circles within its own universe whose centre is the beloved:

*If as in water stir'd more circles be  
Produced by one, love such additions take*

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*Those like to many spheres but one heaven make,  
For they are all concentrate into thee.*

*(Love's Growth)*

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But when Donne married Anne More, love became a holy passion to him. In *The Canonization*, he represents himself and his beloved as two souls loving and dying for each other. He also says that after their death they will be canonized for love. Each of them loves the other so passionately as if each one were a taper as well as a fly for the other:

*Call her one, me another fly,*

*We are taper', too, and at our own cost die.*

*(The Canonization)*

In *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, their love for each other is platonic. It has united their souls together into one soul. Outwardly, they are like a pair of compasses. Inwardly their united souls are like a lump of gold which can be expanded to airy thinness by beating. In other words, they are divine lovers, not merely sublunary lovers. In *The Extasie*, he says that love is a thing of the soul, not of the body.

If we combine all the above stages of his love, we can represent his conception of love as follows: At an early stage, love is a physical passion, a cause of pain and suffering. The pleasure of sensual love is like the delight given by a summer, which is as cold as winter. But between a faithful husband and his wife, it rises to be a holy passion and finally to be platonic love. It reunites the souls of the two lovers into one. But this love requires the lovers to love each other on both the planes - physical and spiritual. Without a physical basis, platonic love is not possible, although temporary separation does not matter.

So one can say that Donne as poet of love is unconventional, realistic as well as philosophical. There are no descriptions of physical beauty in his love songs. 'His songs are the expression... of all the moods of a lover that experience and imagination have taught him to understand...' (Herbert Grierson.) To him, love for sensual pleasure is lust. But the same love becomes a holy passion when the souls of a husband and his wife love each other. In the Holy Sonnet entitled '*Since She Whom? I loved*', he plainly says that his love for his wife led him directly to the love of God.

Yet some critics do not believe that his conception of love had suffered any growth at all. As one critic writes:

'In celebrating love as the supreme, the only thing in the world, Donne went to a new, twisted kind of, hyperbole.' We most respectfully disagree with such critics.



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## 1.4 JOHN DONNE'S *THE SUN RISING*: SUMMARY AND THEME

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*The Sun Rising* is a witty and amusing poem. It is light verse, but it is also extremely serious. It is, in fact, a good example of the fact that seriousness is different from solemnity and may be accompanied with a good deal of frivolity. This poem also illustrates Donne's revolt against the artificiality and absurdity of the fashionable love poetry of courtly chivalry in which the conceit of the beloved's eyes being regarded as brighter than the sun had long become a tedious formula. Donne laughs at the hyperboles or the fantastic exaggerations of the courtly poetry by pretending to accept them. He piles hyperbole on hyperbole and praises his mistress in the most extravagant manner, but the poem is not intended to be merely literary satire. It is a genuine and sincere expression of the poet's deep sense of the beauty and perfection of his loved one. Its final objective is to express the poet's feeling of happiness and completeness in the possession of his mistress. She is so all-perfect, all-lovely, all-complete that she, and she alone, justifies the fantastic hyperboles of courtly poetry.

The poet treats the sun familiarly, colloquially, and irreverently. It is one of the paradoxes of the poem that the poet uses the adjective "unruly" for the sun when the sun is really the standard of order, regulation, and law.

*Busy old fool, unruly sun, Why dost thou thus,  
Through windows, and through curtains call on us?*

But order and rule in the sphere of Nature threaten the pleasure of love. So the poet rails against the sun. Love transcends time, and so the poet-lover feels a scorn for the sun which is an index of passing time. The tones of the poem, and the changes and developments of the tone, are of great importance. The poem begins with a rhetorical arrogant address to the sun. Like many of Donne's poems, this one begins abruptly, with a sharp, surprising colloquial exclamation: 'Busy old fool, unruly Sun'. The poet expresses his contempt for the sun by addressing it as 'saucy pedantic wretch'. The reason for this is that the poet, in his joy at his complete possession of his mistress, feels that he possesses, rules, and controls the whole world, and therefore is superior to the sun itself.

The sun, says the poet, may be a source of fear to schoolboys who get late for school, or apprentices who get late for work, or court-huntsmen who get late in reporting to the king whom they have to accompany on a hunting expedition, or country ants who must get busy in collecting grains. But the sun cannot scare lovers because the lovers are not to be governed by the artificial divisions of time. The lovers are indifferent to the rising of the sun because they can go on making love even after the sun has arisen. The lover, further, claims that he can eclipse and darken the sun merely with a wink. The lover

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has only to close his eyes, and the sunlight exists no more for him and the beloved's eyes are so bright that their light can dazzle the sun.

*I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink,*

*But that I would not lose her sight so long;*

Normally we are dazzled by the sun's brightness, but here the situation is reversed. In the second stanza the poet continues his boastful tone. The thought of his present good fortune makes him feel greater than the world-dominating sun. While expressing this feeling he also manages to pay exquisite compliments to his mistress. The lover asks the sun to go and find out whether the East Indies and the West Indies are still situated at their original location or they have moved from there to lie with him in his bed.

*Whether both th' Indias of spice and mine*

*Be where thou leftst them, or lie here with me.*

*Ask for those kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,*

*And thou shalt hear; All here in one bed lay.*

The idea is that the beloved who lies in the bed is a combination of both the East and the West Indies. The East Indies were known for their fragrant spices, and the West Indies for their diamond mines. The beloved is fragrant and sweet-smelling like the spices of the East Indies, and she has the lustre and glitter of the diamonds of the West Indies. The mistress sums up in herself all the riches and perfumes of the East and the West. She is the glory of the whole world. Also, the setting of the scene, only implied in the first stanza, is now made more specific.

In the final stanza, the poet not only exalts his mistress but himself:

*'She's all states, and all princes I'.*

In other words, she is the whole world and he the supreme ruler of the world. Here is an extravagant conceit, indeed. His tone in speaking to the sun now softens instead of harsh. Let the sun warm the lovers and it will truly be warming the whole world because the lovers are a microcosm of the world. The poet claims that, with a wink of his eyes, he can eclipse and cloud the sun. The beloved who lies in the bed with him is a combination of both the Indies; of spice and mine. She, thus, represents both the East and the West Indies because of her sweet fragrance and her glitter. As for himself he represents all the kings of the world. The beloved is all the kingdoms of the world, and the poet is all the monarch of the world. If the sun shines on the lover's bed-room only, and does not travel to other places, it will still be warming the whole world because their bed-room is a microcosm of the whole world. These are all far-fetched and fantastic ideas.

The poet and his mistress symbolize the whole world and all its rulers. Those who claim to be the rulers of the world are in fact, merely imitating

the lovers. Likewise all honour in the world is a shadow of the true honour which belongs to these lovers. All the wealth in the world is, too, an imitation of the wealth which the lovers represent. In other words, these lovers are the true rulers of the world; they are all the honour, and all the wealth of the world, and they are the whole world too. Nothing else exists.

*Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;*

*This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere.*

What distinguishes Donne's love-poetry is not merely its seriousness but its single mindedness. Everything except their love for one another is shadowy and unsubstantial: everything else exists for him only in so far as it can be related to this, can be made to illustrate this, to throw light upon this. He does not use this experience as a mere starting-point, but as a means for investigating and interpreting other experiences: all other experiences, all other universes of discourse, all his ingenious analogies, all his so-called metaphysics, are valuable to him only in so far as they help him to feel and comprehend more clearly and more intensely the essentialness of this experience.

#### **1.4.1 *The Sun Rising*: Critical Analysis**

While referring to the poem's displacement of the outside world in favour of two lovers' inner world, critics of John Donne's *The Sun Rising* support its overall theme: the centrality of human love amidst a permanent physical universe. Achsah Guibbory, in an essay entitled "John Donne," said, "The world of love contains everything of value; it is the only one worth exploring and possessing. Hence the microcosmic world of love becomes larger and more important than the macrocosm". Donne's lovers seem to transcend the limits of the physical world by disregarding external influences, coercing all things to rotate around them instead. In Thomas Docherty's words, "(the lovers) become the world and occupy the same position of centrality as the sun. They become, in short, the still point around which all else is supposed to revolve, and around whom all time passes ...". They create a miniature world that is more important than the larger universe within the realm of their bedroom, and their bodies are the gravitational centre.

James S. Baumlin concludes that *The Sun Rising* must not be interpreted literally. Rather, Donne's displacement of the outside world, in favour of the lovers' inside "microcosm," is a rhetorical technique used to argue for the strength and energy of mutual love. Baumlin writes, "... the reader knows that the world does not literally go away, that the sun's orbit does not contract to the bedroom of the lovers; but as one reads, one observes how the beliefs, emotions, and values of the lovers themselves undergo a sea change. Hyperbole may lack the power to change the external physical world; still it changes the private world of the lovers, a world of emotion and

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experience that proves stubbornly resistant to logic, though marvellously—miraculously—open to language.

But, is the poet's reliance on language to transcend the physical world able to succeed? Or, does the language of *The Sun Rising*, like the logic, fail to communicate the theme that many scholars have recognized? The poet's use of hyperbole is convincing enough if readers immediately assume that Donne intended to oppose logic and to define the universe's purpose through the transcendent qualities of language. Yet there are inconsistencies in rhetoric, what one scholar has deemed "a tangle of contradictions and reversals."

*The Sun Rising*, he is still unsuccessful at convincing critical readers that internal love can symbolically replace the physical world. As the poem progresses, however, narrator begins to misspeak, seemingly forgetting the earlier language of his discourse. The poem dismantles itself through the inherent contradictions of the persona's rhetoric, leaving the reader unconvinced that language permits love to transcend the outside world.

Ultimately, the poet's attempt to utilize a language that will communicate love's transcendent qualities is a failure—not a "sudden creative power" as Lisa Gorton asserts with other critics—because the structures that he hopes to escape are inherently incorporated in that language.

### Check Your Progress

3. What is the significance of the title of John Donne's poem *The Canonization*?
4. Why does the poet treat the sun irreverently in *The Sun Rising*?

## 1.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

1. Edmund Spenser is famous for his impressive poem *The Faerie Queene*.
2. Some of the themes that the poet uses in *Prothalamion* include the beauty of nature, the theme of marriage and togetherness, the theme of political corruption, etc.
3. The title of the poem has two motives: while the speaker claims that his love will canonize him into a form of sainthood, the poem by itself serves as a canonization of the lovers' pair. The poem caricatures old ideas of love and coins elaborate new ones, in the end concluding that even if the love affair is not likely in the real world, it can become well-known through this poetry and the speaker and his lover will be just like saints to future lovers. Consequently, the title, *The Canonization*,

presses on the process through which people are inducted into the canon of saints.

4. The poet treats the sun irreverently. He uses the adjective “unruly” for the sun when the sun is really the standard of order, regulation, and law. Love transcends time, and so the poet-lover feels a scorn for the sun which is an index of passing time. The poet expresses his contempt for the sun by addressing it as ‘saucy pedantic wretch’. The reason for this is that the poet feels that he possesses, rules, and controls the whole world, and therefore, he is superior to the sun itself.

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### 1.6 SUMMARY

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- In spite of being well read in classical literature, scholars felt that Spenser’s work was not traditional rather he had a very distinctive style. Spenser tried to follow ancient Roman poets like Virgil and Ovid; he had become familiar with their work while he was in studying. However several of his popular poems were remarkably different from his forerunner.
- Many describe Edmund Spenser’s *Prothalamion* as the best marriage verses of all time, though less sensible than his *Epithalamion*. It is a lyrical and runs softly as musical rhyme. The entire verse is a pure magic: “Sweet Thames run softly till I end my song” which symbolizes life on earth to be steady in order to be able to listen to the eternal song. The artistic imagery, sweet music and lyrical power make *Prothalamion* an unparalleled product of the Renaissance.
- There is no denying the fact that Spenser’s *Prothalamion* is a wedding song, but at the same time, it presents an image of joyful celebration. The poet has been able to achieve this because of the melodious verse with its balance and lyricism. Spenser has proven that he is capable of summoning the impressive images of God, nature and its beauty, feeling of companionship and love effectively all through the poem.
- Though Donne is reputed for his sonnets and love song, he had, in his early life, written religious poetry as well. His love poems and sonnets are marked by multiplicity of attitudes and moods. Metaphysics is a part of philosophy dealing with any subject that surpasses its traceability through the senses. Therefore, the mind, the time, free will, God and here, love, are all matters of metaphysical thought.
- *The Canonization* is a poem written by metaphysical poet John Donne. It was published for the first time in 1633. It demonstrates Donne’s wit and irony. In this poem one friend addresses another. Though, it does relate itself with the intricacies of romantic love: the narrator shows us the new aspect of love as an all-consuming feeling.

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- In *The Sun Rising*, the poet and his mistress symbolize the whole world and all its rulers. Those who claim to be the rulers of the world are in fact, merely imitating the lovers. Likewise all honour in the world is a shadow of the true honour which belongs to these lovers. All the wealth in the world is, too, an imitation of the wealth which the lovers represent. In other words, these lovers are the true rulers of the world; they are all the honour, and all the wealth of the world, and they are the whole world too.

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### 1.7 KEY WORDS

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- **Metaphysical Poets:** Coined by the critic Samuel Johnson, the term metaphysical poets describe a loose group of 17th-century English poets whose work was characterized by the inventive use of conceits, and by a greater emphasis on the spoken rather than lyrical quality of their verse.
- **Pentameter:** A line in poetry which has five stressed syllables; the rhythm of poetry with five stressed syllables in a line.
- **Metaphor:** This is a figure of speech that, for rhetorical effect, directly refers to one thing by mentioning another.
- **Hyperbole:** Hyperbole is the use of exaggeration as a rhetorical device or figure of speech.

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### 1.8 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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#### Short Answer Questions

1. Mention the prominent works of Edmund Spenser.
2. Write a short summary of *Prothalamion*.
3. Give examples to illustrate John Donne's Treatment of Love in his poems.

#### Long Answer Questions

1. Critically analyze Edmund Spenser's poem, *Prothalamion*.
2. Analyse the description of Thames River in *Prothalamion*.
3. Discuss the elements of wit and irony in John Donne's *The Canonization*.
4. Analyse the form and stanzaic pattern in John Donne's *The Canonization*.
5. Write a comprehensive note on the poet's ideas in the poem, *The Sun Rising*.

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## 1.9 FURTHER READINGS

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*Edmund Spenser and  
John Donne*

- Bloom, Harold. 1986. *John Donne and the Seventeenth-Century Metaphysical Poets*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers.
- Roston, Murray. 1974. *The Soul of Wit: A Study of John Donne*. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press.
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- O'Neill, Michael. 2010. *The Cambridge History of English Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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## UNIT 2 MILTON, DRYDEN AND BLAKE

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### NOTES

#### Structure

- 2.0 Introduction
- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 John Milton: About the Poet
  - 2.2.1 *Paradise Lost* Book II: Summary
  - 2.2.2 *Paradise Lost* Book II: Critical Analysis
- 2.3 John Dryden: About the Poet
  - 2.3.1 *Mac Flecknoe*: Summary and Interpretation
  - 2.3.2 *Mac Flecknoe*: A Critical Analysis
- 2.4 William Blake: About the Poet
- 2.5 *Holy Thursday*: Summary
  - 2.5.1 *Holy Thursday*: An Analysis
- 2.6 *The Lamb*: Summary and Explanations
  - 2.6.1 Some Important Explanations
  - 2.6.2 Critical Appreciation of the Poem, *The Lamb*
  - 2.6.3 Blake's Vision of Childhood as Depicted in the 'Songs Of Innocence'
- 2.7 *The Tiger*: Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 2.8 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 2.9 Summary
- 2.10 Key Words
- 2.11 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 2.12 Further Readings

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### 2.0 INTRODUCTION

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John Milton's expressiveness in his poetry had a massive effect especially on the eighteenth century verse. Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, written in blank verse, is considered a masterpiece. *Paradise Lost Book II* concerns the council in Hell and Satan's further plans after the construction of Pandemonium. Satan has drawn all the fallen angels into a large council perched on a volcano top and addresses them to give them courage. With each of the demon's proposals to fight heaven, *Book II* introduces few new characters, namely Sin, Death, Chaos and Night, the worldly concepts of good and evil, heaven and hell.

Written in a sarcastic tone, in *Mac Flecknoe*, John Dryden imagines a bizarre coronation ceremony in which Richard Flecknoe, a 'scandalously bad Irish poet', hands over his throne to Thomas Shadwell, a minor dramatist who, like Dryden, was employed in the Cromwell government service. Shadwell promises Flecknoe always to maintain the sacred traditions of Dullness which Flecknoe lovingly treasured during his own reign. Dryden uses a scene of the Aeneid to satirize Shadwell.



This unit aims at analyzing poems written by three famous English poets, John Milton, John Dryden and William Blake.

*Milton, Dryden and Blake*

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## 2.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the life and works of John Milton, John Dryden and William Blake
- Explain John Milton's *Paradise Lost Book II*
- Interpret John Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe*
- Explain William Blake's *Holy Thursday*
- Analyze the spiritual connotations of William Blake's *The Lamb*
- Describe the use of symbols in William Blake's *The Tiger*

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## 2.2 JOHN MILTON: ABOUT THE POET

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John Milton's (1608-1674) poetry is best known for its intensity of thought and writing technique. His major themes are liberty—religious, domestic and civil. He also wrote a drama based on a legendary character, which is called *Samson Agonistes*. He wrote five anti-prelatical tracts, four tracts that justified divorce and five pamphlets in defence of the English Puritan cause. John Milton was a Puritan poet. He was a great poet of the English language. Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667) is considered a masterpiece. His strong and rhetoric prose, and the articulacy of his poetry had a massive effect especially on the eighteenth century verse. Besides poems and drama, Milton published pamphlets that defended civil and religious rights.

Milton was born in London. His mother was a highly-religious lady and his father was a law writer. That is why, Milton's first teacher was his father from whom he learned the art and music. Another person who influenced him was Thomas Young, a graduate of St. Andrews University. Milton went to Christ's College, Cambridge. He started writing poems in Latin, Italian and English. At first, Milton could not adjust to the university life. In his early years, he wanted to become a priest. He relaxed for six years in his father's home and produced his compositions as *L'Allegro and Penseroso*. Milton in *L'Allegro* presents a picture of happy life with several smaller pictures.

Milton is a renowned user of blank verse. Blank verse is unrhymed verse written in iambic pentameter. It was introduced into English by the Earl of Surrey with his translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Prominent writers who employed it include Shakespeare, Marlowe, Milton, Dryden, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, Browning and Swinburne. Most of the English

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poetry is written in blank verse. It has inversion of rhythm, trochaic substitution, enjambment (continuation of the sense over from one line into the next), use of feminine ending and a variety of pause in line. It should not be confused with *Vers libre*. For example, Milton's *On His Blindness* is written in blank verse in which lines of 10 syllables of which 2nd, 4th, 6th, 8th and 10th syllables are accented.

*“When I consider how my light is spent  
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide.”*

John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* is written in blank verse while Edmund Spenser's epic *The Faerie Queene* employs a regular rhymed stanza throughout. The choice of verse form tells us something about each poem. Implicit in Spenser's method is the idea that there is an informing pattern, a divine order, which is easy to grasp. *Paradise Lost* is also a religious poem, but it is a far more troubled faith that is in evidence. It begins,

*“Of man's first disobedience and the fruit  
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste  
Brought death into the world, and our woe  
With loss of Eden.....”*

The way the lines expand, a fresh complication being added in each clause, suggests the complexity of the problem Milton hopes to deal with: nothing less than justifying God's ways to man. Rhyme might suggest that God's plan is easy to grasp, but blank verse suggests a more troubled wide-ranging enquiry: the regularity of the lines, however, keeps an idea of order in the background. In conclusion, although Milton is the only great representative in the field of blank verse, and the only writer of great versatility, he is not altogether representative of his age rather it should be called the Age of the Cavalier and the Puritan.

After visiting many places, Milton returned to London in 1639 and set up a school. Due to a major concern about Puritan cause, he wrote many pamphlets on Divorce, Freedom, Liberty of press, etc. However, his achievement was recognized when he wrote *Paradise Lost*.

We have millions of examples that even great poet's poems were not so impactful in the very beginning. To take the example of John Milton, his early poems, *Allegro* and *Penseroso* were not as famous as his later epics, *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* were.

### 2.2.1 *Paradise Lost* Book II: Summary

Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a work of charm and value because of its theological significance. This book is updated to the values of the modern world.

This book concerns the council in Hell and Satan's further plans after the construction of Pandemonium. This book introduces few new characters:

1. Sin is the daughter of Satan born out of his head in Heaven.
2. Death is born as the son of Satan by his incestuous relationship with his daughter Sin.
3. Chaos rules the region of confusion between Earth and Hell.
4. Night is the consort of Chaos.

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### **Introduction (1-42)**

In the very beginning of this book, Milton gives a very exalted description of Satan who is very grand and who is the president of proceedings. He begins his speech in Pandemonium and there is none who disputes his authority. He opens the floor for discussion. The first scene opens with Satan sitting on his throne in Pandemonium. He is burning with fire of revenge. He opens his manipulative speech to his peers who were the fallen angels from heaven about the democracy of hell. He instigates them that war is still not lost and if they get united they can rise up stronger and defeat God.

### **Belial's speech (106-228)**

Then Belial contradicts him giving his reason that God could give them a worse punishment than Hell if He wished. He further says that may be in future God shows mercy on them so they should feel satisfied with what they have found. But we learn that peace is not what he is looking for rather he uses his intelligence to prevent further war. His speech seems to be more persuasive than Moloch's.

### **Mammon's Speech (229-309)**

Mammon is the next speaker. He refuses to bow down to God again. His approach is studious. He wishes that all fallen angels should try to mimic Heaven in Hell by their hard work. This suggestion meets with the greatest support from all Devils who receive his suggestion with applause.

### **Beelzebub's Speech (310-429)**

Then Beelzebub starts speaking. He also prefers freedom than to serve under God but advocates a different course of action than the previous speakers. He says that there are rumours that God is creating a new race called Man. And He will favour them more than the angels. So it will be better to corrupt this new beloved race created by God. This is how they can avenge on God. The rest of the devils agree to it and unanimously favour his plan. He ends his speech with a rhetorical question whether or not such a plan is better than sitting in Hell.

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### **Satan's Speech (430-505)**

Then they all decide to send somebody as a scout to explore this new world. Satan volunteers himself and flies off to find Hell's gate. Satan insists that none should share this danger with him and all devils pay him homage. Milton, in an aside, laments how while devils work in harmony only man fights his fellow.

### **The Devil's Pastimes (506-628)**

Satan prepares his venture to explore the place called Earth created by God for mankind. Devils are free to use their time as per their wish. Some of them amuse themselves with music and others indulge in vain abstract philosophical assumptions. But none of them feel comfortable in Hell.

### **Satan's Expedition (629-1055)**

Then they all decide to send somebody as a scout to explore this new world. Satan volunteers himself and flies off to find Hell's gate. When he approaches, he finds nine gates which are built of brass, iron and adamantite. He also finds two strange shapes in front of the gates. One of the shapes look like a woman down to her waist but below has the form of a serpent. The other is only a dark shape. Satan demands passage from the gates and then they are about to battle but suddenly woman shape cries out and explains to Satan who she and her companion are.

She claims that they are Satan's offspring. When Satan was an angel, she sprang from his head and was named Sin. Satan then incestuously indulged in liaison with her and she gave birth to a ghostly son named Death. Death in turn raped his mother Sin and begot the dogs that now torment her.

Sin and Death were then assigned to guard the gate of Hell and hold its keys. Satan then explains his plot against God to them and now they get ready to help him in his plot. Then comes Chaos who is joined by Night, Confusion and Discord. Satan explains his plan to Chaos as well. He provokes them to help him. Chaos gets ready to help him in exploring the place Earth which is created for God's new beloved race of Man. Satan moves at the front, Sin and Death move far behind. They build a bridge from Hell to Earth so that evil spirits can travel to tempt mortals.

Finally in this book, we are introduced to a number of parallel trinities that Milton compares and contrasts. We can compare Satan and God. Satan and Sin's relationship is based on lust and even Death, the son of Sin, rapes his own mother and begets howling dogs which keep tormenting Sin. But on the other hand, we come to know that God has sacrificed his own son.

### 2.2.2 *Paradise Lost* Book II: Critical Analysis

Milton, Dryden and Blake

Book II seems to be a parody of military heroism. All devils take a democratic decision to corrupt and tempt mortals, which is the new beloved race created by God. Thus, this decision shows their inner corrupt reason and will. This book also seems to be satirizing many politicians who try to poison everyone and try to show themselves as good though they are corrupt from inside. Milton had witnessed many politicians during his time who are parodied by him in this book.

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This book also shows cynicism of Milton about political organizations. For example, Belial, full of faculties of reason and logic, tries to astray the path of other devils. Milton does not spare any section of society by his writing especially in this epic.

Milton calls the devils' 'discussion' 'vain wisdom all, and false philosophy', which projects Milton as a critic of religious and political organizations. Satan also offers to sacrifice himself for the evil of devils just as an imitation of what Christ has done for the welfare of good, which is also a scathing attack on religious parameters of society. Satan, on the surface, shows that he can do anything for the welfare of his devils but actually he is using them at his best to avenge on God. In other words, he has exiled himself from God because of his original source of his being. He is the father of Death by an incestuous relationship with his daughter. Such progeny, he cannot eradicate from his source of being. His son has raped his own mother begetting dogs only to torment her.

Satan begins the infernal consultation as he opens the debate by feigning a choice between "open war" and "covert guile" for the recovery of Heaven. It is learned later, when Beelzebub addresses the council, however, that the debate has been skillfully manipulated by Satan. Beelzebub is the last to speak, and he echoes Satan's own plan of avenging God by harming his new creation, Man. Beelzebub's proposal, the poet says, was "first devised by Satan." In Book I, Satan had already suggested the strategy of guile rather than force to accomplish the purpose of revenge.

*'Henceforth his might we know, and know our own,  
So as not either to provoke, or dread New war provoked;  
our better part remains To work in close design,  
by fraud or guile What force effected not. (PL, I, 643-47)*

Rumour has it that God intends to create a new world and a new race. Since God is now inaccessible to them, their alternate plan of revenge, Satan says, should be to corrupt the work of the "great Creator".

Many Renaissance poets held the belief that the creation of Man preceded Satan's rebellion in Heaven. They believed it was Satan's jealousy of the newly-created Adam that prompted the archangel's revolt against

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God in Heaven which led to his subsequent fall. Milton took the view less prevalent in his time. His Satan rebels against the Son's recent advancement in Heaven which threatens to usurp the archangel's power. Though Satan's rebellion against God is not merely a sudden unexplainable act of pride, his motives are selfish and his actions are ludicrous in light of the fact that he is asked to obey and show reverence to an inherently superior being, the Son of God. Stella Purce Revard, a critic, justifies Milton's choice on the grounds that his "Satan evokes less sympathy from the reader with his refusal to bow the knee to the Son" than does the Satan of other Renaissance poets who depict his refusal to bow to Adam, an inferior being.

In *Paradise Lost*, Satan realizes that Man will be "favored more/Of him who rules above," but his jealousy of Adam and Eve does not come to the foreground until after the archangel has left Hell and sees them in their blissful state in Paradise. "What do mine eyes with grief behold" (P L, IV, l. 358).

Some critics believe that the demons who speak in the devilish council parallel the people Milton observed when he attended sessions at the Council of State. One can readily see that they frequently demonstrate human characteristics as they rationalize their points of view. Moloch is a typical die-hard who stubbornly refuses to abandon the idea of his former position in Heaven. Ready to fight, he resists any other alternative and is willing to be annihilated rather than accept his present fate in Hell. Belial, though "false and hollow," is a skillful debater, turning Moloch's argument against him point by point. In contrast to Moloch, Belial is a peacemaker and makes "the worse appear/the better reason." Mammon does not want to go back to Heaven if it will entail the singing of "forced halleluiahs" to God. He prefers "hard liberty" to the "easy yoke" of servility. In the case of Mammon, Milton expresses his own views through the words of a demon.

This is reminiscent of his reference to governmental corruption in *Samson Agonistes*.

*But what more oft in nations grown corrupt,  
And by their vices brought to servitude,  
Than to love bondage more than liberty,  
Bondage with ease than strenuous liberty.  
(Samson Agonistes 268-71)*

Milton seems to identify more closely with Mammon, who advocates action, than with Belial, who simply yields to "peaceful sloth." The debate of the devilish council steadily improves as each speaker becomes more rational, slowly relinquishing the idea of the recovery of Heaven as they realize its futility. Beelzebub speaks last drawing the group together with his proposal of a counter plan that involves spying on God's newly created world and contriving a guileful act of revenge.



Biblical allusions abound in *Paradise Lost*. Ironically, Beelzebub's argument to the demons in the council is shot through with references to the Scriptures.

*For he, be sure,  
In height or depth, still first and last will reign Sole king,  
and of his kingdom lose no part By our revolt,  
but over Hell extend  
His empire, and with iron scepter rule  
Us here, as with his golden those in Heaven.  
(P. L., II, 323-28)*

Sin's origins also reflect those of classical myth. She was born out of the head of Satan ("a goddess armed/Out of thy head I sprung") just as Athena, in Greek myth, sprang fully armed from the head of Zeus. As the group of fallen angels explore the geographic regions of Hell, they find an area described as "Burns froze (frozen), and cold performs the effect of fire" (P. L. II, 595).

With his frequent use of oxymoron, Milton emphasizes certain passages by bringing the contradictory terms together. Other examples of this rhetorical antithesis are "darkness visible" (I, 63) and "for evil only good" (II, 623). After his exhaustive journey through Chaos, Satan nears the "pendant world." He sees the world (Earth) as a star of "smallest magnitude." His view of the entire universe gives an impression of distance that is contradictory to that of Book I where Hell is "as far removed from God/As from the center thrice to the utmost pole" (P. L., I, 74). When we consider that Sin and Death are building a bridge from the gates of Hell to Earth, our former impression of the vast distance that the angels have fallen from Heaven to Hell shrinks in our imagination.

#### Check Your Progress

1. List the new character who were introduced in *Paradise Lost* Book II.
2. Which period is regarded as the Age of Dryden?

### 2.3 JOHN DRYDEN: ABOUT THE POET

John Dryden (1631-1700) was an English poet, literary critic, translator, and playwright. He was made England's first Poet Laureate in 1668. He is seen as dominating the literary life of Restoration England to such a point that the period came to be known in literary circles as the Age of Dryden.

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Eighteenth century is regarded as the golden age of political satire in English. This was the period when literature took the form of personal attack, political bantering and religious condemnation during the Restoration period. Personal satire based on malice, political satire rooted in partisanship and prejudice, religious satire founded on principles of hatred were attempted successfully by the satirists of this age. The satires of John Dryden are the most significant of the Restoration satires. His satires were personal, political and religious and he achieved unrivalled success in this art. In his first political satire *Absalom and Achitophel*, Dryden stood as the champion of monarchy and attacked the Earl of Shaftesbury, the Duke of Buckingham and others who were setting up a rival candidate for the throne.

Dryden's next satire, *The Medal*, also aims at Shaftesbury, the evil counsellor of the Duke of Monmouth. It is a personal satire at the instance of the king. But *The Medal* has a political background. *Mac Flecknoe* is pure lampoon and is marked by coarseness and personal spite. Shadwell, the whig poet has been scathingly satirized for personal animosity. *The Hind and the Panther* is a philosophical poem about religion, but in part it is also satirical. Dryden's satire therefore covers a wider range which includes politics, personal animosity and religion.

### 2.3.1 *Mac Flecknoe*: Summary and Interpretation

The subject of the poem is Thomas Shadwell, a minor dramatist who, like Dryden, was employed in the Cromwell government service. There were a number of disagreements between him and Dryden. Different opinions on issues like stature of Ben Jonson as a playwright, purpose of comedy, plagiarism and importance of rhymed plays caused rift between the two. Shadwell usually portrayed himself as Ben Jonson's successor. In *Mac Flecknoe*, Dryden imagines a bizarre coronation ceremony in which Richard Flecknoe, a 'scandalously bad Irish poet' and existing monarch of 'all the Realms of Non-sense' hands over his throne to Shadwell. Shadwell promises Flecknoe always to maintain the sacred traditions of Dullness which Flecknoe lovingly treasured during his own reign.

In the beginning of the poem, Flecknoe realizes that he has been reigning over the kingdoms of dullness for a long time and it is time for him to depart as fate wins over monarchs as well in due course of time. He recalls that he became the emperor like Augustus at a very young age and since then he has been ruling as the undisputed king of dullness in the fields of prose and verse. He then starts thinking about the suitable successor for his kingdom and finds Shadwell suitable for his throne due to the enduring dullness of his works right from the beginning of his career.

The high stature of Augustus has been compared to the insignificance of Flecknoe in accordance to the mock-heroic tradition. Further, Flecknoe says that other dunces have sometimes demonstrated signs of sense but Shadwell



has never deviated into sense and has always shown his expertise in the field of dullness. Thus, he is crowned the ‘prince of nonsense’ and everyone in his kingdom respects him. Laughing at Shadwell’s stupidity, the poet says that he is so blinded with his idiocy that he would never let the ray of sense reach him. He uses the imagery of oak and explains this statement by saying that as oak hinders the rays of sun; Shadwell does not allow enlightenment of minds reach his kingdom.

According to Dryden, Heywood and Shirley were also like Shadwell who did not communicate any real sense with their words but he says that Shadwell has surpassed them as well. This proficiency has earned Shadwell the title of ‘the prophet of tautology’. Flecknoe says that he is more proficient than Shirley and Heywood in dullness but Shadwell has defeated all of them in this art. Further, Flecknoe compares himself to St. John the Baptist. He says that just as St. John came to the Earth in order to pave path for Jesus Christ, he was also sent before Shadwell to pave path for him as Shadwell is destined to be the final epitome of dullness. Dryden satirizes Shadwell’s musical pretenses by saying that Shadwell’s voice is like cacophony.

The poet talks about Arion, a popular magician of Cornith. There is a story that once when Arion was returning from his musical show, some sailors took away his belongings and threw him into the sea. But when he played his lute, its melodious tone attracted some dolphins and they shoved him back to safety. Dryden with the help of this example states that in this instance Shadwell could only reproduce screeches and roars. The thick-skinned people came to appreciate the ‘musician’. The scum came to cheer him in the same way as small fishes rush for remains of food thrown to them.

A lot of religious imagery is used in the poem by using words and phrases like ‘prophet’ and ‘John the Baptist’ and ‘hymn’. The poet also implies that as Christ was born untainted by sin, Shadwell was born ‘untainted’ by sense.

In a sarcastic tone, Dryden says that Shadwell’s timings are better than that of St. Andre who was a French master. When St. Andre’s troop took part in Shadwell’s’ opera, ‘*The Psyche*’, their stage performance was completely arrhythmic due to redundant feet in Shadwell’s poem. Moreover, the way Shadwell conducted the choir made the choir go absolutely out of tune. With pretentious encomium, Dryden ‘appreciates’ Shadwell for the extra feet which he added in his lines. He also asserts that a masterpiece like ‘*The Psyche*’ made Singleton jealous. This masterpiece made the artist feel that it is no use to be an artist any longer.

*Near these a nursery erects its head,  
Where queens are form’d, and future heroes bred;  
Where unfledg’d actors learn to laugh and cry,  
Where infant punks their tender voices try,*

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Here, Dryden explains Shadwell's coronation ceremony. He uses the word 'nursery' while referring to a theatre named Golden Home. He satirizes this theatre by saying that this 'nursery' is suitable for preparing children for theatre as children are usually found playing the role of kings and queens here. He says that good plays have never been performed here and this theatre is suitable for paying homage to bad playwrights. During the preparation of coronation ceremony, floors of London have been covered with worthless works of poets instead of red carpet.

Dryden uses a scene of the *Aeneid* to satirize Shadwell. In this scene, Aeneas announces that his son Ascanius would be his successor. Referring to this scene, Dryden writes that during coronation, there was a cloud of ignorance around Shadwell and he vows that he would not leave any stone unturned to encourage and spread insipidness in his kingdom. Just as Hamilcar Barca's son Hannibal pledges that Rome would remain his enemy, Shadwell pledges that good sense would always remain his arch enemy.

As kings hold a ball and sceptre as an emblem of sovereignty during coronation, Shadwell has a mug of ale and a copy of Flecknoe's play '*Love's Kingdom*' in his hand. Here the copy of the play is representative of female genitalia which gives birth to psyche. By these symbols, Dryden makes fun of Shadwell's alcoholic and sexual propensities. By calling the works of Shadwell abortive, Dryden tries to imply that Shadwell has features of a woman. Dryden also adorns Shadwell with poppies to show that Shadwell is inclined towards opium and his monotonous works can easily put his readers to sleep.

Following the mock-heroic traditions, Dryden says that as in the fight between Remus and Romulus, Romulus attained the opportunity to name the city because they saw twelve vultures as opposed to six vultures seen by Remus; Shadwell has stupidly brought twelve owls instead of vultures. Owls are considered ill omen according to Greek mythology.

*The sire then shook the honours of his head,  
And from his brows damps of oblivion shed  
Full on the filial dullness: long he stood,  
Repelling from his breast the raging god;  
At length burst out in this prophetic mood:*

*Sinking he left his drugget robe behind,  
Born upwards by a subterranean wind.  
The mantle fell to the young prophet's part,  
With double portion of his father's art.*

In the next few lines, Flecknoe blesses Shadwell and wishes him success in the field of dullness. He encourages Shadwell to reign the kingdom

of dullness better than him. He asks his son not to refer to any other work while producing his work as that might bring sense to his work. He wants his son to make more 'literary abortions'. Making reference to the accusations of plagiarism on Shadwell and that of borrowing from the plays of Sedley, Flecknoe says that he should use his spontaneous idiocy in his works as this quality sets him apart from other intelligent playwrights. He also advises him not to follow Ben Jonson as his works are considered sound and this might hamper Shadwell's idiocy. Flecknoe avows that Shadwell is his own child.

Dryden says that Shadwell should to be proud of his verses which are repetitive, dry and are capable to inducing sleep. He says that his tragedies make people laugh and his comedies put them to sleep. Dryden ironically says that in spite of this reverse effect, his works are harmless and shallow. Flecknoe advises Shadwell not to waste his genius in writing plays and ask him to utilize it in writing dull, shallow and pseudo-wit and humour. While still speaking, Flecknoe suddenly disappears and his royal robe falls on Shadwell's shoulders and the poem ends with an odious 'fart'.

### 2.3.2 *Mac Flecknoe*: A Critical Analysis

*Mac Flecknoe* was published anonymously in 1682. Dryden made no written acknowledgment of his authorship of the work until after Shadwell's death in 1692, but to contemporaries the authorship was no secret. Scholarly evidence suggests that it was written between 1676, the date of the latest Shadwell drama cited in the text, and 1678, the most probable year for Richard Flecknoe's death.

Dryden's reasons for attacking Shadwell at the time also remain obscure. Undeniably, the two dramatists disagreed on literary and political questions. In the political controversies of the time, Dryden sided with the Tory supporters of the king, whereas Shadwell allied himself with the Whigs. In prefaces to his plays, Shadwell portrayed himself as a follower of Ben Jonson, whose comedies of humor feature characters influenced by humors, or quirks of personality, that motivate their actions. Dryden preferred the comedies of wit and intrigue that were the dominant forms during the Restoration. Yet Dryden could hardly have perceived Shadwell as a threat to himself. Several clumsy poetic lampoons on Dryden have been attributed to Shadwell, but none appears to have preceded *Mac Flecknoe*. Scholars have attempted to discover passages in Shadwell's published works that may have given offense to Dryden, and some of the scholars' suggestions may be considered plausible but not clearly established occasions for Dryden's satire.

The poem employs the mock-epic or mock-heroic mode of satire, making low nonsense and dullness ridiculous by juxtaposing them with solemn, important matters such as imperial Rome or the question of monarchical succession.

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## 2.4 WILLIAM BLAKE: ABOUT THE POET

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William Blake was born in London in 1757. From his childhood, he had the power of extraordinary imagination. When he was four, he spoke to his parents about the visions that he had. William Blake spent his childhood and youth at a time of revolutions which shook the world – American Revolution in 1775 and the French Revolution in 1789. These revolutions and ideas and his reading of different writers especially Scandinavian poet Swedenborg, created in him the persona of a rebel. In 1789, Blake published *Songs of Innocence* and *The Book of Thel* which established him as a poet of extraordinary caliber. Between 1790-1800, Blake created iconic works such as *Songs of Experience*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *America: A Prophecy*, *Europe: A Prophecy*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, *The Song of Los*, and *The Book of Urizen*, all of which discernibly demonstrated Blake's ideas on the Revolution. As the ideals of the French Revolution disintegrated during the Reign of Terror and into a war for national power, and lost sight of its original mission of liberating idealism; Blake began to lose his faith in humanity and in the revolutionary spirit. In Blake's final years of poverty and despair, he completed two of his most famous and respected religious works, *Jerusalem* and *Milton*.

William Blake's major writings happened before 1798, which is the year considered by literary scholars and the critics to be the year which marked the beginning of the Romantic Era British Literature with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, a compilation of poems by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The Romantics brought forth a revolution not only in reacting against the classical dogmas of the eighteenth-century writing; but provided a fresh outlook by emphasizing on the role of imagination and individualism. Every age is either a reaction to the immediate age gone by or is a continuation with subtle changes. In the case of the Romantic era, it established itself as a reversal of the eighteenth-century Age of Reason.

The term 'romantic' signifies a poetic creed in English literature and it connects a highly complicated set of attitudes and beliefs. Romanticism was largely a reaction against the prevailing Neo-Classical school of writing which laid great stress on form, structure and conventions of poetic diction. In a sense, reacting against a kind of sophisticated culture, the Romantics brought with them the 'Renaissance of wonder' where the natural world is revealed and vividly portrayed for the first time. This led to the idea of nature as an inspiring force, as felt by William Wordsworth and Percy B. Shelley. But it is not that this change that we perceive happened suddenly. This change of outlook about writing poetry was a gradual one. The Pre-Romantics (Thomson, Gray and others) had their contribution in achieving this change in the history of the English literature. Some literary scholars even include William Blake in the list of the Pre-Romantics, as William Blake was writing

much before the Romantic poets had started writing. Whether we consider William Blake as a romantic or a pre-romantic poet does not matter as the philosophical, metaphysical, political ideas that are manifest in his writings remains intact. Moreover, if one looks at his poetry and tries to look at the major themes and ideas dealt in them, then one is bound to classify him as a Romantic Poet.

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### 2.5 HOLY THURSDAY: SUMMARY

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The poem *Holy Thursday* is written by William Blake in 1789 and is part of his book titled as *Songs of Innocence*. There is a poem with the same title in *Songs of Experience*, in that the song is in a completely contrasting context.

The poet depicts the ceremony which is held in England on Ascension Day, the ceremony was also referred to as Holy Thursday, in present times it is called Maundy Thursday. During this ceremony orphaned school children are dressed in distinctive coloured coats and made to march to the Saint Paul's Cathedral where they sing for an audience. The distinctive colours of their coats are synonym to flowers and the march to the church resembles a river. Their singing at the Cathedral on this occasion is associated with their elevated level which becomes higher than their old and unfeeling custodians. The poem tries to depict the sad reality of the lives of orphaned children.

Besides writing poems, William Blake was also a keen painter, and printmaker. Most of his work was recognised only after his death, after living all his life in anonymity he began to be regarded as an influential personality in the history of the poetry and visual arts of the Romantic Age. Twentieth century critic Northrop Frye regarded his prophetic works to be full of merits and his poetry formed the basis of the English language. Critic Jonathan Jones felt that his visual artistry was very superior and he proclaimed him as "far and away the greatest artist Britain has ever produced". According to the BBC poll held in 2002, Blake was ranked at 38 amongst the 100 Greatest Britons. Even though Blake spent most of his life in London apart for the three years he spent in Felpham, he was able to produce varied and allegorically rich oeuvre, many scholars felt that his imagination was Godlike.

Due to his idiosyncratic views he was regarded as senile by some of his colleagues. But the later critics held him in high regard because of the creativity and perspicuity he used in his work. They felt that his work was highly philosophical and full of mystic undercurrents. His paintings and poetry form the character of the Romantic Movement and are regarded as "Pre-Romantic". Blake was a devoted Christian but he was not in favour of any form of organised religion especially the Church of England, rather he was partial towards the principles and aims of the French and American Revolutions for some time but soon he began to reject most of their ideologies as well and he became neutral and established a cordial relationship with

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the political activist Thomas Paine; Blake was very inspired by Emanuel Swedenborg. Regardless of all the influences in his life his work had a uniqueness which makes it hard to categorise his work. Nineteenth century scholar William Rossetti regarded him as a “*glorious luminary*”, and “*a man not forestalled by predecessors, nor to be classed with contemporaries, nor to be replaced by known or readily surmisable successors*”.

Christians celebrate Holy Thursday in order to remember Jesus Christ. On this day enemies of Jesus crucified him, he was betrayed by one of his close friends. The poem *Holy Thursday* from *The Songs of Innocence* depicts the ceremonies which take place on this day. The orphans from various schools are dressed up and made to march in front of people so that they are able to extract money.

Superficially the poem may be regarded as a simple description of the procession in which orphans march to the Cathedral but the aim of the poet is to expose the despair of the orphans and criticise the behaviour of charity organizations and society as a whole.

The poem has three stanzas. In the first stanza the poet describes the procession and arrival of the children from their respective charity houses to St. Paul Church. In the second stanza the poet illustrates about the singing of children and the third stanza gives details about the sermons which take place at the Cathedral.

In the first stanza, the line in which the poet says ‘Twas on a Holy Thursday’, he meant that it was Holy Thursday and only on this day the orphans are dressed up in clean clothes and made to walk in a formation of ‘two and two. They are made to dress up in red and blue and green coloured clothes so that they look colourful and cheerful. The poet is not appreciating the procession of the children. In fact he has used ironical phrases such as ‘innocent faces clean, ‘walking two and two’ and in ‘red and blue and green’ so that he is able to draw the attention of the readers towards a deeper meaning. The children have been cleaned up and made to wear colourful clothes so that they are able to attract the people’s attention and extract more money from them. The poet stresses that the charity organisation have done all this so that they are benefitted monetarily and not because they care for the children.

The third line of the first stanza, the poet says that the ‘Grey-headed beadles’ were marching in front of the children with white wands in their hands, the wand was as white as snow and by saying that the beadles head was grey he is referring to the elderly guardians who were holding the wand to make the children walk in an orderly manner. The poet has compared the walking of the children with the flow of Thames River. The readers must note that in the third line the poet has referred to the ‘Grey-headed beadles’ is in the past tense but in the fourth line, once they arrive at the Church, they are mentioned in the present tense. He is trying to project their dynamic nature, the movement which changes from snow to flow.



The second stanza the poet has described the singing of the children in the Church. The poet equates the colourful appearance of orphans to the flowers found in London. Once again the poet wants the readers to see the irony in comparing the children with flowers. He is trying to say that even though the innocent clean faces and colourful coats of the children resemble flowers but just as the flowers have a short life and the appearance of the children is just for the ceremony. As soon as the ceremonies at the Church get over they will be taken back to the charity homes and return to their miserable condition. Thinking about their plight makes the poet feel sad and by saying '*all their own*' he tries to signify that the glow which is visible on the faces of the orphans is a divine glow and its presence is because they are singing and remembering Jesus and their angelic faces are radiant because of the heavenly glow. The poet wants the readers to realise that this glow has nothing to do with the care and hard-work of the guardians.

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The innocent children while singing in a chorus resemble the lambs which flocked around Jesus, the expression '*multitudes of lambs*' infers Christ with his lambs and his fondness for children. Therefore orphans are compared to the lambs who were always sitting around Christ. The number of children present in the Church is large and all of them raised their hands in order to pray.

There is a transformation in the third stanza; the poet changes the '*radiant angelic companies*' into Holy ghosts that are twirling '*like a mighty wind*'. So the readers notice the concept of Transcendentalism in the third stanza. The singing of the children is so divine that their prayers are bound to be heard in the heaven and reach the ears of the Gods in the heaven. The poet at this moment says that the singing of the children is not only moving the heavenly gods but also the rich and wise people present in the church. After hearing their singing all of them are going to donate large sum of money to different charities to which these orphans belong. But the poet is just not satisfied by their gesture and he demands answers as to why these wise men have to wait for 'Holy Thursday' for helping the homeless children and where are they for the rest of the year. He questions the careless attitude of the society as a whole and lack of efforts by people in order to help the orphans on other occasions.

The poet ends the poem by demanding the people to be responsible towards suffering of the orphans and treating them well not just on particular days but throughout the year. The poet has written this satirical poem to criticize the attitude and behaviour of the people in the society towards orphans.

### 2.5.1 *Holy Thursday*: An Analysis

Blake critiques Christian charity and the way the Church cares for children in unfortunate circumstances. The first poem is a subtler criticism of the church



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that ends with the speaker gently warning readers of the consequences of their treatment, and provides a path of redemption.

In the *Songs of Innocence* version, the children are shown “walking two & two in red & blue & green” through London to the grand and lofty “high dome of Pauls”. The repetition mirrors the orderliness of the children in their flowing lines, which is likened to the “Thames”. The rhyme scheme of the poem, AABB, is jaunty and mimics the quickening current of the river, and its pleasant sounding melody reinforces the idyllic image of “innocent” and “clean” children on their way to church. The structure of the poem, which consists of long lines, similarly parallels the long flowing river – this is even more visible in the illustration, where the long stretched out lines resemble the procession of children depicted above.

The children are compared to nature, first the lively Thames river, then the “flowers of London”. This choice of imagery highlights the beauty and fragility of the children that the rest of London sees as destitute and burdensome, and they are elevated to the status of something that adorns the city, rather than besmirches it. The children are meek and good-natured like “lambs”, but this also parallels the biblical symbol of Christ as the Lamb of God. They are described to possess a “radiance all their own”, and this suggests that the purity and angelic qualities of the children wholly stem from their innate innocence.

The speaker does not merely stop at portraying the children positively – he goes so far as to suggest the superiority of the children. They may be “little boys & girls” who are young in age, but they possess strength in numbers, and the speaker stresses this by repeating “multitudes” throughout the second stanza. Furthermore, they are like a “mighty wind” with their “harmonious thunderings”, and this switch from visual to aural imagery heightens their strength and influence palpably. However, the speaker’s use of “wind” and “thunder” can be interpreted as an ominous suggestion of divine judgment on the Church’s ill-treatment of the children. In this poem, the speaker leaves subtle hints of their predicament, beginning with the “wands” of the “grey beadles”, which despite their innocuous description, are really rods for punishment.

The opening line, which remarks on the children’s “clean” faces, also suggests that the children’s usual state is otherwise. Although these “guardians” are “wise”, or think themselves wise, the speaker indicates that the children’s innocence and untainted purity surpasses them, for it is genuine. In contrast, the snow-like whiteness of the beadles’ “wands”, which are symbolic of innocence, are merely external. Furthermore, the children do not need an intermediary to commune with the divine, and they can “raise to heaven” the “voice of song” on their own, and the guardians ultimately sit “beneath them”, both physically and figuratively in the eyes of the Lord.

The last line in the poem, “then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door”, is the speaker’s plea to readers to treat unfortunate children with compassion. It points to the failure of their current Christian charity, and warns of the consequences of institutionalizing the harsh treatment of God’s “angels”, for instead of bringing these children closer to the faith, it can result in driving them away.

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### Check Your Progress

3. State the main theme of William Blake’s *Holy Thursday*.
4. How does Blake critique the Christian charity in the poem?

## 2.6 THE LAMB: SUMMARY AND EXPLANATIONS

### 2.6.1 Some Important Explanations

1. Little lamb.....made thee.

The first stanza contains a number of natural pictures to build up lamb’s habitat. But the emphasis is on the ‘lamb-hood’—that is, the character and qualities of this innocent creature of God. The speaker asks: ‘Little Lamb, who made thee?’ The speaker is, of course, a child who puts child-like questions.

2. Little lamb.....bless thee.

The maker of the lamb is himself called a ‘lamb’. The reference is to Christ who, because of his qualities of gentleness and meekness, and mildness is so called.

3. *For he calls Himself a Lamb* – Christ is known as a Lamb.

Christ also possessed the qualities of a child and praised the innocence of children. (That is why, in the Introduction, the child on the cloud may be regarded as symbolizing Christ).

4. *We are called by His name*: Both the child and the lamb have the same qualities as Christ. They all share the qualities of meekness, mildness and innocence.

The lamb, the child, and Christ are identified in this poem. Christ had the qualities of meekness and mildness which both a lamb and a child possess. Christ was an incarnation of love and tenderness.

The structure of each stanza consists of a theme (2 lines), its exposition (6 lines), and a coda (2 lines). Technically it is a triumph of form, but that one hardly notices, such is the childish beauty of the symbol, and the deep religious feeling which pulses through it.’

## 2.6.2 Critical Appreciation of the Poem, *The Lamb*

*The Lamb* is one of the simplest poems of Blake, both as regards the subject and the style. It has a significant position in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

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In the first stanza, the child who is supposed to be speaking to the lamb gives a brief description of the little animal as he sees it. The lamb has been blessed with life and with the capacity to feed by the stream and over the meadow; it has been endowed with bright and soft wool which serves as its clothing; it has a tender voice which fills the valley with joy. We have here a true portrait of a lamb.

In the second stanza, there is an identification of the lamb, Christ, and the child. Christ has another name, that is, Lamb, because Christ is meek and mild like a lamb. Christ was also a child when he first appeared on this earth as the Son of God. Hence the appropriateness of the following lines:

*He becomes a little child,  
I a child and thou a lamb,  
We are called by His name.*

The child in this poem speaks to the lamb, as if the lamb were another child and could respond to what is being said. The child shows his deep joy in the company of the lamb who is just like him, meek and mild. The poem conveys the very spirit of childhood – the purity, the innocence, the tenderness of childhood and the affection that a child feels for little creatures. A religious note is introduced in the poem because of the image of Christ as a child.

*The Lamb* is a pastoral poem and it thus perfectly harmonizes with the pastoral note of the Introduction to the *Songs of Innocence*. The pastoral note in Blake is another symbol of innocence of joy.

The particular significance of this poem lies in the fact that it is a counterpart to *The Tiger* of the *Songs of Experience*. In other words, *The Lamb* and *The Tiger* represent the two contrary states of the human soul. The opposition between these two poems is most pointed and striking. The lamb represents the violent and terrifying forces within man. Taken together, the lamb and the tiger represent the duality of human nature.

## 2.6.3 Blake's Vision of Childhood as Depicted in the '*Songs Of Innocence*'

The world of the *Songs of Innocence* is largely a child's world. It is a world of simplicity, purity, happiness, and security, though touches of the adult world of misery and guilt do occasionally intrude here. The central situation in this world is that of a child or young animal delighting in life. Fear is not

necessarily totally absent from this world, but when danger threatens, a parent-figure (father, mother, God, or angel) is at hand to console and to comfort.

The keynote of the world of the *Songs of Innocence* is struck in the very opening poem called *Introduction* which is a little pastoral but which is also an appropriate preface to the poems that follow. Blake here thinks of himself as a shepherd with a pipe, playing, songs of joy in the open country, when he sees a 'child' or a lamb; and under its inspiration he writes 'happy songs' which 'every child may joy to hear'. The child in this poem seems to carry suggestions of (1) the Christ child speaking from Heaven ('a cloud'); (2) an angel symbolizing innocence; and (3) the spirit of pastoral poetry.

It is possible therefore, to treat the poem as an allegory, its subject being divine inspiration. The poem brings divinity effortlessly to earth. The fact that the poem deals with divine inspiration in such simple and natural terms makes it a highly appropriate introduction to the *Songs of Innocence*. The poet shows himself setting out happily to record the joys of childhood which are pure and secure.

*The Echoing Green* is the record of a happy day. It is a scene of a village green on a warm afternoon in late spring, but it is also a symbolic presentation of the days of innocence from sunrise to sunset. Children, young folk, and the old people all participate in an 'unfallen' enjoyment of life in a beautiful natural environment. The poem reminds us of the Biblical picture of Adam and Eve before they sinned and were expelled from Paradise.

Even the reminiscences of the old people seem not to contain any regret. The end of the day brings rest and refreshment, not fear of darkness.

*The Lamb* suggests the Lamb of God that 'taketh away the sin of the world'. What is vital in this poem is the nature of the innocent creature of God. Innocence has a divine source. The innocent lamb symbolizes Christ, the incarnation of love and tenderness. The child who speaks in the poem is also identified with Christ because Christ became a child and particularly praised the innocence of children.

The child-like qualities of this poem lie particularly in the little speaker's unselfconscious and serious address to the lamb as to another little child, and in his delight in repetition.

### Check Your Progress

5. What does Blake mention in the first stanza of *The Lamb*.
6. What do you mean by a pastoral poem?

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## 2.7 THE TIGER: SUMMARY AND CRITICAL APPRECIATION

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*The Tiger*, originally called *The Tyger*, is a lyric poem focusing on the nature of God and His creations. It was published in 1794 in a collection entitled *Songs of Experience* by William Blake. It is one of Blake's best-known and most analyzed poems. *The Tyger* is a highly symbolic poem based on Blake's personal philosophy of spiritual and intellectual revolution by individuals. The speaker in the poem is mystified at the sight of a tiger in the night, and asks a series of questions about its fierce appearance and the creator responsible for its creation. The first impression that William Blake gives is of seeing a tiger in the night, and, as a result of his state of panic, exaggerating the description of the animal when he writes:

*Tyger! Tyger! burning bright*

*In the forests of the night,*

Immediately upon seeing the 'Tyger' in the forest, the poet makes inquiries about the deity that could have created it:

*What immortal hand or eye*

*Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

The word 'immortal' gives the reader a clue that the poet refers to God. In the second stanza, the author wonders in what faraway places the tiger was created, inferring that these places could not be reached by any mortal.

In the third stanza, once the tiger's heart began to beat, the poet again inquires about the creator of such a frightening and evil animal. However, the context must be interpreted according to Blake's philosophy of symbolic myths about human life, society and spiritual revolution.

*In what distant deeps or skies*

*Burnt the fire of thine eyes?*

*On what wings dare he aspire?*

*What the hand dare seize the fire?*

The tiger itself is a symbol of the fierce forces in the soul and a divine spirit that will not be subdued by restrictions, but will arise against established rules and conventions. In the fourth stanza, William Blake inquires about the tools used by God for creating the fearsome and deadly creature, namely, the hammer, the chain, the furnace and the anvil.

*What the hammer? what the chain?*

*In what furnace was thy brain?*

*What the anvil? what dread grasp*

*Dare its deadly terrors clasp?*

All these tools are used by an ironsmith. Thus, according to the poet, God is a kind of craftsman. In the fifth stanza, the poet asks two scientific questions. These questions refer to God's feelings:

*Did he smile his work to see?*

*Did he who made the Lamb make thee?*

Here, the poet wonders whether God was happy with his creation of the fearsome tiger. He does not understand why or how the deity, who is responsible for good and innocence, can introduce violence and evil in this world. However, the poet does not make any statements throughout the poem. The poem's last stanza is the same as the first one, which may indicate that the author is still not able to understand the world in which we live.

*The Tyger* presents a question that embodies the central theme – Who created the tiger? Was it the kind and loving God who made the lamb or Satan? Blake realizes, of course, that God made all the creatures on earth. However, to express his bewilderment that God, who created the gentle lamb, also created the terrifying Tiger, he includes Satan as a possible creator while raising his rhetorical questions.

*In what distant deeps or skies*

*Burnt the fire of thine eyes?*

In these lines, 'fire' refers to hell and 'skies' to heaven. In either case, there would be fire, the fire of hell or the fire of the stars. The tiger symbolizes evil or the incarnation of evil, and the lamb represents goodness. Blake's inquiry is a variation on an old philosophical and theological question: Why does evil exist in a universe created and ruled by a benevolent God? Blake provides no answer for this question, as his mission is to present reality in arresting images. A poet's first purpose, after all, is to present the world and its denizens in a language that stimulates the aesthetic sense. Nevertheless, the poem does propel the reader to deep thought. Here, the tiger symbolizes the quest for sustenance, and the lamb, meek and gentle, symbolizes the quest for survival.

The poet wonders if it is possible that the same God who made the lamb also created the tiger, or was it the devil's work.

The poem is more about the creator of the tiger than about the tiger itself. In contemplating the terrible ferocity and remarkable symmetry of the tiger, the speaker is at a loss to explain how the same God, who created the

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lamb, could also create the tiger. Therefore, this poem subtly reminds that humans are incapable of completely understanding the mind of God and the mystery of his handiwork. The poem consists of six quatrains and each quatrain contains two couplets.

Therefore, we have a twenty-four line poem with twelve couplets and six stanzas. A neat and balanced package, Blake's choice of 'tiger' has usually been interpreted as rendering an exotic or alien quality of the beast. In the first stanza, we can observe that the word 'tiger' is written with a 'y' instead of an 'I'. Here, the purpose of the poet is to give the word an inclination towards Ancient Greece. This is closely followed by the alliteration '(.,.) burning bright (.,.)'.

This alliteration is used by the author to emphasize the strong, bright, shiny colours of the 'tyger'. The symmetry 'y' is highlighted in this stanza, which is closely related to the spelling of the word, because in Ancient Greece, symmetry is seen as 'beauty'. It also speaks about an 'immortal hand or eye', which is an allusion of the tiger's creator, God. The pattern of the poem is also symmetrical.

'Distant deeps', in the second stanza is an alliteration used to remark on the distant depths. Subsequently, the poet writes 'On what wings dare he aspire?' The meaning of which is directly connected to God who created the tiger. In the third stanza, the creator of the tiger is seen as an artist, and the appreciation he has for the creator's work is quite apparent. This is followed by the line 'and when thy heart began to beat', which highlights God's power to create life. In the fourth stanza, God is portrayed as a 'Hammersmith', which can be gauged by the use of the words 'hammer', 'furnace' and 'anvil'. Through his meter and techniques, Blake manages quite efficiently to enforce a chanting rhythm and powerful voice.

Demanding questions and vivid images disprove the simple nature of his end rhyme, rather exploring a deep, driving question.

### Check Your Progress

7. What is the poet's first impression of tiger in the poem, *The Tiger*?
8. Mention the element of symbolism in *The Tiger*.



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## 2.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

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1. *Paradise Lost Book II* introduces few new characters:
  - Sin is the daughter of Satan born out of his head in Heaven.
  - Death is born as the son of Satan by his incestuous relationship with his daughter Sin.
  - Chaos rules the region of confusion between Earth and Hell.
  - Night is the consort of Chaos.
2. John Dryden (1631-1700) was an English poet, literary critic, translator, and playwright. He was made England's first Poet Laureate in 1668. He is seen as dominating the literary life of Restoration England to such a point that the period came to be known in literary circles as the Age of Dryden. The satires of John Dryden are the most significant of the Restoration satires. His satires were personal, political and religious and he achieved unrivalled success in this art.
3. The poem may be regarded as a simple description of the procession in which orphans march to the Cathedral but the aim of the poet is to expose the despair of the orphans and criticise the behavior of charity organizations and society as a whole. The poem has three stanzas. In the first stanza the poet describes the procession and arrival of the children from their respective charity houses to St. Paul Church. In the second stanza the poet illustrates about the singing of children and the third stanza gives details about the sermons which take place at the Cathedral.
4. Blake critiques Christian charity and the way the Church cares for children in unfortunate circumstances. The poem is a subtler criticism of the church that ends with the speaker gently warning readers of the consequences of their treatment, and provides a path of redemption. The speaker's use of "wind" and "thunder" can be interpreted as an ominous suggestion of divine judgment on the Church's ill-treatment of the children.
5. In the first stanza, the child who is supposed to be speaking to the lamb gives a brief description of the little animal as he sees it. The lamb has been blessed with life and with the capacity to feed by the stream and over the meadow; it has been endowed with bright and soft wool which serves as its clothing; it has a tender voice which fills the valley with joy. We have here a true portrait of a lamb.

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6. Pastoral (from pastor, Latin for “shepherd”) refers to a literary work dealing with shepherds and rustic life. Pastoral poetry is highly conventionalized; it presents an idealized rather than realistic view of rustic life. The Lamb is a pastoral poem and it thus perfectly harmonizes with the pastoral note of the Introduction to the *Songs of Innocence*. The pastoral note in Blake is another symbol of innocence of joy.

7. The poet in the poem is mystified at the sight of a tiger in the night, and asks a series of questions about its fierce appearance and the creator responsible for its creation. The first impression that William Blake gives is of seeing a tiger in the night, and, as a result of his state of panic, exaggerating the description of the animal when he writes:

*Tyger! Tyger! burning bright*

*In the forests of the night,*

Immediately upon seeing the ‘Tyger’ in the forest, the poet makes inquiries about the deity that could have created it:

*What immortal hand or eye*

*Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

8. The tiger itself is a symbol of the fierce forces in the soul and a divine spirit that will not be subdued by restrictions, but will arise against established rules and conventions. In the fourth stanza, William Blake inquires about the tools used by God for creating the fearsome and deadly creature, namely, the hammer, the chain, the furnace and the anvil.

*What the hammer? what the chain?*

*In what furnace was thy brain?*

*What the anvil? what dread grasp*

*Dare its deadly terrors clasp?*

All these tools are used by an ironsmith. Thus, according to the poet, God is a kind of craftsman. The poem is more about the creator of the tiger than about the tiger itself. In contemplating the terrible ferocity and remarkable symmetry of the tiger, the speaker is at a loss to explain how the same God, who created the lamb, could also create the tiger.

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## 2.9 SUMMARY

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- John Milton was a Puritan poet. He was a great poet of the English language. Milton’s epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667) is considered a masterpiece. His strong and rhetoric prose, and the articulacy of his poetry had a massive effect especially on the eighteenth century verse.

- In the very beginning of this book, Milton gives a very exalted description of Satan who is very grand and who is the president of proceedings. He begins his speech in Pandemonium and there is none who disputes his authority. He opens the floor for discussion. The first scene opens with Satan sitting on his throne in Pandemonium. He is burning with fire of revenge.
- Many Renaissance poets held the belief that the creation of Man preceded Satan's rebellion in Heaven. They believed it was Satan's jealousy of the newly-created Adam that prompted the archangel's revolt against God in Heaven which led to his subsequent fall. Milton took the view less prevalent in his time.
- In *Mac Flecknoe*, Dryden imagines a bizarre coronation ceremony in which Richard Flecknoe, a 'scandalously bad Irish poet' and existing monarch of 'all the Realms of Non-sense' hands over his throne to Shadwell. Shadwell promises Flecknoe always to maintain the sacred traditions of Dullness which Flecknoe lovingly treasured during his own reign.
- Dryden's reasons for attacking Shadwell at the time also remain obscure. Undeniably, the two dramatists disagreed on literary and political questions. In the political controversies of the time, Dryden sided with the Tory supporters of the king, whereas Shadwell allied himself with the Whigs.
- The term 'romantic' signifies a poetic creed in English literature and it connects a highly complicated set of attitudes and beliefs. Romanticism was largely a reaction against the prevailing Neo-Classical school of writing which laid great stress on form, structure and conventions of poetic diction.
- Christians celebrate *Holy Thursday* in order to remember Jesus Christ. The poem *Holy Thursday* from *The Songs of Innocence* depicts the ceremonies which take place on this day. The orphans from various schools are dressed up and made to march in front of people so that they are able to extract money. The poem may be regarded as a simple description of the procession in which orphans march to the Cathedral but the aim of the poet is to expose the despair of the orphans and criticise the behaviour of charity organizations and society as a whole.
- *The Lamb* is one of the simplest poems of Blake, both as regards the subject and the style. It has a significant position in the '*Songs of Innocence and of Experience*'.
- *The Tiger*, originally called *The Tyger*, is a lyric poem focusing on the nature of God and His creations. It was published in 1794 in a

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collection entitled *Songs of Experience* by William Blake. It is one of Blake's best-known and most analyzed poems. *The Tyger* is a highly symbolic poem based on Blake's personal philosophy of spiritual and intellectual revolution by individuals.

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### 2.10 KEY WORDS

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- **Romantic poetry:** This is the poetry of the Romantic era, an artistic, literary, musical and intellectual movement that originated in Europe toward the end of the 18th century.
- **Pastoral poetry:** Pastoral refers to a literary work dealing with shepherds and rustic life. Pastoral poetry is highly conventionalized; it presents an idealized rather than realistic view of rustic life.
- **Lyric poetry:** This is a formal type of poetry which expresses personal emotions or feelings, typically spoken in the first person.
- **Alliteration:** In literature, alliteration is the conspicuous repetition of identical initial consonant sounds in successive or closely associated syllables within a group of words, even those spelled differently.

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### 2.11 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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#### Short Answer Questions

1. Name the prominent works of John Milton.
2. What are the main ideas expressed in Milton's *Paradise Lost* Book II.
3. What is the subject matter of Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe*.
4. How has Blake treated child in *Holy Thursday*.
5. Summarize the poem *The Lamb*.

#### Long Answer Questions

1. Critically analyze John Milton's *Paradise Lost* Book II.
2. Analyse the description of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* Book II.
3. Discuss the elements of satire in *Mac Flecknoe*.
4. Analyse the form and metrical pattern in William Blake's *Holy Thursday*.
5. Analyse the pastoralism in Blake's *The Lamb*.
6. Explain William Blake's contribution to Romantic poetry.
7. Describe the significance of blank verse in English poetry.

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## 2.12 FURTHER READINGS

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- Manning, J Peter. 1990. *Reading Romantics: Texts and Context*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Leonard, Barnett George. 1973. *Charles Lamb: The Evolution of Elia*. USA: Haskell House.
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## UNIT 3 WORDSWORTH AND KEATS

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#### Structure

- 3.0 Introduction
- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 William Wordsworth: About the Poet
- 3.3 *Tintern Abbey*: Summary and Explanation
  - 3.3.1 *Tintern Abbey*: A Critical Analysis
- 3.4 John Keats: About the Poet
- 3.5 *Ode on a Grecian Urn*: A Critical Analysis
  - 3.5.1 *Ode on a Grecian Urn*: Summary and Annotations
  - 3.5.2 Poetic Devices in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*
- 3.6 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 3.7 Summary
- 3.8 Key Words
- 3.9 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 3.10 Further Readings

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### 3.0 INTRODUCTION

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In English Literature, the eighteenth century heralded a new era with bold experiments that the poets brought with them. Especially, last thirty years of the century marked clearly a new beginning with a clear change in temperament and a sudden appearance of literary geniuses like William Wordsworth, Shelley, John Keats and the others. The period ultimately led to Romanticism, one of the greatest movements of English literature. This romantic spirit is essentially the expression of strong feelings which have been used to express new vision with a strong emphasis on emotional life. After all, Romanticism denotes a free spirit, high ideals like beauty, love, and individuality.

The most significant expression of Romanticism found its expression in the year 1798 in the preface to the “Lyrical Ballads” by Wordsworth who purposefully maintains that all good poetry is essentially the impulsive overflow of innermost feelings which are bound to be very powerful. This was also the period when, in terms of poetic form, rhymed stanzas were slowly giving way to blank verse, an unrhymed but still rhythmic style of poetry. The purpose of blank verse was to heighten conversational speech to the level of original beauty. The poet draws heavily on his personal experience and its fitting expression.

Wordsworth brought a completely new approach to the writing of English poetry. His greatest poems are those where autobiography, perception and narrative are woven into one texture. *Tintern Abbey* (1798) shows idiom

of poetry where reflection is linked to sensation in new and organic fashion. Relationship, love and joy are the key words of Wordsworth's poems. Written in blank verse, unrhymed iambic pentameter, *Tintern Abbey* comprises the elements of an ode, conversation poem as well as dramatic monologue.

John Keats was another English Romantic poet. Keats had a significant influence on a diverse range of poets and writers and today his poems are some of the most popular and most analyzed in English literature. Keats only lived for 25 years, but during this brief span, he managed to produce an array of romantic and nature poems that have reverberated across literature and popular culture.

This unit aims at analyzing the poems of William Wordsworth and John Keats and explain in detail the main themes of those poems.

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### 3.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain Wordsworth's romantic, philosophical and nature poems
- Understand the themes of *Tintern Abbey*
- Analyze critically Wordsworth's epic poem, *Tintern Abbey*
- Understand Keats' poem, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*
- Analyze Keats' poem critically
- Explain the use of various figures of speech in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

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### 3.2 WILLIAM WORDSWORTH: ABOUT THE POET

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William Wordsworth was born on 7 April, 1770 in Cockermouth, Cumberland. His father was a law agent and collected rent. He was financially secure and Wordsworth enjoyed a comfortable childhood. He was admitted to Hawkshead Grammar school near Windermere in 1778. In 1787, he went to Saint John's College, Cambridge. He loved trekking in Cumberland, France, Switzerland, Germany and Wales. He visited France in 1791 during the time of the French Revolution. It was during this time that he met Annette Vallon, a French woman and had a brief affair with her. He returned to England due to the Anglo-French war. In 1794 Dorothy, his sister, became his close companion, friend and housekeeper.

In 1795, he met Coleridge. He planned *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. Then he travelled to Germany after which both William and Dorothy settled in their beloved lake district near Grassmere. In 1783, he married Mary Hutchinson. He faced a series of tragedies; death of his brother, death of his two children



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and alienation from Coleridge. His financial condition was also not stable. In 1830, he was appointed as distributor of stamps for West Mooreland. Gradually, he became financially secure. His literary career started with descriptive sketches in 1793. At the peak of his poetic career, he wrote *Poems in Two Volumes* which was published in 1807. In 1828, he reconciled with Coleridge and both toured the Rhineland together. Wordsworth received an honorary Doctor of Civil Law degree in 1838 from Durham University, and the same honour from Oxford University the next year. He became a poet laureate in 1843 and died in 1850.

He brought a completely new approach to the writing of English poetry. His objections to highly stylized poetic diction, his attitude to nature, his choice of simple incidents and humble people as subjects of his poetry are some of his achievements. Poetry for him was primarily the record of a certain kind of state of mind and the value of poetry for him lay in the value of that state of mind that the poet recorded. As a poet, Wordsworth was a man of unusual emotional vitality. The initiation point is the poet's special kind of perception which differed in degree rather than in kind from that of ordinary men. The French Revolution, eighteenth century development of psychological views implicit in Locke's view of perception and knowledge, rational and humanitarian principles of enlightenment, his own simple and democratic upbringing, and the countryside of the Lake District were important factors in the development of his poetry. His first poem, *An Evening Walk* (1793), shows the influence of the French poets.

Wordsworth was not a dramatic poet. He displayed what Keats called egotistical sublime. He himself had to be implicated in everything he wrote however apparently objective the narrative might be. His greatest poems are those where autobiography, perception and narrative are woven into one texture. *Tintern Abbey* (1798) volume shows idiom of poetry where reflection is linked to sensation in new and organic fashion. It shows the development of his attitude towards nature- moving from the animal pleasure of childhood through adolescent passion for wild and gloomy to adult awareness of the relation of one's perception of the natural world to a sense of the human and moral world. In immortality ode, Wordsworth gives us the complete balance of maturity as he saw it. *The Prelude* gives a long autobiographical account of his own development as a poet. *The Recluse* is a 'philosophical poem containing the view of man, nature and society having for its principal subject the sensations and the opinions of a poet living in retirement'. Relationship, love, joy are the key words of Wordsworth. Poems like *Resolution*, *Independence*, *The Solitary Reaper* and *Michael* are some of his most famous poems.

**Check Your Progress**

1. State the factors that influenced the development of William Wordsworth's poetry.
2. List some of the famous poems written by Wordsworth.

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### 3.3 *TINTERN ABBEY*: SUMMARY AND EXPLANATION

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**Lines 1 - 21**

*FIVE years have past; five summers, with the length  
Of five long winters! and again I hear  
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs  
With a soft inland murmur. — Once again  
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,  
That on a wild secluded scene impress  
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect  
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.  
The day is come when I again repose  
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view*

In the first couple of lines, the speaker begins by relating to the reader that a lot of time has passed since he had last visited the banks of the river Wye. In the next few lines, the poet starts reminiscing about his last visit and how the visit had left upon him a lasting impression. The speaker then begins to describe the 'steep and lofty cliffs' and says that they are just like he remembered them. Wordsworth reiterates that he has come 'again' and how the mountain cliffs impress upon him thoughts of solitude and seclusion. The poet expresses his sense of peace as once again he finds himself witnessing the merging of the vast landscape with the endless sky.

*These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,  
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,  
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves  
'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see  
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines  
Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,  
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke  
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!*

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*With some uncertain notice, as might seem  
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,  
Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire  
The Hermit sits alone.*

In these lines, the poet muses over the tranquil landscape with the cottages, the orchards laden with their unripe bounty of fruit. The green hue is soothing to the poet as he once again recalls having seen the hedge rows, pastoral farms and wreathes of smoke rising to the sky from the dwellings of vagrants in the 'houseless woods'.

**Lines 21-49**

*These beauteous forms,  
Through a long absence, have not been to me  
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:  
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din  
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them  
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,  
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;  
And passing even into my purer mind,  
With tranquil restoration: — feelings too  
Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,  
As have no slight or trivial influence  
On that best portion of a good man's life,  
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts  
Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust,  
To them I may have owed another gift,  
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,  
In which the burthen of the mystery,  
In which the heavy and the weary weight  
Of all this unintelligible world,  
Is lightened: — that serene and blessed mood,  
In which the affections gently lead us on, —  
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame  
And even the motion of our human blood  
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
In body, and become a living soul:*

*While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things.*

The poet in these lines contemplates how in the last five years, when he had not seen this landscape, its memories had remained with him as fresh as ever. He says that often in the din and rush of the city life, he had derived in a wearied state a soothing sensation from recalling those peaceful moments he had spent there; and those memories restore tranquility within him. The speaker says that such beautiful forms also elicited within him thoughts of some 'unremembered pleasure' of countless little 'unremembered acts of kindness and of love', which for a moment, may appear trifle but endow endless riches to human lives. It is these moments which lend a sublime feeling, a blessed mood to our lives and lessens the burden of leading our lives in a harsh, unintelligible world. He says that such a serene feeling blesses us in a manner that our corporeal frame is suspended and we almost become a 'living soul' which is in a state of harmony with the universe.

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### Lines 49 - 67

*In darkness and amid the many shapes  
Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir  
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,  
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart —  
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,  
O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods,  
How often has my spirit turned to thee!  
And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,  
With many recognitions dim and faint,  
And somewhat of a sad perplexity, The picture of the mind revives again:  
While here I stand, not only with the sense  
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts  
That in this moment there is life and food  
To me was all in all. — I cannot paint  
What then I was. The sounding cataract  
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,  
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,  
Their colours and their forms, were then to me  
An appetite; a feeling and a love, That had no need of a remoter charm,  
By thought supplied, nor any interest*

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*Unborrowed from the eye. — That time is past,  
And all its aching joys are now no more,  
And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this  
Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur, other gifts  
Have followed; for such loss, I would believe,  
Abundant recompence. For I have learned  
To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes  
The still, sad music of humanity,  
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
To chasten and subdue.*

The speaker says that often perturbed by the fretful stir of this world, he has turned to the river Wye for succour, and that when he stands here again, he is rejuvenated by the belief that he can find solace to sustain him through the coming years in future. He then goes on to say that he is no more the same individual who had come to visit river Wye five years ago when he was like a roe full of optimism and energy. He says that he cannot relate what the sounding cataract meant to him or what feelings the tall rock induced within his being. The speaker says that today with more experience, he can no longer indulge in boyish pleasures that he derived from experiencing the outward beauties of nature; rather he has started deriving pleasure from the solace that nature lends to the troubled soul. He says that he has learnt to see in nature the power to ‘chasten and subdue’ disturbing elements.

*And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;  
If I were not thus taught, should I the more  
Suffer my genial spirits to decay:  
For thou art with me here upon the banks  
Of this fair river; thou my dearest Friend,  
My dear, dear Friend; and in thy voice I catch  
The language of my former heart, and read  
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while*

*May I behold in thee what I was once,  
My dear, dear Sister! and this prayer I make,  
Knowing that Nature never did betray  
The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,  
Through all the years of this our life, to lead*

*From joy to joy: for she can so inform  
The mind that is within us, so impress  
With quietness and beauty, and so feed  
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,  
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,  
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all  
The dreary intercourse of daily life,  
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb  
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,  
And these my exhortations! Nor, perchance —  
If I should be where I no more can hear  
Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams  
Of past existence — wilt thou then forget  
That on the banks of this delightful stream*

*We stood together; and that I, so long  
A worshipper of Nature, hither came  
Unwearied in that service: rather say  
With warmer love — oh! with far deeper zeal  
Of holier love. Nor wilt thou then forget,  
That after many wanderings, many years  
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,  
And this green pastoral landscape, were to me  
More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake!*

The poet feels the presence of something divine in every aspect of nature that fills his entire being with a sense of joy and peace. The speaker says that he continues to be a lover of nature and finds repose in its bounties. The poet then turns to his sister who has accompanied him to this visit and in whom he finds his dearest companion. The poet says that he sees in his

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sister an image of his former self. Addressing his sister, the poet says that he is making a prayer to nature to lead him from joy to joy eternally and all the while induce in their beings lofty and sublime thoughts such that the 'dreary intercourse' of every day mundane life does not make them insensitive to the beauties of nature. He says that 'memory' serves 'as a dwelling-place for all sweet sounds and harmonies' and it is these memories that will heal her soul if 'solitude', fear or pain assail her in this life. The poet ends the poem by saying that the memory that they both stood together as worshippers of nature will help them overcome even years of absence from these beautiful 'steep woods and lofty cliffs' and refresh in their mind's eye what the green pastoral landscape meant to them.

### 3.3.1 *Tintern Abbey*: A Critical Analysis

*Tintern Abbey* was composed in the year 1798 and it is considered to be one of the most significant of all the works of Wordsworth. One of his most celebrated and critically acclaimed poems, it is seen by critics as a record of the different stages in the growth of Wordsworth's poetic genius and imagination. Critics often regard it as a miniature epic that thematically anticipates his epical endeavour, *The Prelude*. *Tintern Abbey* brings out much of Wordsworth's poetic and philosophical beliefs. Written in blank verse, unrhymed iambic pentameter, the poem comprises the elements of an ode, conversation poem as well as dramatic monologue. In the opening lines, the poet is seen meditating upon his earlier visit to the river Wye. The memories of his earlier visit fill him with a deep sense of 'tranquil restoration'. The narrator recalls that five years earlier when he had visited river Wye, he had almost a sublime, transcendental experience; what perplexes and saddens Wordsworth is the fact that he is no longer able to experience that same feeling. In the first twenty five lines, Wordsworth solely deals with the sensory perception and appreciation of nature's beauty. It is in these lines that Wordsworth's thematic principle comes to the fore, that being, the interconnectedness of man and nature. The opening line connotes the passage of time by apprehending it through the change of seasons and the sweet soft murmur of the river Wye. In these lines, Wordsworth draws a relationship between man, nature and time.

In the next few lines, Wordsworth proceeds to develop the link between the mind and nature. He says that the lofty cliffs amidst the virgin seclusion impress upon him the feeling that the earth is merging with the sky in a divine unison.

In the lines 26- 50, he proceeds to address the effect that river Wye and its soothing transcendental beauty has upon him. In the Lines 59 -110, Wordsworth explores in depth how he apprehends enlightenment through nature, while the rest of the poem is an exploration of his relationship with his beloved sister Dorothy and thoughts about the future.



As Kaiser Jr. writes, ‘In Wordsworth’s *Lines Written a few Miles above Tintern Abbey*, the narrator melts into nature, and they form one infinite, contiguous existence. Awed at the prospect of infinitely contiguous reality, he is roused to the sublime state’.<sup>6</sup>

The poet seems to find joy and solace in completely absorbing himself into nature. Thence, the poet succeeds in creating an illusion of an infinite connectedness between the landscape of the sky and the poet’s soul. The narrator gradually weaves the magic upon the reader too and engages him by describing the visual aspects of the secluded scene.

The sanctity of the tranquil surroundings enables the poet to have a sublime, transcendental experience. Again and again, Wordsworth emphasizes on the solitude, the silence which induces a sense of well-being and contentment. The poet becomes so enchanted with the beauty of the landscape that he becomes embroiled in even the minutest aspects such as ‘wreathes of smoke Sent up, in silence’. As Kaiser writes, “so powerfully intense and passionate is Wordsworth’s representation that he almost invokes the landscape in the mind’s eye of the reader”; To quote Kaiser, ‘Wordsworth paints a picture, not unlike a Turner watercolour, blending the landscape with complementary hues, and lending a still greater sense of harmony to the scene. One can imagine the narrator reposing under his sycamore, scanning the pastoral landscape, his eye focusing on the hedge rows, copses and country cottages, then panning backward to notice the mysterious wreathes of smoke above the trees. He is effectively absorbed into the landscape, as has already happened to the other mysterious inhabitants of the valley. Like the hedgerows indicate sheep herding, so too do the wreathes of smoke indicate the presence of these unseen folk’.

*wreathes-twisted or turned circular shapes*

In these lines, Wordsworth also explains his vision of mutual intercourse, or communion, between nature and the mind. Retreating into the solitude of his memories, Wordsworth tries to efface the din of cities. He recalls how in the most troubled times, amidst the ‘hours of weariness’, these memories of nature’s calmness gave him strength and gave him ‘sensations sweet’. In the lines following, he once again lays emphasis on the connectedness between nature, time and man.

Wordsworth says that so strong is the power of nature to soothe frayed souls that even while he was far away from the lap of nature, he could perceive the beauty of nature with his mind’s eye, and that through this communion with nature, he felt a sense of peace and connectedness. Through his connection with nature, he is able to draw on the boundless potential of the earth.

In the lines 36-50, Wordsworth expounds the crux of the poem as he describes endowment of his prophetic vision. Wordsworth says that nature

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invokes within him a natural sense of tranquility which enables him to draw on nature's potential through self-surrender to both nature and his own mind. Wordsworth suggests pantheism here, as he says the tranquil mood envelops him completely, leading him into a state akin to a trance. As Kaiser writes, 'This trance lends Wordsworth the wisdom and insight to "see into the life of things". This "blessed mood" invokes not only a mental and emotional change, but a physical change as well. Wordsworth's body seems to almost enter a stasis, not unlike what appears to occur in transcendental meditation. The body slows down to a point where it does not distract us, and indeed all corporeal things disappear'.

Another critic, William Christie, writes that as Wordsworth would 'have us believe, ... *Tintern Abbey* is a poem of emancipation and enlightenment, discovering and celebrating the harmony - indeed, unity - of man and Nature, as had Coleridge's *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison* and *Frost at Midnight*. Far from being an "exploration", *Tintern Abbey* represents on at least one level an escape from the "dark passages" of life; an escape, literally and metaphorically, from "lonely rooms: mid the din of towns and cities" (11.26-7), for it is thus incarcerated that the poet feels "the burthen of the mystery" and "the heavy and the weary weight of all this unintelligible world" most acutely (11.39-41). The escape itself is, by turns, upwards (transcendence), outwards (geographical relocation), and, ultimately, both'.

Of all the works of Wordsworth, critics assert that *Tintern Abbey* is the most paradoxical. It is seen by a critic as 'at once highly derivative and highly innovative: derivative, in that it is rooted in the eighteenth-century recollective, topographical tradition of Thomson, Warton, Akenside, Cowper, Bowles, Rogers, Southey, and even Goldsmith; innovative, in that it initiates a descriptive and psychological depth and fusion - a poetic language expressive of the imaginative co-operation of mind and nature - as well as achieving the unapologetic audacity or reach that we identify as "the Romantic sublime"'.

Wordsworth, on his second visit to the River Wye, is consistently drawing a comparison between his memories of his earlier visit or 'mental revisiting' and the experience he has in context of those memories in his 'physical revisiting'. He is representing a 'mental landscape' by trying to superimpose it upon the present landscape. This develops in the poet a deep sense of unease and perplexity as he is unable to apprehend the river Wye with as innocent and calm mental state as he had done five years earlier. In these five years, the poet's disillusionment with the hollowness of the revolutionary fervour of the French Revolution has incapacitated the poet's ability to indulge in the sublime beauty of nature as before.

*Tintern Abbey* has been seen as a holistic statement of Wordsworth's philosophy of nature. The poet recalls how as a boy, when he still retained the innocence of childhood, he 'like a roe / I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides / Of the deep river, and the lonely streams' (lines 67-69), and

absorbed the ‘sensations sweet’. It is these ‘sensations’ which his adult mind recalls to draw sustenance amidst the din of the city and fill his being with a sense of ‘tranquil restoration’. Not only that, he says that these memories

*have no slight or trivial influence  
On that best portion of a good man’s life,  
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts  
Of kindness and of love” (lines 29-35).*

Wordsworth asserts that nature’s peaceful environment rejuvenates a person’s soul so that even amid the stress of city life, one can find solace and that is the reason why he still is:

*A lover of the meadows and the woods,  
And mountains; and of all that we behold  
From this green earth; . . . . .  
. . . . . well pleased to recognize  
In nature and the language of the sense,  
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being. (102-111)*

### Check Your Progress

3. State the philosophy of nature in Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey*.
4. Why does the poet turn to his sister in the poem?

## 3.4 JOHN KEATS: ABOUT THE POET

John Keats was born in London. Thomas, his father, worked in the Swan and Hoop Inn Stables owned by his father-in-law. He continued his schooling in Dame school and later on in a school in Enfield whose headmaster was John Clarke, who went on to become a major influence in Keats life. Keats father died in 1804. His mother remarried, but her second marriage turned out to be unsuccessful. She died in 1810.

Keats became an apprentice to Thomas Hammond, and after completing his apprenticeship he became an assistant to a surgeon. But all through this he was in touch with Charles Clarke, a teacher by profession and son of John Clarke.

Keats’ first poem to be published was *On Solitude* in 1816. It came out in Leigh Hunt’s *Examiner*. The first book of his which was published was *Poems*; it was commercially unsuccessful. Next he started writing *Endymion*, an epic

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poem, which he finished only after the death of his brother, Tom. *Endymion* was published in 1818 and turned out to be another unsuccessful attempt. Immediately after this came his *The Eve of St. Agnes, To a Grecian Urn, La Belle Dame Sans Merci, To a Nightingale, To Psyche* and *To Melancholy*. He started composing his next epic *Hyperion*.

In 1819, he met Fanny Brawn, the love of his life. And in 1820, came out his final book *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes and Other Poems*. He died in February 1821.

In his last wish, Keats had mentioned that he during his burial, his grave should contain, apart from his body, unread letters received from Fanny Brawn, a lock of her hair and a purse designed by Keats' sister and his headstone would have the words, 'Here lies one whose name was writ in water' etched out.

### Check Your Progress

5. List some of the famous poems written by John Keats.

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## 3.5 ODE ON A GRECIAN URN: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Douglas Bush has pointed out that 'from first to the last Keats's important poems are related to, or grow directly out of...inner conflicts.' The poems chronicle Keats' engagement with the various dichotomies of life - like sufferings and delight, sorrow and exaltation. All these feelings are interlaced with each other and life. It is difficult to separate each from the other.

The *Ode On a Grecian Urn* begins abruptly in an apostrophic mode. The initial lines associate the urn with permanence and immortality. The word 'still' is used to highlight the fact that the urn is beyond the temporal effects of time. The poet cannot suppress his wonder as to how could this piece of art battle the effects of time and remain as a custodian to the last few centuries to which it has been a silent spectator.

Keats juxtaposes his excitement and amazement of this sudden encounter with a 'Sylvan historian' with his imagining sense of impermanence and transient life that he is leading. He portrays the urn as a feminine symbol which is accommodating nurturing and is part of the ancient world. He calls her 'bride' and mentions about its shape and outer lines.

The closing lines of the poem have indeed drawn a lot of speculation and critical observations. The words seem to convey a multitude of contexts which could have led to this statement. In a letter to Fanny Browne, Keats mentioned that 'I have loved the principle of beauty in all things.' All of

Keats' work prominently highlights his love for beauty; Keats was an admirer of the ideal beauty, a concept which can trace its germination to the Greek philosopher Plato. According to Plato, the mortal world that we exist in is a replica of the ideal and perfect image that exists in the ideal world.

In another letter to Bailey written in 22 November, 1817, Keats asserts, 'what the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth.' It could also be that Keats was had in mind P.B. Shelley's defense of poetry where he advocates that 'to be a poet is to apprehend the truth and the beautiful.' But there was a difference in Keats's and Shelley's approach towards the notion of beauty. For Shelley, beauty was abstract but for Keats, it was more physical, something that can be felt with senses. The link between 'truth' and 'beauty' might be because of the influence of the Neo-classists. The urn becomes the representative where the synthesis of truth and beauty takes place.

The use of the phrase 'cold pastoral' underlines that the poet is no longer traversing in his fantastical and ecstatic journey. He is back to the reality. But at the same time it suggests that the beauty of the urn and its symbolic manifestations are now part of the poet's mind. The beauty of the urn is not only love but it is also perceived and internalised.

Keats, like all the Romantics, was strongly influenced by the Greeks who were lovers of beauty. Keats believed that any form of art is created to represent beauty. For him, the artistic creativity is a whole some representation of human perfection, which is the only solace human mind. The poem first records the beauty that has a visual appeal:

*'What men or gods are these?'*

*What wild ecstasy?'*

Keats is so amazed on seeing the human figure and other inanimate objects that are painted in the urn that he gets involved in their joy. These lines reflect Keats belief that true beauty was 'joy forever'. From physical sensations Keats gradually moves to perceptions which are beyond physical. He writes, 'Heard melodies are sweet ... of no tone'

The melodious tune that the piper on the urn plays cannot be captured by the human auditory organs. Here, Keats affirms the significance and utility imagination which has the ability reconstruct the world that is beyond the grasp of the mortal senses. The word 'soft' used in these lines caters to both aesthetic as well as sensuous appeal. In the concluding lines, Keats insists that the urn holds a benevolent position in human world. By being free from the temporal world it is able to draw human attention to one liberating aspect of human existence.

*'When old age... need to know.'*

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### 3.5.1 *Ode on a Grecian Urn*: Summary and Annotations

#### *Stanza 1*

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Keats addresses the urn as ‘unravish’d bride of quietness’ because it has managed to survive for centuries without undergoing any transformation in its appearance (it is ‘unravished’). He goes on to identify the urn as ‘foster-child of silence and time’ because it has taken recourse to silence and has transcended time; thus, acquiring this calm disposition. Furthermore, Keats refers to the urn as a ‘sylvan historian’. The urn is ‘sylvan’— because a design of leaves circumscribes the vase and also because the scene depicted on the urn is located among the woods. It is historian because it has been a witness to human lives for centuries and also because it depicts a pastoral landscape of an unidentified period.

The pattern on the urn depicts a story (‘legend’). Keats presumes that the scene depicted is set on Arcadia or Tempe. Tempe is a valley situated between Mount Olympus and Mount Ossa in Greece that was a favourite location with Apollo. Arcady refers to Arcadia, a place in Greece popular for its scenic beauty which reflects the rustic life. Keats is taken aback on seeing the picture and wonders if the people reflected in the vase are actually human or are they god. He wonders who the maidens are and what kind of action is taking place in the lives of these people.

#### *Stanza 2*

Stanza two uses the figures of speech of paradox and oxymoron. Keats seems to be in awe of the silent music coming from the pipes and considers these ‘unheard melodies’ more appealing to the auditory organ than the real life music one comes across. Keats then realises that the characters painted on the vase have transcended time and have received an immortal status. The young man who is playing the pipe under trees will always keep his hands stretched. He, like the leaves, has defeated time. They will always remain as they are. Keats rightly observes that the young lover will never be able to embrace the girl despite sharing such close proximity. But, Keats suggests that there is no reason for the lover to be sorrowful because though the embrace can never materialise yet their love for each other will always remain intact and the beloved will remain as beautiful forever.

#### *Stanza 3*

Keats shifts his focus to the tress, the ‘happy, happy boughs’ and wonders at the eternal spring they will enjoy as they will never shed leaves. He calls the young musician, ‘happy melodist’ because his song too will remain forever melodious just like the unquenched yet unchanging nature of love of the young man for this maiden — ‘warm and still to be enjoy’d / Forever panting, and forever young...’ In contrast to this ideal depiction, Keats points out that the



lovers in real world are imperfect, causing distraught and sorrow. The lovers are always faced with ‘burning forehead, and a parching tongue.’

#### **Stanza 4**

Keats wonders about the people and the nature of the occasion when he sees the approaching crowd moving towards an altar to sacrifice a ‘lowing’ (mooring) cow. Keats speculates about the background of these people. But then he realises that it does not matter whether they are from a town or village because the entire place will be vacant now as all the people are now participating in the ritual. Just like the lover and the beloved, they are also caught in the frame work of time.

#### **Stanza 5**

Keats calls the urn as ‘attic shape’ because the urn was created in Attica, a place in Greece. The urn is beautiful because of its ‘brede’, the decorations. Keats refers the urn as ‘cold pastoral’ partly because it is made of marble, and partly because it is unaffected by time or surrounding. Keats argues that even after he or his generation is dead, even then the urn will remain, reminding all that ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’.

### **3.5.2 Poetic Devices in *Ode on Grecian Urn***

The line ‘bride of quietness, / Thou foster-child of silence and slow time’ is an example of assonance. Assonance is the repetition of the similar vowel sounds in quick succession. ‘Thou foster-child of silence and slow time, / Sylvan historian, who canst thus express’ is an example of alliteration. In alliteration consonant sounds recur in quick succession. The lines

*What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?*

*What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?*

*What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?*

is an anaphora. Anaphora is the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of consecutive clauses or verses.

The line ‘Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter:’ is an oxymoron. It lies in setting side by side two contradictory terms (here, heard-unheard). The poem is written in iambic pentameter.

#### **Check Your Progress**

6. How does John Keats address the urn in the first stanza of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*?
7. List some of the figures of speech in Keats’ *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

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### 3.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

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1. The French Revolution, eighteenth century development of psychological views implicit in Locke's view of perception and knowledge, rational and humanitarian principles of enlightenment, his own simple and democratic upbringing, and the countryside of the Lake District were important factors in the development of his poetry. His first poem, *An Evening Walk* (1793), shows the influence of the French poets.
2. *The Prelude* gives a long autobiographical account of his own development as a poet. *The Recluse* is a 'philosophical poem containing the view of man, nature and society having for its principal subject the sensations and the opinions of a poet living in retirement'. Relationship, love, joy are the key words of Wordsworth. Poems like *Resolution*, *Independence*, *The Solitary Reaper* and *Michael* are some of his most famous poems.
3. Wordsworth says that so strong is the power of nature to soothe frayed souls that even while he was far away from the lap of nature, he could perceive the beauty of nature with his mind's eye, and that through this communion with nature, he felt a sense of peace and connectedness. Through his connection with nature, he is able to draw on the boundless potential of the earth. The poet becomes so enchanted with the beauty of the landscape that he becomes embroiled in even the minutest aspects such as 'wreathes of smoke Sent up, in silence'.
4. The poet then turns to his sister who has accompanied him to this visit and in whom he finds his dearest companion. The poet says that he sees in his sister an image of his former self. Addressing his sister, the poet says that he is making a prayer to nature to lead him from joy to joy eternally and all the while induce in their beings lofty and sublime thoughts such that the 'dreary intercourse' of every day mundane life does not make them insensitive to the beauties of nature.
5. John Keats' *Endymion* was published in 1818 and turned out to be another unsuccessful attempt. Immediately after this came his *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *To a Grecian Urn*, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, *To a Nightingale*, *To Psyche* and *To Melancholy*. He started composing his next epic *Hyperion*. In 1819, he met Fanny Brawn, the love of his life. And in 1820, came out his final book *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes and Other Poems*.
6. In the first stanza of the poem, Keats addresses the urn as 'unravish'd bride of quietness' because it has managed to survive for centuries without undergoing any transformation in its appearance (it is

‘unravished’). He goes on to identify the urn as ‘foster-child of silence and time’ because it has taken recourse to silence and has transcended time; thus, acquiring this calm disposition. Furthermore, Keats refers to the urn as a ‘sylvan historian’. The urn is ‘sylvan’— because a design of leaves circumscribes the vase and also because the scene depicted on the urn is located among the woods.

7. *Ode on a Grecian Urn* uses numerous figures of speech. The line ‘bride of quietness, / Thou foster-child of silence and slow time’ is an example of assonance. Assonance is the repetition of the similar vowel sounds in quick succession. ‘Thou foster-child of silence and slow time, / Sylvan historian, who canst thus express’ is an example of alliteration. There is the use of anaphora. Anaphora is the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of consecutive clauses or verses.

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### 3.7 SUMMARY

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- In 1795, William Wordsworth met Coleridge. He planned lyrical *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. Then he travelled to Germany after which both William and Dorothy settled in their beloved lake district near Grasmere. In 1783, he married Mary Hutchinson. He faced a series of tragedies; death of his brother, death of his two children and alienation from Coleridge. His financial condition was also not stable.
- *Tintern Abbey* (1798) volume shows idiom of poetry where reflection is linked to sensation in new and organic fashion. It shows the development of his attitude towards nature- moving from the animal pleasure of childhood through adolescent passion for wild and gloomy to adult awareness of the relation of one’s perception of the natural world to a sense of the human and moral world.
- *Tintern Abbey* was composed in the year 1798 and it is considered to be one of the most significant of all the works of Wordsworth. One of his most celebrated and critically acclaimed poems, it is seen by critics as a record of the different stages in the growth of Wordsworth’s poetic genius and imagination.
- Wordsworth says that so strong is the power of nature to soothe frayed souls that even while he was far away from the lap of nature, he could perceive the beauty of nature with his mind’s eye, and that through this communion with nature, he felt a sense of peace and connectedness. Through his connection with nature, he is able to draw on the boundless potential of the earth.
- *Tintern Abbey* has been seen as a holistic statement of Wordsworth’s philosophy of nature. The poet recalls how as a boy, when he still retained the innocence of childhood, he ‘like a roe / I bounded o’er

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the mountains, by the sides / Of the deep river, and the lonely streams' (lines 67-69), and absorbed the 'sensations sweet'.

- The closing lines of the poem have indeed drawn a lot of speculation and critical observations. The words seem to convey a multitude of contexts which could have led to this statement. In a letter to Fanny Browne, Keats mentioned that 'I have loved the principle of beauty in all things.' All of Keats' work prominently highlights his love for beauty; Keats was an admirer of the ideal beauty, a concept which can trace its germination to the Greek philosopher Plato.
- In *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, John Keats is so amazed on seeing the human figure and other inanimate objects that are painted in the urn that he gets involved in their joy. The lines in the poem reflect Keats belief that true beauty was 'joy forever'. From physical sensations, Keats gradually moves to perceptions which are beyond physical. He writes, 'Heard melodies are sweet ... of no tone.'

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### 3.8 KEY WORDS

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- **Keats's use of apostrophe:** In "*Ode on a Grecian Urn*", this is an effective method of conveying the speaker's deeply felt emotions. In apostrophe, a writer speaks to a person who is not there or to an inanimate object. In either case, someone or something that cannot respond is addressed.
- **Iambic pentameter:** This is a type of metric line used in traditional English poetry and verse drama. The term describes the rhythm, or meter, established by the words in that line; rhythm is measured in small groups of syllables called "feet".
- **Anaphora:** Anaphora is the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of consecutive clauses or verses.

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### 3.9 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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#### Short Answer Questions

1. Enumerate the life and works of William Wordsworth.
2. Write in brief the element of Romanticism in Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*.
3. State the significance of tranquility as reflected in Wordsworth's poem.
4. What is the main theme of John Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*?

5. Write a brief note on John Keats's contribution in Romantic poetry.
6. State the use of figurative speech in Keats' *Ode on Grecian Urn*.

### Long Answer Questions

1. Discuss why William Wordsworth is regarded as the pioneer of Romanticism in English Literature.
2. Analyze the description of relationship between Man and Nature in Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*.
3. Why do critics describe *Tintern Abbey* a paradoxical? Discuss.
4. In John Keats' *Ode on Grecian Urn*, the urn becomes the representative where the synthesis of truth and beauty takes place. Discuss this statement.
5. Write a comprehensive note on Keats poetic devices used in the poem.

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### 3.10 FURTHER READINGS

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## UNIT 4 TENNYSON AND BROWNING

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### NOTES

#### Structure

- 4.0 Introduction
  - 4.1 Objectives
  - 4.2 Alfred Tennyson: About the Poet
  - 4.3 Alfred Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*: Summary
    - 4.3.1 *The Lady of Shalott*: An Analysis
  - 4.4 Robert Browning: About the Poet
  - 4.5 Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess*: Summary
    - 4.5.1 Browning as a Poet of Dramatic Monologues
    - 4.5.2 *My Last Duchess*: An Analysis
  - 4.6 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
  - 4.7 Summary
  - 4.8 Key Words
  - 4.9 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
  - 4.10 Further Readings
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#### 4.0 INTRODUCTION

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Considered by many as one of Britain's greatest poets, Alfred Tennyson was deeply influenced by melancholic style of the English Romantic poets. Tennyson's verse illustrated a mastery of rhythm and descriptive imagery drawing on both the poetic structure and content of classical myths and medieval legends. Tennyson's *Poems of 1842* was a great success, consisting of two volumes. The first was a revision of the *1832 Poems*, and the second was an epic 3,000 line requiem for the late Hallam, a fellow student with whom he developed a close and lasting friendship, *In Memoriam A.H.H.* or simply *In Memoriam*, who died in Vienna in 1833. It contains some of Tennyson's most accomplished lyrical works and is widely considered to be one of the great poems of the 19th century. Tennyson used the elegiac structure of *Poems* as a vehicle to express the uncertainties and rising divergences between theology and scientific theory characteristic of the time. *The Lady of Shalott* is one of the most famous poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson.

Universally acknowledged for his dramatic monologue, Robert Browning's most esteemed poems include the monologues, *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*, *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *Andrea Del Sarto*, and *My Last Duchess*. Browning's *The Ring and the Book* is often cited as his most supreme work, whereas *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, a children's poem was one of his biggest commercial successes. However, Browning's name is primarily associated with the dramatic monologue in which a character

divulges many things about himself or herself, sometimes more than they intended. The characters expose themselves by talking to a listener from an utterly subjective point of view. *My Last Duchess* is a dramatic monologue, a poem with a character who presents an account centered on a particular topic. This character speaks all the words in the poem.

This unit aims at bringing in the life and works of Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning while critically analyzing their poems, *The Lady of Shalott* and *My Last Duchess*.

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### 4.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand poems written by Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning
- Evaluate and critically analyze Tennyson’s *The Lady of Shalott*
- Enumerate conflict between art and life in *The Lady of Shalott*.
- Explain the theme of Browning’s *My Last Duchess*
- Understand the treatment of dramatic monologue in Browning’s poem
- Analyse critically Browning’s *My Last Duchess*

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### 4.2 ALFRED TENNYSON: ABOUT THE POET

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Alfred Lord Tennyson was born in 1809 into a large family in Lincolnshire, England. He began writing poetry at the age of 17. He attended Trinity College in Cambridge where his first publication, *Poems*, earned him the Chancellor’s Gold Medal in 1829. It was at Trinity College that Tennyson met fellow student Arthur Henry Hallam, with whom he developed a close and lasting friendship. In 1833, he published his second collection of poetry, *Poems*. The work was met with harsh criticism and, although he continued to write, Tennyson refused to publish again for the following ten years. Later that same year, Hallam died suddenly from a stroke at the age of 22.

T.S. Eliot described Alfred Lord Tennyson as “the saddest of all English poets”. To this day, Tennyson is considered to be one of Britain’s greatest poets. He was heavily influenced by the strictly metered and often melancholic style of the English Romantic poets. Tennyson’s verse illustrated a mastery of rhythm and descriptive imagery drawing on both the poetic structure and content of classical myths and medieval legends.

It was only after his decision to move to London that Tennyson allowed a revised and lengthened version of *Poems* to be published. *Poems of 1842* was a great success, consisting of two volumes – the first of which was a revision of the 1832 *Poems*, and the second of which was an epic 3,000 line requiem

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for the late Hallam, *In Memoriam A.H.H.* or simply *In Memoriam*, who died in Vienna in 1833. It contains some of Tennyson's most accomplished lyrical work and is widely considered to be one of the great poems of the 19th century. The original title of the poem was "*The Way of the Soul*", and this might give an idea of how the poem is an account of all Tennyson's thoughts and emotions as he grieves over the death of a close friend.

*In Memoriam* was ultimately an allegory of the societal, religious, and intellectual conflicts that defined the Victorian era. Tennyson used the elegiac structure of Poems as a vehicle to express the uncertainties and rising divergences between theology and scientific theory characteristic of the time. Soon he found himself to be a celebrity in London. In response to the success of the *1842 Poems*, Edgar Allan Poe wrote: "I am not sure that Tennyson is not the greatest of poets." In 1850, he was appointed Poet Laureate of Great Britain and England by Queen Victoria, succeeding William Wordsworth. That same year he married his wife Emily Sellwood, whom he had known since childhood. She became the mother of his two sons, Hallam and Lionel. Tennyson produced some of his best-known works throughout the period, including: *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, *Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington*, and *Idylls of the King*.

The most famous poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson are: *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, *Ulysses*, *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, *Locksley Hall*, *The Eagle*, *Tears*, *idle Tears* (part of *The Princess*), *Tithonus*, *Break, Break, Break*, *The Lady of Shalott* and *Crossing the Bar*.

### Check Your Progress

1. State some of Alfred Tennyson's contribution in English poetry.
2. List some of Alfred Tennyson's famous poems.

## 4.3 ALFRED TENNYSON'S *THE LADY OF SHALOTT*: SUMMARY

Fields of barley and rye are on either side of the river, and through them a road winds to Camelot. The people gaze at the way lilies blow around the island of Shalott. The willows "whiten," and little breezes blow forever around the island. There are four gray walls and four gray towers on the island, and within is the Lady of Shalott. No one has ever seen the Lady wave or stand at the window though heavy barges followed by slow horses pass by the island. Only early morning harvesters hear the cheerful song of Lady of Shalott that reaches down to the river that winds to Camelot. They pile up their sheaves and whisper that it is the song sung by fairy Lady.



In the tower, Lady of Shalott weaves day and night her “magic web with colours gay.” She knows there is a curse upon her if she looks down at Camelot, although she is not aware of what the curse is. She weaves steadily and thinks of little else. Through her mirror she sees the shadows of the world, the highway and the river eddy and the young men and women passing onward from Shalott. Sometimes she will see an abbot, or a group of damsels, or a page clad in crimson, or knights riding in twos. She herself has no “loyal knight.” Oblivious of the situation, Lady of Shalott weaves and delights in her creations of the mirrors’ “magic sights.” There are occasions when there is a general procession or two young lovers or newly-wed. Then she says to herself, “I am half sick of shadows.”

Sir Lancelot, with the emblem of a knight on his breast forever kneeling to a lady, rides through the barley sheaves. The bells on his bridle ring out merrily, and the silver bugle he carried shines brightly. He passes by Shalott in “blue unclouded weather,” and his helmet, helmet feather, and saddle-leather burn like “one burning flame together.” He is like a meteor shooting through the starry night sky. Sunlight glimmers on his brow, and his black curly hair flows from under his helmet. As he sings “Tirra lirra” by the river, Lancelot’s image flashes into the mirror. In three paces, the Lady of Shalott leaves her loom and crosses the room. She looks down and sees the water lilies blooming and Lancelot’s helmet and plume. She looks down to Camelot, and as she does so, her web flies out the window and her mirror cracks from side to side. “The curse is come upon me,” she cries out.

Meanwhile, nature becomes stormy over Camelot. Lady of Shalott leaves her tower and finds a boat. On its prow she writes, “The Lady of Shalott.” She looks out over the river as a seer with glossy eyes would be wont to do, seeing his own “mischance.” When the sun sets, she loosens her chain and lies down in the boat. The broad stream takes her far away down the river. She is dressed in snowy white, and her garments flutter from left to right. Leaves fall upon her softly. Through the “noises of the night” she travels in her boat down to Camelot. She sings her last song. Those who hear her hear a “carol, mournful, holy, / Chanted loudly, chanted lowly” until her blood freezes and her eyes darken. By the time she reaches the first house by the water side singing her song, she dies.

Lady of Shalott floats under the tower, balcony, and garden wall as a “gleaming shape” silently into Camelot. Knight, burgher, lord dame and everyone, come out to see her name written on the prow of the boat. In nearby palace, the noise has died down and people wonder and cross themselves for fear. Sir Lancelot, though, muses a bit and says that she had a lovely face and asks for God to lend her grace.

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### 4.3.1 *The Lady of Shalott: An Analysis*

#### NOTES

*The Lady of Shalott* is one of Alfred Tennyson's most famous and beloved poems. Originally written in 1832 and published in 1842, the poem is divided into four parts; the first and second parts containing four stanzas; the third part containing five stanzas; and the fourth part containing six stanzas. Each stanza contains nine lines with a rhyme scheme of *AAAABCCCB*. The syntax is also line-bound, meaning that the lines do not carry over from one to the other. There are many critics who believe that the poem is based on the episode in Arthurian legend of *Elaine of Astalot*, or *the Maid of Astalot*, who died of her unrequited love for the famous knight. In his *Idylls of the King*, Tennyson's engagement with Arthurian legend is most notably seen. However, the poet complicated the origins of his poem by claiming his source was the Italian romance *Donna di Scalotta*. This may be true in some sense, but it is impossible to ignore the Arthurian components of Camelot, Lancelot, knights and ladies, and even the name Shalott, which sounds somewhat like Astalot.

In Part I of the poem, we see the isle of Shalott with its tall towers and imprisoned, fairy-like Lady. The interior where she is embowered is "silent" and immovable, whereas the world outside goes on in a busy and cheerful way. In stark contrast to the Lady of Shalott, the positioning of the great city of Camelot by the river stresses the progress, purposefulness, and ever-present sense of movement and vitality of the men and women outside of the tower. This attests to the fact that there is a connection between the inhabitants of Camelot and the Lady. But that it is mysterious and magical further emphasizes the distinction between the realms of the external world and the tower.

In Part II introduces us to the Lady, who is under the spell of a mysterious curse that does not allow her to look out from her window. Nonetheless, the Lady seems happy and spends her days weaving her "magic web" and singing (alluding to Odysseus's wife, Penelope, who weaves while her husband is away, and other myths that involve a woman's weaving). Her web, a symbol of artistic fecundity but also of her enslavement, depicts the world outside, but only as reflected in her mirror. She sees knights and pages and boys and girls, and sometimes she sees the two great events of earthly life, funerals and weddings. This state of affairs is what causes her to assert her identity by claiming that she is sick of shadows, for her life is paralyzed and stagnant. She feels a sense of loss and exclusion.

The handsome and courageous Sir Lancelot is introduced in Part III. The language is sensual and heroic, and the Lady of Shalott is also entranced by his persona. She breaks the curse and moves to her window to look down on the great knight. Some critics have noted that it is the song of Lancelot, "Tirra lira," that breaks down the cursed Lady's resistance, for song is one of her means of expression. It is now clear that she feels an intense connection

with the man. “Tirra lirra” is a bawdy song from Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*. However, once the mirror cracks and the web flutters out the window, everyone knows that the Lady is doomed.

The Lady lets the river carry her in Part IV. Tennyson emphasizes the disruption of the Lady’s being through Nature: the wind is “stormy,” the “pale yellow woods were waning,” and the “low sky” was raining heavily and the banks of the river straining. The people of Camelot are frightened but curious to know, as they hear her last song and see her pale shape. The poem, *The Lady of Shalott* concludes with Lancelot looking down at her and commenting that she “has a lovely face” and that he hopes God will lend her grace, reminding us of the famous death of Hamlet’s sister Ophelia and other scenes where a woman dies in a river or ocean.

Most critics analyze the poem as expressing the conflicts between art and life. It also raises the question of whether or not artistic seclusion is necessary for achievement. As the poem begins, we see that despite her isolation, the Lady of Shalott experiences artistic fulfillment and accomplishment in the island of Shalott. She works on her web and sings her song, blissful and happy. However, her art mimics the shadows through a mirror and is far from direct observation of real life. This separation and isolation finally lead her to a gesture of passion and an embrace of her own death. The cracking of mirror symbolizes the end of her artistic abilities. Harold Bloom concludes that “the end of artistic isolation leads to the death of creativity. The artist’s intense loneliness is absolutely necessary, for all great art demands solitude and silent reflection.”

Flavia M. Alaya, another critic, agrees that “an essential loneliness is the one element of the artistic condition that cannot be revoked, even by love” while noting that the Lady is placed in an eponymously-named boat which is an extension of herself, and that Tennyson is suggesting some motif through this lonely scene.

Alaya even interprets Lancelot’s last words, commonly perceived as callously and regrettably ironic, as redemptive: “Lancelot, who earlier had provided the symbolic type of cosmic love and human sympathy, is the only knight to express the mystery of her presence in language we find so curiously appropriate, recognizing her beauty and providing the benediction which her act of renunciation and egoism have sought and required.”

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### Check Your Progress

3. State the list of Part I of *The Lady of Shalott*.
4. What role does Sir Lancelot play in the poem?

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#### 4.4 ROBERT BROWNING: ABOUT THE POET

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Robert Browning was born on 7 May 1812, in Camberwell, England. His mother was an accomplished pianist and a devout evangelical Christian. His father, who worked as a blank clerk, was also an artist, scholar, antiquarian, and collector of books and pictures. Browning's early career began promisingly, but was not a huge success. The long poem *Pauline* brought him to the attention of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and was followed by *Paracelsus*, which was praised by Wordsworth and Dickens. But in 1840, *Sordello*, which was seen as willfully obscure, brought his poetry into disrepute. His reputation took more than a decade to recover. Today, Browning's critically most esteemed poems include the monologues *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*, *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *Andrea Del Sarto*, and *My Last Duchess*.

Browning published *Dramatis Personae*, with both first and second editions in the 1860s. However, he attained success and recognition only when he reached his 50s. *The Ring and the Book*, published in 1868-69, is often cited by critics as his most supreme work, whereas *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, a children's poem was one of his biggest commercial successes. Despite the latter being not considered by the poet to be a work of major consequence, it was destined to become famous. However, Browning's name is primarily associated with the dramatic monologue. In a dramatic monologue, a character divulges many things about himself or herself, sometimes more than they intended. The characters expose themselves by talking to a listener from an utterly subjective point of view. Browning was reinstated in the good books of the mid-century critics of the twentieth century, after it was disparaged initially by the modernist critics of that time.

**Check Your Progress**

5. List some of the famous dramatic monologues of Robert Browning.

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#### 4.5 ROBERT BROWNING'S *MY LAST DUCHESS*: SUMMARY

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Robert Browning's poem, *My Last Duchess*, is narrated by the Duke of Ferrara to an envoy of a nobleman whose daughter he is soon to marry. Throughout the poem, these details are revealed but from the very opening of the poem when one encounters the use of the irony that the poet employs. At the poem's opening, the Duke has just pulled back a curtain to reveal to the envoy a portrait of his previous duchess. The portrait was painted by Fra Pandolf, a monk and painter whom the Duke believes captured the singularity of the duchess's glance. However, the Duke insists that his former wife's deep,

passionate glance was not reserved solely for her husband. As he puts it, she was “too easily impressed” into sharing her affable nature.

The Duke’s tone grows harsh as he recollects how both human and nature could impress her, which insulted him since she did not give special favor to the “gift” of his “nine-hundred-years-old” family name and lineage. Desperate to rein on her unacceptable love of everything, the duke “gave commands” to have her killed. He then ends his story and asks the envoy to rise and accompany him back to the count, the father of the Duke’s impending bride and the envoy’s employer. He mentions that he expects a high dowry, though he is happy enough with the daughter herself. He insists that the envoy walk with him “together” and on their descent, the Duke points out a bronze bust of the god Neptune in his collection.

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### 4.5.1 Browning as a Poet of Dramatic Monologues

Robert Browning’s genius was dramatic as well as metaphysical. He was gifted with an almost unlimited power of imagination, which was always exerted upon real things, visible or invisible, that is to say on everything that a human being can think or feel; he is realistic because he is never visionary. His dramatic bent of mind is seen in his characterization, and in the unfolding of strong dramatic situations. He also considered the drama as the highest form of expression. He, therefore, took to writing plays for the public stage in right earnest and produced at least eight plays in a period of eight years. Browning is a cheerful optimist; optimism is at the very core of his teaching and his view of human life. Contrary to the views of some critics, his optimism is not ‘blind’; he does not shut his eyes to the suffering and evil that is in life. It is not a cheap optimism: it is found on the realities of life. The famous lines in *Pippa Passes*,

*God is in his heaven,  
All is right with the world.*

He spoke the strongest word of faith in an age of doubt and pessimism. A drama is essentially a representation of action, but in Browning’s play, the action is entirely internal. His real interest lays in soul study, in introspection and psychological analysis, and so his plays were stage-failures. His dramatic skill, as well as his skill in painting, ‘interior landscapes’, could be exercised to advantage in the dramatic monologue, and it was of this poetic form that he became the supreme exponent. The dramatic monologue was used by Browning with amazing skill and success. As Hugh Walker points out, ‘Browning did not invent the dramatic monologue, but he made it specially his own, and no one else has ever put such rich and varied material into it’.

The salient features of the dramatic monologue are best brought out through a comparison and contrast both with the drama proper and the soliloquy. The dramatic monologue differs widely from the drama in its

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purpose and its method. In drama, the action is external; in monologue, the action is entirely internal. The thoughts and emotions of the individual character are the actors, and his soul is the stage. Dramatic monologue develops character not through outward action and conflict as in the drama but through the clash of motives in the soul of the speaker, and with this end in view, a moment of crisis is chosen, a moment when his personality is most active. The monologue is to be distinguished from the soliloquy. For one thing, the monologue is much longer than the soliloquy, thus allowing the poet fuller scope for character-portrayal for the analysis of motives and emotions. The soliloquy is a sort of private debate, 'a dialogue of the mind with itself', a speech of a person to himself when he is all alone; whereas a dramatic monologue implies the presence of some other character or characters, to whom it is addressed, and who listen to it, though they may not take part in it. This imparts to the monologue in a conversational tone.

*My Last Duchess* is a dramatic monologue, a poem with a character who presents an account centered on a particular topic. This character speaks all the words in the poem. During his discourse, the speaker intentionally or unintentionally reveals information about one or more of the following: his personality, his state of mind, his attitude toward his topic, and his response or reaction to developments relating to his topic. The main focus of a dramatic monologue is this personal information not the topic which the speaker happens to be discussing. The word monologue is derived from a Greek word meaning to speak alone.

In each monologue, the speaker is placed in the most momentous or critical situation of his life and the monologue embodies his reactions to this situation. Unlike a dramatist, Browning does not begin slowly with an action leading to the crisis; rather he plunges headlong into the crisis. For this reason, his monologues have an abrupt, but very arresting opening, and at the same time, what has gone before is suggested cleverly or brought out through retrospective meditation and reflection. *My Last Duchess* opens with a reference to a picture of the dead Duchess with clear indications that it is being shown to someone. This abrupt beginning is followed by self-introspection on the part of the speaker, and the whole gamut of his moods, emotions, reflections and meditations is given. The speaker's thoughts range freely over the past and the future, and so there is no logical and chronological development. The past and the future are focused in the present, and the unity is emotional rather than logical. The language of the monologues conforms closely to the thought-processes of the speaker concerned. It is the language of informal talk.

In his analysis of particular mental states, in his probing into the minds and hearts of the central characters of his monologues, in short, in his passion for psychoanalysis, Browning anticipates, to a very great extent, the modern stream of consciousness technique. Like the modern impressionists,



Browning, too, focuses the past and the future in the present; instead of giving us the orderly sequential development of thought, he ranges at will over vast stretches of time. His business is to render the soul or psyche of his protagonists, and so he follows the same technique as the modern impressionists.

In *My Last Duchess*, the speaker is the Duke of Ferrara, a perfect model of a nobleman of Renaissance Italy. His former wife, the last Duchess is dead. A neighbouring Count has sent to him an emissary offering his daughter's hand in marriage. It is important for the Duke to send the emissary back, suitably impressed, so that the Count receives a favourable report about him. He brings the emissary to his art gallery, draws the curtain in front of the portrait of his late wife and speaks the words that form the monologue. It is a critical moment indeed since the realization of his aspirations depends entirely on the impression he creates on the visitor.

As suggested above, the subject of *My Last Duchess* is the character delineation of the Duchess, but ironically, the speaker reveals more of himself than about the Duchess. The latter emerges as an extremely amiable woman, polite, courteous, easily pleased, generous at heart and utterly incorruptible. The Duke, on the other hand, is a heartless snob, devoid of all human feelings. The first few words uttered by him suggest his possessive and suspicious nature. He treated her no better than a prize possession, When she was alive, her courteous nature incensed him; but now that she is dead, and has been reduced to an art piece, he takes pride in possessing her and jealously guards the portrait from public gaze. His suspicious nature is revealed by the choice of the artist engaged by him to draw the portrait. Even though the artist was a priest by profession and sure to conduct himself in an upright manner, he kept sitting near the Duchess till the portrait was finished. His exaggerated pride in his 900-year-old family looks ridiculous to the modern reader, though his contemporaries might have found nothing wrong in it. He fails to understand how the Duchess could show the same courtesy to other people that she showed to him.

He regrets that she smiled at whatever she saw and her eyes fell everywhere.

*This grew; I gave commands;*

*Then all smiles stopped together.*

Obviously, there was no boorishness in her character. But this lovable trait, instead of eliciting gratitude from him, infuriated him. A time came when he could no longer put up with the total absence of snobbishness in her, and he got her done away with. This fact is hinted at in words shrouded with mystery and not explicitly stated. Besides these qualities, the monologue also reveals his felicity with language, his avariciousness suggested by his

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expectations of a large dowry and his bullying nature symbolised by the statue of Neptune taming sea waves placed at the entrance of the art gallery

The heroes of Browning's monologues are mostly self-deceived. The Duke of Ferrara too is no exception. He misinterprets vanity as justifiable self-pride. To him, showing courtesy to others deserves reprimand and not admiration. His self-deception lies in the fact that the more he speaks disparagingly of his wife, the more she rises in the reader's esteem, and the more he tries to justify his own behaviour, the lower he sinks in the reader's opinion. But in certain respects, he understands himself rather too clearly. He knows what he expects and sends the right signals. He is a great patron of art and his art gallery could be the pride of any nobleman in the country. He is a nonsense man and would tolerate no opposition from his would-be wife. He expects a bountiful dowry and his expectations must be fulfilled. His cleverly worded speech fully succeeds in sending the right signals to the Count:

*I repeat,  
The Count your master's known munificence  
is ample warrant that no just pretence  
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;  
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed  
At starting, is my object.*

Much of the success of Browning's monologues depends upon the listener in the poem, for it provides us with a perspective to judge the poem. This is particularly true of monologue like *My Last Duchess*. The Duke of Ferrara would not have appeared to be such an inhuman monster if he had not haunted his habit of bullying his former wife and mentioned getting her murdered, to a person who has brought another marriage proposal. It is true that the emissary is a contemporary figure and did not possess the eye of literature that the reader possesses. Still, since his master chose to send him on such an important mission, he must have been a man of sufficient intelligence and could not have been blind to the Duke's snobbishness or his utter lack of human emotions.

According to Robert Langbaum, the dramatic element in a dramatic monologue is introduced by the disequilibrium between sympathy and judgment. The speaker delivers his speech in a very persuasive tone and puts across his views very effectively. Browning's monologues are logically structured and the speaker's tone is throughout argumentative. As long as he is able to engage us, he is also able to win our support for his point of view or our sympathy. But the moment we detach ourselves and assume neutrality, internal contradictions of his argument start appearing and we judge him also. He demands our admiration as a lover of art, and we do admire him for that;

but we also condemn the debasement of that love when we find that though he takes pride in the portrait of the Duchess, he despised her when she was alive. He has a point when he says that he is proud of his lineage, but that lineage cannot justify his vanity. It is the tension between such polarities in the poem that makes it a successful dramatic monologue.

#### 4.5.2 *My Last Duchess: An Analysis*

Robert Browning is one of the famous poets of the 19th century (Victorian period). He is particularly well-known for his early monologue, *My Last Duchess*. *My Last Duchess* is a great example of dramatic dialogue, a poetic form used to narrate and dramatize Victorian concerns. *My Last Duchess*, a dramatic monologue written in 1842 by Robert Browning, is the first of two companion pieces originally released under the title *Italy and France*. It is written in twenty-eight rhyming couplets, with iambic pentameter dominating. The easy conversational flow of the poem is created by making the regular mid-line pauses (*caesura*) the dominant stops of the poem rather than end stopping.

*My Last Duchess* was first published in the volume of poems called, *Dramatic Lyrics*, in 1842. It was republished in the *Dramatic Romances of 1863*. It is a dramatic monologue and William Lyon Phelps regards it as one of the finest dramatic monologues not only of Browning, but in the whole range of English literature. The poem, *My Last Duchess* is based on incidents in the life of Alfonso II, duke of Ferrara in Italy. The Duke's first wife, Lucrezia, died in 1561 — after they had been married for three years. The background of the poem is interesting, but the text can be difficult to understand. The use of dramatic monologue works to separate the speaker from the poet (Browning). The speaker is the Duke of Ferrara, an important city of Italy. It was an important cultural centre during the Renaissance. Whether the character of the Duke in the monologue is based on some actual historical figure or not, there can be no denying the fact that in the monologue, the poet has captured the very spirit of Renaissance Italy, its intrigues, its sensuality, its greed, as well as its cultural and artistic activity.

The Duke of Ferrara, a powerful and proud duke of the 16th century, has been widowed recently, and now he intends to marry a second time. The messenger of a powerful Count, who has his estate in the neighbourhood, comes to the Duke's palace to negotiate with him the marriage of the Count's daughter. The Duke takes him round his picture gallery and shows to him the portrait of his last Duchess. The portrait is lifelike and realistic, and the Duke, who is a great lover of the fine arts, is justly proud of it.

The Duke points out the portrait to the messenger and tells him that he alone uncovers the picture and nobody else is allowed to do so. At this point, the Duke notices an inquiring look in the eyes of the messenger and at once understands that he wants to know the cause of the deep, passionate look in

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the eyes of the Duchess, and proceeds to satisfy his curiosity. In response to the inquiring look of the messenger, the Duke tells him that the deep passion in the eyes of the Duchess does not result from any sex intrigue or guilty love. He did not give her any occasion to be unfaithful to him. Even the portrait on the wall was done not by an ordinary artist, but by a monk, and he was allowed only one day to do it. He did not allow the monk any longer time for he did not want to provide them any occasion for intimacy. This shows that the Duke is a jealous tyrant; the poor Duchess could not enjoy any freedom of movement as the wife of such a man.

Continuing further with his explanation, the Duke tells the envoy that his last Duchess had a very childish and foolish nature. She was pleased with trifles, would thank others for even the slightest service they happened to render to her, and had no sense of dignity and decorum. For example, the faint blush of joy on her cheek and her neck was not caused by the presence of her husband alone. If the painter happened to mention that her cloak covered her wrist too much, or that paint could never hope to capture the light pink glow on her throat, she would like such chance remarks as compliments and blush with pleasure. She had a childish heart, and was pleased too easily by such trifles as the gift of a branch laden with cherries, the beautiful sunset or the mule presented to her by someone for her rides round the terrace.

She would blush with pleasure at such trifles, just as much as she would blush at some costly ornament presented by him. She was the wife of a Duke who belonged to a 900 year old ancient family. But she considered even this gift of his at par with the trifling services rendered to her by others. As a matter of fact, she had no discrimination, and no sense of dignity and decorum. She smiled at everybody without distinction; she thanked everybody in the same way. He expected better sense from his wife. He did not correct her, for even to notice such frivolity would have meant loss of dignity, and he did not like to suffer this loss. Besides, she would have argued and discussed with him, instead of listening to his advice. Her habit of smiling continued to grow till it became intolerable to him. At last he gave orders, and '*Then all smiles stopped together*'. What seems most outrageous of all to the speaker is that she showed others her appreciation for their kindness in such a way that seemed to him to belittle his greatest gift: his title.

She thanked men - good! But thanked

Somehow - I know not how - as if she ranked

My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name

*With anybody's gift* (ll. 31-34)

This statement, perhaps, reveals more about the speaker than any of his previous statements. It becomes clear that he felt the Duchess to be indebted to him for the gift of his noble title, which seems, by his description of her, to be the only gift he had to offer.

We cannot say for certain how the smiling stopped. But, most probably, the poor, innocent Duchess was murdered at the command of her brutal and stony-hearted husband. The Duke then asks the messenger to come down, where his other guests are waiting. In passing, he tells the messenger that he would expect a rich dowry from his master, the Count, though, of course, he adds very cleverly that his primary concern is the daughter and not the dowry. The Duke is not only hard-hearted and tyrannical but also greedy and cunning. He is a hypocrite of the first water. We learn about the Duke by what he says and how he says it. Through him, we also learn about his wife, the last Duchess. We decipher something of how their relationship stood, what his expectations were, how she responded, etc.

In short, we learn a great deal about his character by hearing how he thought and felt about her. The Duke is manipulative, filled with family pride and a feeling of ownership over even the memory of his deceased wife. The only good point about him is his love of art as they go down the stairs. He asks the messenger to have a good look at the bronze statue of Neptune, the sea-god. In this statue, the god is shown riding and controlling a sea-horse. It was done specially for him by the great sculptor, Claus of Innsbruck. It is the name of an imaginary artist invented to impress the messenger just as earlier he had invented the name of the painter, Fra Pandolf.

As a dramatic monologue does, the poem also reveals the psychology of the speaker, the Duke who is a very proud and possessive husband, who did not even like his wife to be smiling at anyone except him, who always wanted to treat her according to his whims. He regarded his late wife as a mere object who existed only to please him and do his bidding. He likes the portrait of her because he is a lover of art. He never admired her when she was alive, but after her death, he admires her portrait a lot. This shows his cunningness and cruelty. Moreover, he now has complete control of the portrait as a pretty art object that he can show to visitors. Several lines in the poem suggest that the duke had treated his wife as a mere object. He expected her to be beautiful to look at, but little more. But the Duchess was human; she had faults. When the Duke became annoyed by her faults and her smiling face, he ‘*gave commands*’ that brought an end to her smiling forever.

In other words, he apparently ordered her to be killed. The word *last* in the title suggests that the young woman in the portrait was not the Duke’s first wife. One wonders whether his previous wife (or wives) met the same fate and whether his next duchess will end up like his last duchess. Thus Robert Browning’s poem, *My Last Duchess* illustrates the attitude towards women in 16th century. The Duke, from an aristocratic family, expects his wife to behave in a certain way and when she does not, she pays the ultimate price. Women were expected to be happy dotting over their husband and their family; any other outside interests were seen as inconveniences. The fact that the Duke can do away with his last duchess in such a nonchalant way

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demonstrates how society views women. If the husband is displeased with his wife's behaviour, he can simply do away with her and have the next best through a portrait of her on the wall.

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The monologue is an admirable piece of character study. It is a poem of fifty lines, but within its brief compass, the poet has rendered a vivid and moving description of both the Duke and the Duchess. The tyranny, the pride and self-conceit, the hard-heartedness, and the dictatorial attitude of the Duke have been thrown into sharp relief by contrast with the genial, cheerful and good nature of the Duchess. Not only is this monologue an admirable piece of character study, but it is also the very epitome of the Italian Renaissance. The very spirit of the age has been captured in a short piece. The style of the monologue is dense and epigrammatic. The line, '*all smiles stopped together*', is a concentrated expression of a whole life's tragedy. But despite this density and concentration, the poem is lucid and clear. It is entirely free from the usual faults of Browning. No doubt, there are a few parentheses, but they do not come in the way of understanding. The poem is written in heroic couplets, but as the sense runs on from one line to another, the readers are hardly conscious of the rhyme.

### Check Your Progress

6. What do you mean by dramatic monologue?
7. Write a short note on the character of the main speaker of Browning's *My Last Duchess*.

## 4.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

1. T.S. Eliot described Alfred Lord Tennyson as "the saddest of all English poets". To this day, Tennyson is considered to be one of Britain's greatest poets. He was heavily influenced by the strictly metered and often melancholic style of the English Romantic poets. Tennyson's verse illustrated a mastery of rhythm and descriptive imagery drawing on both the poetic structure and content of classical myths and medieval legends. It was only after his decision to move to London that Tennyson allowed a revised and lengthened version of *Poems* to be published. *Poems* of 1842 was a great success, consisting of two volumes – the first of which was a revision of the 1832 *Poems*, and the second of which was an epic 3,000 line requiem for the late Hallam, *In Memoriam A.H.H.* or simply *In Memoriam*, who died in Vienna in 1833. It contains some of Tennyson's most accomplished lyrical work and is widely considered to be one of the great poems of the 19th century.

2. The most famous poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson are: *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, *Ulysses*, *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, *Locksley Hall*, *The Eagle*, *Tears*, *idle Tears* (part of *The Princess*), *Tithonus*, *Break, Break, Break*, *The Lady of Shalott* and *Crossing the Bar*
3. In Part I of the poem, we see the isle of Shalott with its tall towers and imprisoned, fairy-like Lady. The interior where she is embowered is “silent” and immovable, whereas the world outside goes on in a busy and cheerful way. In stark contrast to the Lady of Shalott, the positioning of the great city of Camelot by the river stresses the progress, purposefulness, and ever-present sense of movement and vitality of the men and women outside of the tower.
4. The handsome and courageous Sir Lancelot is introduced in Part III of the poem. Lancelot, with the emblem of a knight on his breast forever kneeling to a lady, rides through the barley sheaves. The bells on his bridle ring out merrily, and the silver bugle he carried shines brightly. He passes by Shalott in “blue unclouded weather,” and his helmet, helmet feather, and saddle-leather burn like “one burning flame together.” As he sings “Tirra lirra” by the river, Lancelot’s image flashes into the mirror. Lady breaks the curse and moves to her window to look down on the great knight.
5. Browning’s critically most esteemed poems include the monologues *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*, *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *Andrea Del Sarto*, and *My Last Duchess*.
6. Robert Browning’s genius was dramatic as well as metaphysical. The dramatic monologue was used by Browning with amazing skill and success. As Hugh Walker points out, ‘Browning did not invent the dramatic monologue, but he made it specially his own, and no one else has ever put such rich and varied material into it’. The salient features of the dramatic monologue are best brought out through a comparison and contrast both with the drama proper and the soliloquy. The dramatic monologue differs widely from the drama in its purpose and its method.
7. In *My Last Duchess*, the speaker is the Duke of Ferrara, a perfect model of a nobleman of Renaissance Italy. His former wife, the last Duchess is dead. A neighbouring Count has sent to him an emissary offering his daughter’s hand in marriage. It is important for the Duke to send the emissary back, suitably impressed, so that the Count receives a favourable report about him. He brings the emissary to his art gallery, draws the curtain in front of the portrait of his late wife and speaks the words that form the monologue. The Duke’s tone grows harsh as he recollects how both human and nature could impress her, which insulted him since she did not give special favor to the “gift” of his “nine-hundred-years-old” family name and lineage. The Duke

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is a heartless snob, devoid of all human feelings. The first few words uttered by him suggest his possessive and suspicious nature.

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### 4.7 SUMMARY

- T.S. Eliot described Alfred Lord Tennyson as “the saddest of all English poets”. To this day, Tennyson is considered to be one of Britain’s greatest poets. He was heavily influenced by the strictly metered and often melancholic style of the English Romantic poets. Tennyson’s verse illustrated a mastery of rhythm and descriptive imagery drawing on both the poetic structure and content of classical myths and medieval legends.
- Most critics analyze the poem, *The Lady of Shalott*, as expressing the conflicts between art and life. It also raises the question of whether or not artistic seclusion is necessary for achievement. As the poem begins, we see that despite her isolation, the Lady of Shalott experiences artistic fulfillment and accomplishment in the island of Shalott.
- Robert Browning’s poem, *My Last Duchess*, is narrated by the Duke of Ferrara to an envoy of a nobleman whose daughter he is soon to marry. Throughout the poem, these details are revealed but from the very opening of the poem when one encounters the use of the irony that the poet employs.
- The subject of *My Last Duchess* is the character delineation of the Duchess, but ironically, the speaker reveals more of himself than about the Duchess. The latter emerges as an extremely amiable woman, polite, courteous, easily pleased, generous at heart and utterly incorruptible.
- The heroes of Browning’s monologues are mostly self-deceived. The Duke of Ferrara too is no exception. He misinterprets vanity as justifiable self-pride. To him, showing courtesy to others deserves reprimand and not admiration. His self-deception lies in the fact that the more he speaks disparagingly of his wife, the more she rises in the reader’s esteem, and the more he tries to justify his own behaviour, the lower he sinks in the reader’s opinion.
- As a dramatic monologue does, the poem also reveals the psychology of the speaker, the Duke who is a very proud and possessive husband, who did not even like his wife to be smiling at anyone except him, who always wanted to treat her according to his whims. He regarded his late wife as a mere object who existed only to please him and do his bidding.



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## 4.8 KEY WORDS

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- **Tirra lirra:** This is the song of the lark and an expression of joy that sometimes amounts to nothing but pure gibberish ((tirra-lirra chants, Shakespeare, *Winter's Tale*, IV, iii).
- **Monologue:** This is a speech presented by a single character, most often to express their mental thoughts aloud, though sometimes also to directly address another character or the audience. Monologues are common across the range of dramatic media such as poetry.
- **Dramatic monologue:** A poem in the form of a speech or narrative by an imagined person, in which the speaker inadvertently reveals aspects of their character while describing a particular situation or series of events.

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## 4.9 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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### Short Answer Questions

1. Enumerate the life and works of Alfred Tennyson.
2. State the theme of Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*.
3. What is the main purpose of the poem *The Lady of Shalott*?
4. Enumerate Tennyson's attempt to explain the conflict between life and art in the poem.
5. Write a brief note on the writings of Robert Browning.

### Long Answer Questions

1. Discuss the narrative techniques in the poem, *The Lady of Shalott*.
2. Critically analyze the purpose for writing the poem, *The Lady of Shalott*.
3. Discuss the influence of the Arthurian legend in Tennyson's poem.
4. Write a comprehensive note on Robert Browning's contribution in English poetry.
5. Analyze the significance of dramatic monologue in Browning's *My Last Duchess*.

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## 4.10 FURTHER READINGS

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### NOTES

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**BLOCK - II**  
**POETRY V-VII**

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*Arnold and Yeats*

**NOTES**

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**UNIT 5    ARNOLD AND YEATS**

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**Structure**

- 5.0 Introduction
- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Mathew Arnold: About the Poet
- 5.3 Mathew Arnold's *The Scholar Gipsy*: Summary
  - 5.3.1 *The Scholar Gipsy*: A Critical Analysis
- 5.4 W.B. Yeats: About the Poet
  - 5.4.1 Yeats' Works
  - 5.4.2 W.B. Yeats' *Byzantium*: Summary
  - 5.4.3 *Byzantium*: An Analysis
- 5.5 W.B. Yeats' *Sailing to Byzantium*: Summary
  - 5.5.1 *Sailing to Byzantium*: An Analysis
- 5.6 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 5.7 Summary
- 5.8 Key Words
- 5.9 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 5.10 Further Readings

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**5.0    INTRODUCTION**

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Universally regarded as a creative genius in English Literature, Matthew Arnold lived the first phase of life as a poet. Arnold's poetry is very much concerned with life. Perhaps more than any other poet of his time, he saw life around him and was deeply affected by the changes that were occurring. The various changing scenes of Victorian society leave their deep impressions on the mind of Arnold. Numerous poems spring from his observation of life around him. Matthew Arnold wrote poetry to find an outlet for the ideas which he had acquired through rich experience of life. In the words of Arnold, 'The best poetry is what we want; the best poetry will be found to have power of forming, sustaining and delighting us, as nothing else can.' Many of his works were criticism on the social issues prevailing at the time and through them, he attempted to spread awareness among his readers. In 1853, *Poems: A New Edition* was published and it included *Sohrab and Rustum* and *The Scholar Gipsy*.

W.B. Yeats came into prominence at a time when the Victorian Era was at variance with Modernism. His poetic style was considerably influenced by his increased involvement with nationalist politics. His diction became

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simpler, the syntax grew rigid and the verse structures became better developed at the same time preserving their traditional form. In 1889, he published his first collection of poetry. The themes that his writings centred on were Ireland, spiritualism and love and these were reflected in *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems*. Yeats dreamed of a world exempt from the usual sadness of life - a domain of greater appetites more greatly gratified. Byzantium became the most lavishly imagined and the most famous of these anti-worlds.

This unit aims at analyzing the poetry of Mathew Arnold and W. B. Yeats and presents a critical view of poems written by them.

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### 5.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand Mathew Arnold as an English poet
- Explain Arnold's contribution to English Literature
- Analyze the main themes of Arnold's *The Gipsy Scholar*
- Critically analyse the poem *The Gipsy Scholar*
- Understand the life and works of W.B. Yeats
- Explain Yeats' poems, *Byzantium* and *Sailing to Byzantium*
- Analyze critically both of Yeats' poems

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### 5.2 MATHEW ARNOLD: ABOUT THE POET

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Matthew Arnold was born on 24 December, 1822 and besides being a poet of the English language, he was also a cultural critic and held the post of a school inspector for the same. He belonged to a well-read family. His father, Thomas Arnold, was a famous headmaster at the Rugby School, and one of his brothers was a literary professor, while the other was a novelist and colonial administrator. Due to his style and selection of content, he is often regarded as a sage writer. Many of his works were criticism on the social issues prevailing at the time and through them, he attempted to spread awareness among his readers. Mathew Arnold is often placed at par with Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning. He was considered to be the third greatest Victorian poets and his work has been a testimony that he rightly deserved the place assigned to him.

His second volume of poems was published in 1852 under the title, *Empedocles on Etna, and Other Poems*. In 1853, *Poems: A New Edition* was published and it included *Sohrab and Rustum* and *The Scholar Gipsy*. In 1854, *Poems: Second Series* was published in 1854; the collection had a

new edition titled, *Balder Dead*. He was appointed as Professor of Poetry at Oxford twice, once in 1857 and then again in 1862.

He published *Essays in Criticism: First Series* in 1865 and the second series appeared only after his death in 1888. His elegy for his friend was published by him in 1866, titled as *Thyrsis*. Arnold's main work in social criticism was published in 1869. *Culture and Anarchy* is one of his few works done in prose. *Literature and Dogma*, Arnold's main work in religious criticism was available in 1873. In 1883 and 1884, Arnold visited the United States and Canada; he gave lectures on education, democracy and Ralph Waldo Emerson. In 1883 he was chosen to be the Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He retired from his post of school inspector in 1886 and planned one more tour to America.

*The Scholar Gipsy* is a lyrical poem written by Mathew Arnold. The poem is based on the story of an Oxford scholar who had given up his education in order to roam around with a group of gipsies. The poem was published in 1853 as a part of Arnold's collection titled as *Poems*. In the poem Arnold has managed to elaborate on the customs and culture of the gipsies. The poem also provides a detailed description of the countryside surrounding Oxford.

The poem was based on a seventeenth-century Oxford story found in a book titled *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* written by Joseph Glanvill in 1661. The poem is often regarded as one of the most popular and finest work of the poet. The lines from the poem have been used by Ralph Vaughan Williams in his choral creation, *An Oxford Elegy*.

Mathew Arnold had written *The Scholar Gipsy* immediately after *Sohrab and Rustum*. In 1857 he had written a letter to his brother in which he had mentioned about his wonderings with his friends Theodore Walrond and the poet Arthur Hugh Clough, and he remarked that *The Scholar Gipsy* was a recollection of the time spent roaming around in the Cumner hills prior to their erosion. He recollected his memories once again in the sequel of the poem several years later. The sequel was titled, "*Thyrsis*". It was his elegy for his friend Arthur Hugh Clough.

The poem initially appeared in his 1853 edition of poems along with some of his other poems like "*Requiescat*" and "*Sohrab and Rustum*". The collection was published by Longmans. The poem was republished several times during the twentieth century, sometimes solo and a few times along with its sequel. The poem also featured in *The Oxford Book of English Verse* and in spite of being a long poem, it was included in some of the copies of *Golden Treasury*, a publication by Francis Turner Palgrave.

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**Check Your Progress**

1. What is Mathew Arnold's position as an eminent Victorian poet?
2. List some of the poems written by Mathew Arnold.

### 5.3 MATHEW ARNOLD'S *THE SCHOLAR GIPSY*: SUMMARY

Arnold starts *The Scholar Gipsy* in rustic mode, summoning a shepherd and unfolding the splendours of a pastoral scene, with Oxford in the background. The speaker of *The Scholar Gipsy* describes a beautiful rural setting in the pastures, with the town of Oxford lying in the distance. He observes the shepherd and farmers working in the field, and he informs the shepherd that he will stay till the sun sets as he wants to continue to enjoy the landscape and look at the towers of Oxford. All the time, he spends in the pastures and he has his book which contains the stories narrated by Joseph Glanvill. The book has stories about the penurious student who had discontinued his education at Oxford in order to join a group of gypsies. After joining them, he became a part of their community and learnt their way of life.

After few years he was discovered by two of his Oxford friends and the scholar gipsy told his friends about all that he had learnt during his stay with the gypsies. He also informed them that he planned to remain with them till he had learnt all their secrets and after learning, he would share them with the world.

The speaker of the poem frequently interposed his personal marvels while narrating the story of scholar gipsy. The people of Berkshire had claimed to have seen the scholar gipsy on a couple of occasions around the moors. After that he reiterates the essence of story by Glanvill, but stresses with the description of the rumoured stories about the sighting of the scholar gipsy around Oxford on a couple of occasions. He is imagined to be a shadowy figure by Arnold whose glimpses can be seen in the countryside of Berkshire and Oxfordshire, "waiting for the spark from Heaven to fall" and he even claimed that the gipsy had been spotted by him as well. He regales in the belief that the scholar gipsy is alive even after all this time. He does not want to think about his death:

*For what wears out the life of mortal men?  
'Tis that from change to change their being rolls:  
'Tis that repeated shocks, again, again,  
Exhaust the energy of strongest souls,  
And numb the elastic powers.*

The speaker refuses to accept that the scholar gipsy could have died, as he felt that he was immortal man. The scholar gipsy, having surrendered to this type of life, and now he is free from common tiredness and ailments of life. He is not subjected to death, though at this point, Arnold is afraid that the scholar gipsy could get infected with a strange disease called the 'modern life'.

*Free from the sick fatigue, the languid doubt,  
Which much to have tried, in much been baffled, brings,  
and is therefore not subject to ageing and death.*

In the poem, Arnold has defined the symptoms of the strange disease of modern life. The poet pleads to the scholar gipsy to avoid everyone who is suffering from this strange disease, as he is scared that the gipsy will get infected and meet his end. The poet ends the poem with a comprehensive simile of a Tyrian merchant seaman who had escaped from the invasion of Greek contenders to Iberia in search of a new world.

### 5.3.1 *The Scholar Gipsy: A Critical Analysis*

The poem, because of its length, almost feels like a story which explores one of the prominent themes of the poet at length. Arnold has based a number of his works on the theme of the toils of modern life and its depressing impact. But in spite of its story-like feel, it cannot be denied that the poem's unique narrative makes it one of a kind. In fact, there are two stories being told in the poem, one being the tale of the scholar gipsy and the second is of the speaker who is coping with the concepts put forward by that remarkable character. The message conveyed by both the stories is same. The scholar gipsy lived life to the fullest because he decided to escape the ways of modern life. As seen in his other works, the poet in this poem also condemns modern life as he feels that it is the cause of downfall for most men. He has referred to modern life as a contagious disease in the poem and he constantly advises the scholar-gipsy to stay away from people who were suffering from this disease.

All the poems in this collection confirm to the same comment. The reason for the strength of scholar-gipsy is that he is able to stay away from modern life. There is a somewhat cynical worldview implied in that notion, as it is obviously impossible to establish real individuality and yet participate in society. In order to become a great figure, the scholar-gipsy had completely cut himself away from modern ways of life. He successfully did that by leaving his studies at Oxford. However the poem is regarded as an optimistic work from the poet unlike some of his other works like "*A Summer Night*" which dwells on a similar theme but individuality is achieved at the cost of separation. The poem carries the message that individuals can excel if they are willing to bear the cost.

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For all his approbation, it is very evident that the speaker is yet to muster the strength to renounce the world. The scenery aids in establishing his contrary feelings. The poem starts with imageries of quiet and tranquil rural life which is free from hustle-bustle of modern life. The image of the pastors is drawn in the typical manner as in most poems. The speaker of the poem is enjoying the setting just as the scholar-gipsy would have but at the same time, the speaker is noticing the towers of Oxford in the background. This observation seems to be a contradiction as the scholar-gipsy had left all this. The poet by doing this has cleverly articulated the divided priorities of the speaker. Though the speaker is completely awed by the ways of the scholar-gipsy, he is not able to completely let go the modernity himself. Similar contradictions are seen in the speaker in his "*A Summer Night*."

These contradictions represent the conflicts which existed within the poet and became visible in his work. He wanted to live a life of a transcendent but he was unable to completely let go the modern ways of life. He was torn between the fear of catching the infection of modern society and remaining close to the nature. These pressures began to reflect in his work; he deeply desired to be like scholar-gipsy but there were too many things which were holding him from being like him.

The poem has been written in a ten-line stanza pattern and it consists of 250 lines and twenty five stanzas. The poem is regarded as a major English pastoral elegy and is at par with John Milton's "*Lycidas*" and Thomas Gray's "*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*". It abides the stamp of Arnold's classicism, with insinuations to Vergil's *Aeneid* (c. 29-19 BCE.; English translation, 1553) and the poem's ending is a masterful form of an epic simile. In spite of all these credentials, Arnold appears to weaken the sense of tradition, poetic culture that he was trying to preserve.

The focus of Arnold's elegy is a fabled and humble Oxford University student from the seventeenth century who had discontinued his studies to become a part of the gipsies. *The Scholar Gipsy* is not depicted as dead but as an immortal twilight that is part of a Romantic imagination.

The unusual pastoral elegy presented by Arnold starts well within the expected genre. The poem opens on a pleasant afternoon of the month August. The speaker of the poem is addressing an anonymous shepherd and describing the unending duties at the pastoral for taking care of the flock. Matthew Arnold provided the crucial features of the legend in lines 31 and carried on till line 56 of the poem. The addition of the Cumner country in the poem added a crucial aspect to the poem. The very articulate description of the rural countryside with a dream-like visual in the poem has added an extra admiration for the poem. The poet has managed to do so without taking the focus away from the main theme of the poem.

The language used by the poet admirably succeeds in catching and reconstructing realistically the distinctive beauty and atmosphere of the countryside in the neighbourhood of Oxford, which was very close to his heart. The poet has explored and examined different parts in the poem but he has very skillfully managed to unify all the disjointed parts into a unified creation. However there are many scholars who have criticized the poem to be more negative than positive. The work done by Arnold has a close resemblance with the poems of Keats.

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### Check Your Progress

3. What is the narrative technique of Arnold's *The Gipsy Scholar*?
4. What dilemma does the speaker face in *The Gipsy Scholar*?

## 5.4 W.B. YEATS: ABOUT THE POET

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) came into prominence at a time when the Victorian Era was at variance with Modernism, a movement that signaled a break from the past and led to new trends in art, literature, philosophy and culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Modernism was influenced by the changes brought about by industrialisation, new scientific discoveries and the advancements in the arena of humanities and social sciences. The currents of this are reflected in his poetry. Yeats was born in Dublin but spent a considerable part of his childhood in London where his family moved when he was two. He lived in London till the age of sixteen. Yeats however, remained connected with Ireland through his mother's Irish songs and stories and holiday visits to Co. Sligo.

Yeats studied at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art. In 1889, he published his first collection of poetry. The themes that his writings centred on were Ireland, spiritualism and love and these were reflected in *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems*. His earliest books draw on the romantics and pre-Raphaelite ideals and mythologize a 'Celtic Twilight', a movement that revived interest in the Celtic traditions and culture in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

His poetic style was considerably influenced by his increased involvement with nationalist politics. His diction became simpler, the syntax grew rigid and the verse structures became better developed while, at the same time, preserving their traditional form.

To this middle period belongs his failed courtship of the beautiful nationalist, Maud Gonne and his founding in 1899 of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, which became a focus for many of the writers of the Irish Revival of which Yeats was a key figure. Though Yeats wrote prolifically for the stage,

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he also continued with his poetry. Yeats was also influenced by Modernism. Ezra Pound, especially, was a great influence. He introduced Yeats to the principles of Japanese Noh theatre. Political events saw their way into Yeats' writings. As events in Ireland become laced with violence, Yeats' poems dealt with public themes. *Easter 1916* is his troubled tribute of the Easter Uprising.

Yeats also dabbled in politics. He was elected to the Senate, the upper house of the new Free State, in 1922. On the personal front too his life underwent many changes. Being finally rejected by Maud Gonne and subsequently by her daughter, Yeats married Georgie Hyde Lees with whom he was very happy. They had a shared interest in spiritualism and Yeats' investigation in this area led to some of his powerful visionary poems.

Yeats had now matured as a poet. This led to his development of a symbolism to mediate between the demands of art and life. His later collections *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* are often considered his best. Yeats had made a name for himself as a poet par excellence. He was honoured with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923. He died in France in 1939 and as per his wish, was buried in Drumcliffe Church, Co. Sligo.

### 5.4.1 Yeats' Works

Although W. B. Yeats is more famous as a poet, he also delves deeply into all other literary genres:

- Fiction: *The Celtic Twilight*
- Non-Fiction: *Four Years*
- Plays: *The Countess Cathleen, The Hour Glass, The Land of Heart's Desire*
- Short Stories: *Rosa Alchemica, Stories of Red Hanrahan, Synge and The Ireland of His Time, Out of the Rose, The Heart of the Spring, The Curse of the Fires and of the Shadows, The Old Men of the Twilight, Where There is Nothing, There is God, and Of Costello the Proud*
- Poetry: *A Prayer for My Daughter, Against Unworthy Praise, Broken Dreams, Easter, 1916, He Wishes for the Cloths Of Heaven, Her Praise, In the Seven Woods, King and No King, Lapis Lazuli, Leda and the Swan, No Second Troy, Politics, Sailing to Byzantium, The Lake Isle of Innisfree, The Second Coming* and others

### 5.4.2 W.B. Yeats' *Byzantium*: Summary

"The unpurged images of day recede" at night in the city of Byzantium. The drunken soldiers of the emperor are asleep, and the song of night-walkers fades after the great cathedral gong. The speaker says that the "starlit" or "moonlit dome," disdains all that is human—"all mere complexities, / the

fury and the mire of human veins.” Before him floats an image—a man or a shade, but more a shade than a man, and still more simply “an image.” He hails this “superhuman” image and calls it “death-in-life and life-in-death.” Meanwhile, a golden bird sits on a golden tree, which the speaker says is a “miracle”. The bird sings aloud, and scorns the “common bird or petal / and all complexities of mire or blood.”

The speaker says that at midnight, the images of flames flit across the emperor’s pavement, though they are not fed by wood or steel, nor disturbed by storms. Here, “blood-begotten spirits come,” and die “into a dance, / an agony of trance, / an agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve,” leaving behind all the complexities and furies of life. Riding the backs of dolphins, spirit after spirit arrives, the flood broken on “the golden smithies of the emperor.” The marbles of the dancing floor break the “bitter furies of complexity,” the storms of images that beget more images, “that dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.”

### 5.4.3 *Byzantium*: An Analysis

Each stanza of the poem constitutes eight lines, and each rhymes AABBCDDC. The structure of every stanza is quite complicated. The lines are loosely iambic. The first, second, third, fifth, and eighth lines are in pentameter, the fourth line in tetrameter, whereas the sixth and seventh line in trimeter.

The theme discussed in *Byzantium* is a follow up of the theme in *Sailing to Byzantium*. The reader in *Byzantium* is given exposure to the eternal city to get familiar with its reality for the first time. In the first stanza of *Sailing to Byzantium*, there is remoteness between the speaker and the place from where he came; similarly a distance is disclosed between the speaker and place where he desires to move. On the other hand, in *Sailing to Byzantium*, there is no such distance between the speaker and the subject, as the poem describes the events as they happen inside the city. Hence, in *Byzantium*, the speaker becomes aware of the reality since the events happening inside the city are revealed to him in present tense.

The speaker in *Byzantium* is the poet who observes the city’s eternal reality. The speaker has expressed his views in the second stanza. ‘Before me floats an image,’ and ending emphatically, ‘I hail the superhuman; / I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.’ Furthermore, as the speaker is a witness to the events of the city he is never influenced or transformed by the city itself. The speaker is the visionary poet who is able to witness the reality of *Byzantium* as only human souls enter the city. (‘Astraddle on the dolphin’s mire and blood, / Spirit after spirit!’). Also no other than the author could speak to the readers from inside the reality of this eternal city.

In *Sailing to Byzantium*, the old man visualizes the city’s power as being able to ‘gather’ him into ‘the artifice of eternity.’ In *Byzantium*, Yeats makes

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real what was previously imagined to be perfect. The speaker envisages an actual artifice of eternity and not eternal artifice. The city generates eternal images, motionless and everlasting realities which finally overtake or devour all ‘complexities,’ all individual souls, all art and all forms of temporal life. *Byzantium* explains what eternity actually is rather than some apparently material, everlasting matter which, while being feasible to the human mind, would essentially entail shape and substance and therefore the entrapping of change and finiteness. As in a continuous furnace or procedure beyond all time, substance, and human notion, in *Byzantium* we observe not a predetermined structure and substance which can excel and eternalize the temporal, but eternally immortal everlasting images, the act or temperament of which devours and invalidates all artifice, all things real or imagined.

### Check Your Progress

5. How did W.B. Yeats come to be known as a poet par excellence?
6. What is the structure of stanza in Yeats’ *Byzantium*?

## 5.5 W.B. YEATS’ *SAILING TO BYZANTIUM*: SUMMARY

The first stanza begins with a dramatic gesture of apparent rejection: ‘That [Ireland] is no country for old men’. But the stanza is held by what it would reject, the world of sexuality, ‘dying generations’ (a phrase that compact death and renewal), the transient but captivating stuff of physical living that composes ‘sensual music’ persisting ‘all summer long’. The last phrase implies that the appeal of the physical objects lessens with the onset of the winter of age and when he describes ‘all’ as being ‘Caught’.

Yeats suggests not only willing captivation, but also a state of entrapment. Certainly, though, the neglected ‘Monuments of unageing intellect’ seems ponderous and remote by comparison with the sensual music that Yeats, against the grain of his manifest intention, hymns in this first stanza.

In the second stanza, Yeats turns with scorn on the condition of age, saying it can only be redeemed if ‘Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing/ For every tatter in its mortal dress’. Soul, minus definite article and receiving a strong stress, conveys its longing for spiritual life through the physical image of clapping and singing. In this stanza, ‘unageing intellect’ is a vital force, delighting in the study of ‘its own magnificence’, and prompting the poet’s voyage to the holy city of Byzantium’, where the name of the city rhymes triumphantly with the verb ‘come’.

After the polarities of ‘sensual music’ and arid ‘Soul’ have been set up, the poem moves, in the third stanza, to its emotional core; here, as Yeats

longs for the sages to spiral their way out of their dimension and take him up into theirs, it is his suffering 'heart' that takes centre-stage, a heart that is 'sick with desire/And fastened to a dying animal' and, in an echo of Christ's words on the cross, 'knows what it is'.

The lines suggest the poet's torment 'fastened' develops the hint of entrapment in the first stanza's 'Caught'; the tragic glamour of the first stanzas 'dying generations' shrinks to the drab terror implied by the poet's description of trig body as a 'dying animal'. But, in the act of praying to be gathered 'Into the artifice of eternity', Yeats glimpses the limitations of an imagined permanence. It is hard to agree with critics who dispute the presence of irony in 'artifice':

Yeats implies that 'eternity' is both artistically shaped and 'something' artificial, a pretence in the final stanza, the poet offers an urbane diminuendo after his emotional climax; he imagines himself choosing his post-mortal shape from something made, not begotten, but the golden bird he strongly suggests he would like to be seems, ornamental, a trivial plaything to amuse the Emperor. Moreover, his song would still be of time what is past or passing, or to come'), for all his would-be escape from the temporal.

As 'Byzantium' again rhymes with 'come', there is less a sense of triumph than of the inability of Yeats' holy city to free itself from the dimension of time. This impression is reinforced by the syntactical chime across the poem between 'whatever is begotten, born, and dies' and the last line.

### 5.5.1 *Sailing to Byzantium: An Analysis*

The poem was composed in 1926 and first published in *October Blast* (1927). It was also published as the opening poem of *The Tower* (1928). 'Sailing to Byzantium', written in four stanzas of ottava rima (eight iambic lines rhyming abababcc), is among the most distilled and concentrated examples of Yeats's lyric art. In a radio talk of 8 September 1921, Yeats said: 'Now I am trying to write about the state of my soul, for it is right for an old man to make his soul, and some of my thoughts upon that subject I have put into a poem called 'Sailing to Byzantium'. Byzantium is the emblem of the search for the spiritual life' (a phrase from the radio talk) because it seemed to Yeats, as he put it in *A Vision*, as though 'In early Byzantium, may be never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic practical life were one'. Yet Yeats is divided about the desirability of focusing exclusively on 'the state of [his] soul' and, indeed, about the worth of Byzantium.

From his earliest work, Yeats dreamed of a world exempt from the usual sadness of life - a domain of greater appetites more greatly gratified. Byzantium became the most lavishly imagined and the most famous of these anti-worlds. In *A Vision*, Yeats wrote of Justinian's construction of the

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cathedral of Hagia Sophia (AD 560) as one of history's closest approximations to the a historical beauty of the full moon, Phase 15 of the gyre:

“Byzantium ... substituted for formal Roman magnificence, with its glorification of physical power, an architecture that suggests the Sacred City in the Apocalypse of St. John. I think if I could be given a month of Antiquity and leave to spend it where I chose, I would spend it in Byzantium ... I think I could find in some little wine-shop some philosophical worker in mosaic who could answer all my questions, the supernatural descending nearer to him than to Plotinus even, for the pride of his delicate skill would make [religious truths] show as a lovely flexible presence like that of a perfect human body.”

The characteristics of Byzantium, then, are: (1) an almost complete dematerialization, as if the city were the pleasure dome in Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* (1797), manufactured out of air and shadowed on water. In fact, a draft of 'Sailing to Byzantium' mentioned 'St Sophia's 'sacred dome ... Mirrored in water' (Stallworthy); (2) a deliberate destruction of the boundary between life and art - men are translated into mosaic, while symbols have the presence of 'a perfect human body'; (3) anonymity - art is the cooperative effect of a community of workers and thinkers; the oblivion and beatitude of dead souls were realized there on earth. Byzantium is an abstraction from life, and Byzantine art is notable for its abstract character, as Owen Aherne says in a passage (later deleted) from the 1908 version of *The Tables of the Law*: 'the Byzantine style ... moves me because these tall, emaciated angels and saints seem to have less relation to the world about us than to an abstract pattern of flowing lines, that suggest an imagination absorbed in the contemplation of Eternity.'

Yet, for all its seductiveness, Byzantium is finally forced to confess its inadequacy. There is a covert allusion in the poem's first line to Tir na nOg, the paradise for which Oisín searches in *The Wanderings of Oisín*; and in that early poem, as in so many later ones, paradise at last famishes the appetites that it promises to glut. All representations of the supernatural must contain some grotesquerie, a straining for effect, a juxtaposition of incompatible elements, as Yeats himself noted. However, the poet's metamorphosis into a golden bird, at the end of this poem, may suggest a certain laborious triviality as well as an eerie splendour, as if life in Byzantium were at last shown as a superior sort of folly.

### Check Your Progress

7. What is the meaning of the first stanza of the poem, *Sailing to Byzantium*?



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## 5.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

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1. Mathew Arnold is often placed at par with Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning. He was considered to be the third greatest Victorian poets and his work has been a testimony that he rightly deserved the place assigned to him.
2. Some poems of Mathew Arnold include *Sohrab and Rustum* and *The Scholar Gipsy*.
3. The poem, because of its length, almost feels like a story which explores one of the prominent themes of the poet at length. Arnold has based a number of his works on the theme about the toils of modern life and its depressing impact. But in spite of its story-like feel, it cannot be denied that the poem's unique narrative makes it one of its kinds. In fact, there are two stories being told in the poem, one being the tale of the scholar gipsy and the second is of the speaker who is coping with the concepts put forward by that remarkable character.
4. In the poem by Arnold, though the speaker is completely awed by the ways of scholar-gipsy, yet he is not able to completely let go the modernity himself. Similar contradictions are seen in the speaker in his "*A Summer Night*." These contradictions represent the conflicts which existed within the poet and became visible in his work. He wanted to live a life of a transcendent but he was unable to completely let go the modern ways of life. He was torn between the fear of catching the infection of modern society and remaining close to the nature. These pressures began to reflect in his work; he deeply desired to be like scholar-gipsy but there were too many things which were holding him from being like him.
5. W.B. Yeats came into prominence at a time when the Victorian Era was at variance with Modernism. His poetic style was considerably influenced by his increased involvement with nationalist politics. His diction became simpler, the syntax grew rigid and the verse structures became better developed while, at the same time, preserving their traditional form. His later collections *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* are often considered his best. Yeats had made a name for himself as a poet par excellence. He was honoured with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923.
6. Each stanza of the poem *Byzantium* constitutes eight lines, and each rhymes AABBCDDC. The structure of every stanza is quite complicated. The lines are loosely iambic. The first, second, third, fifth, and eighth lines are in pentameter, the fourth line in tetrameter,

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whereas the sixth and seventh line in trimester. The theme discussed in *Byzantium* is a follow up of the theme in *Sailing to Byzantium*. The reader in *Byzantium* is given exposure to the eternal city to get familiar with its reality for the first time.

7. The first stanza begins with a dramatic gesture of apparent rejection: 'That [Ireland] is no country for old men'. But the stanza is held by what it would reject, the world of sexuality, 'dying generations' (a phrase that compact death and renewal), the transient but captivating stuff of physical living that composes 'sensual music' persisting 'all summer long'. The last phrase implies that the appeal of the physical objects lessens with the onset of the winter of age and when he describes 'all' as being 'Caught'.

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## 5.7 SUMMARY

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- Arnold starts "*The Scholar Gipsy*" in rustic mode, summoning a shepherd and unfolding the splendours of a pastoral scene, with Oxford in the background. The speaker of "*The Scholar Gipsy*" describes a beautiful rural setting in the pastures, with the town of Oxford lying in the distance. He observes the shepherd and farmers working in the field, and he informs the shepherd that he will stay till the sun sets as he wants to continue to enjoy the landscape and look at the towers of Oxford.
- The poem *The Scholar Gipsy* has been written in a ten-line stanza pattern and it consists of 250 lines and twenty five stanzas. The poem is regarded as a major English pastoral elegy and is at par with John Milton's "*Lycidas*" and Thomas Gray's "*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*". It abides the stamp of Arnold's classicism, with insinuations to Vergil's *Aeneid* (c. 29-19 BCE.; English translation, 1553) and the poem's ending is a masterful form of an epic simile.
- William Butler Yeats came into prominence at a time when the Victorian Era was at variance with Modernism, a movement that signaled a break from the past and led to new trends in art, literature, philosophy and culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.
- Yeats also dabbled in politics. He was elected to the Senate, the upper house of the new Free State, in 1922. On the personal front too his life underwent many changes. Being finally rejected by Maud Gonne and subsequently by her daughter, Yeats married Georgie Hyde Lees with whom he was very happy. They had a shared interest in spiritualism and Yeats' investigation in this area led to some of his powerful visionary poems.

- In *Sailing to Byzantium*, the old man visualizes the city's power as being able to 'gather' him into 'the artifice of eternity.' In *Byzantium*, Yeats makes real what was previously imagined to be perfect. The speaker envisages an actual artifice of eternity and not eternal artifice.
- In the second stanza of *Sailing to Byzantium*, Yeats turns with scorn on the condition of age, saying it can only be redeemed if 'Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing/ For every tatter in its mortal dress'. Soul, minus definite article and receiving a strong stress, conveys its longing for spiritual life through the physical image of clapping and singing. In this stanza, 'unageing intellect' is a vital force, delighting in the study of 'its own magnificence', and prompting the poet's voyage to the holy city of Byzantium', where the name of the city rhymes triumphantly with the verb 'come'.

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### 5.8 KEY WORDS

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- **The Pastoral Elegy:** This is a poem about both death and idyllic rural life. Often, the pastoral elegy features shepherds. The genre is actually a subgroup of pastoral poetry, as the elegy takes the pastoral elements and relates them to expressing grief or a loss.
- **Pre-Raphaelite Ideals:** William Holman Hunt was an English painter that co-founded the Pre-Raphaelite Movement. Following the ideals of the Pre-Raphaelite, he remained true to its rejection of Renaissance perfectionism. His works are distinguished by their attention to detail, vibrant colors, and elaborate symbolism.
- **Tír na nÓg:** In Irish and Scottish mythologies, Tír na nÓg ("Land of the Young") is one of the names for the Celtic Otherworld, or perhaps for a part of it. Tír na nÓg is depicted as a paradise and supernatural realm of everlasting youth, beauty, health, abundance and joy.

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### 5.9 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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#### Short Answer Questions

1. Enumerate the life and works of Mathew Arnold.
2. Why is Arnold's *The Scholar Gipsy* famous as a lyrical poem?
3. Analyze the setting of *The Scholar Gipsy*.
4. Discuss the main theme of W.B. Yeats' *Byzantium*.

5. Write a brief note on the images used in *Byzantium*.
6. What is the significance of figurative words, 'unaging intellect' in Yeats' *Sailing to Byzantium*?

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### Long Answer Questions

1. Discuss why Mathew Arnold is regarded as one of the greatest Victorian poets in English Literature?
2. Analyze the background stories which led the poet to write *The Scholar Gipsy*.
3. "In *The Scholar Gipsy*, Arnold has defined the symptoms of strange diseases in modern life." Discuss this statement with reference from the poem.
4. Present a critical analysis of W.B. Yeats' *Byzantium*.
5. Write a comparative overview of themes in Arnold's *Byzantium* and *Sailing to Byzantium*.

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### 5.10 FURTHER READINGS

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- O'Neill, Michael. 2010. *The Cambridge History of English Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grierson, Herbert. and J. C. Smith. 2014. *A Critical History of English Poetry*. London: A&C Black.
- Jefferies, Norman. 1996. *W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet*. London: Macmillan.
- Smith, Stan. 1990. *W.B. Yeats: A Critical Introduction*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.

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# UNIT 6 ELIOT, EMERSON AND DICKINSON

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Eliot, Emerson  
and Dickinson

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### Structure

- 6.0 Introduction
- 6.1 Objectives
- 6.2 T.S. Eliot: About the Poet
- 6.3 T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: Summary and Interpretation
- 6.4 Various Aspects of *The Waste Land*
  - 6.4.1 Waste Land Myth as the Central Myth
  - 6.4.2 Eliot's use of Myths
  - 6.4.3 Outcome of Eliot's Technique of Using Myths
  - 6.4.4 *The Waste Land* as a Modern Poem
  - 6.4.5 Allusions in *The Waste Land*
- 6.5 Ralph Waldo Emerson: About the Poet
- 6.6 Emerson's *Brahma*: Summary
  - 6.6.1 Themes in the Poem *Brahma*
  - 6.6.2 *Brahma*: An Analysis
  - 6.6.3 Narrative Techniques in *Brahma*
  - 6.6.4 Figure of Speech in the Poem
- 6.7 Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Terminus*: Summary
  - 6.7.1 *Terminus*: An Analysis
- 6.8 Emily Dickinson: About the Poet
  - 6.8.1 Dickinson as an American Romantic Poet
- 6.9 *The Soul Selects Her Own Society*: Text and Summary
  - 6.9.1 *The Soul Selects Her Own Society*: A Critical Analysis
  - 6.9.2 *The Soul Selects Her Own Society*: Form and Language
- 6.10 *My Life Closed Twice Before it's Close*: Text and Summary
  - 6.10.1 *My Life Closed Twice Before it's Close*: An Analysis
  - 6.10.2 Form and Structure of the Poem
  - 6.10.3 Themes of the Poem
  - 6.10.4 Figure of Speech in the Poem
- 6.11 *Success is Counted Sweetest*: Introduction
  - 6.11.1 *Success is Counted Sweetest*: Text and Summary
  - 6.11.2 Analysis of the Poem
  - 6.11.3 Theme of the Poem
  - 6.11.4 Figure of Speech in the Poem
- 6.12 Emily Dickinson's *I Heard a Fly Buzz –When I Died*: Introduction
  - 6.12.1 *I Heard a Fly Buzz –When I Died*: Text and Summary
  - 6.12.2 Analysis of the Poem
  - 6.12.3 Techniques and Structure of the Poem
- 6.13 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 6.14 Summary
- 6.15 Key Words
- 6.16 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 6.17 Further Readings

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## 6.0 INTRODUCTION

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An American-English poet, playwright, literary critic, and editor, and with seminal works as *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Four Quartets* (1943), T.S. Eliot was the most prominent face of the Modernist movement in poetry. Eliot's experiments in diction, style, and versification have greatly revitalized English poetry. A recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Eliot is regarded as one of the greatest English poet and man of letters. The publication in 1922 of his poem *The Waste Land* catapulted Eliot into international reputation. The highly complex poem expresses with great power the disenchantment, disillusionment, and disgust of the modern period.

The American poet, essayist and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson was the leading light of Transcendentalism in America. He was described as a poet among philosophers and a philosopher among poets. He started writing poem when he was 18. In majority of his poems namely, *The Celestial Love* and *Brahma*, Emerson derived a number of themes and titles from the Hindu scriptures. The poem *Terminus* was composed when Emerson had become old and wanted to be able to work with the same energy as he did when he was younger. The poem is about how time is a limit in the life of individuals. Emerson used very simple, musical and dignified language in his poems.

Emily Dickinson, an American poet, wrote almost 1800 poems and most of them were composed in the decade of her late 20s and early 30s. With a few exceptions, Dickinson's poetry remained virtually unpublished until after she died on May 15, 1886. After her death, her poems and life story were brought to the attention of the wider world. As keen observer, Dickinson used images from nature, and different walks of life to probe themes related to nature, the identity, death and immortality, and love.

This unit discusses T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, R. W. Emerson's *Brahma* and *Terminus*, Dickinson's *My Life Closed Twice Before Its Close*, *Success is Counted Sweetest*, *The Soul Selects Her Own Society* and *I heard a Fly Buzz When I Died*.

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## 6.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand T.S. Eliot's contribution to English Literature
- Enumerate Eliot's *The Waste Land*
- Analyze various strands and aspects of *The Waste Land*
- Explain the role of allusions in the theme of *The Waste Land*
- Understand Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendentalism

- Explain Emerson's poems, *Brahma* and *Terminus*
- Analyze the use of figures of speech in Emerson's poem
- Discuss Emily Dickinson's poetry in English Literature
- Analyze the themes of Dickinson's *My Life Closed Twice before Its Close*
- Enumerate Dickinson's poem, *Success is Counted Sweetest*
- Explain Dickinson's *The Soul Selects Her Own Society*
- Understand Dickinson's *I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died*

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### 6.2 T.S. ELIOT: ABOUT THE POET

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Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888–1965) was born in St. Louis, Missouri (America). He graduated in Philosophy at the Sorbonne, Harvard, and Merton College, Oxford. He settled in England, where he was for a time a schoolmaster and a bank clerk, and eventually literary editor for the publishing house Faber & Faber, of which he later became a director. During the seventeen years of its publication (1922–1939), he edited the exclusive and influential literary journal *Criterion*. In 1927, Eliot became a British citizen and about the same time entered the Anglican Church. Eliot can be read as one of the most innovative poets of the twentieth century. Thoroughly uncompromising, both with public demand and the demands of the English poetic tradition and language, he has followed his belief that poetry should aim at representing the complexities of modern civilization in language and that such representation necessarily leads to difficult poetry.

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### 6.3 T.S. ELIOTS *THE WASTE LAND*: SUMMARY AND INTERPRETATION

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*The Waste Land* is a complex poem. Most of the difficulty in the poem arises from the web of allusions, quotations and imitations from primitive myths, European history and contemporary popular culture woven into the poem. In a span of 433 lines, we have references – direct or indirect – to thirty-five different authors, for instance, Shakespeare and Dante, bits of popular songs, and passages in six foreign languages including Sanskrit.

Negotiating this heterogeneous mix constitute a major hurdle in explaining the meaning and significance of the poem. Understanding this difficulty involves answering a number of basic questions:

1. Why should Eliot evoke this kind of complex multiplicity to convey his theme?
2. What difficulty does the reader encounter while negotiating this complex multiplicity?



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3. What constitutes the nature of the difficulty?
4. Why don't conventional negotiations help?

The question of why Eliot uses this myth has been treated extensively subsequently. The difficulty that the reader encounters is, however, because of the syntactic and semantic features of the poem. At the semantic level, the meaning and significance of many of the terms used are not readily available to most readers, making annotations compulsory. However, mere annotations do not help. These terms are woven into a chaotic complexity that makes discerning a pattern something of a challenge. So one has to be happy with a disjointed collection of fragments – a heap of broken images. This is part of a conscious design. Eliot intended to recreate the fragmented and broken nature of modern existence in the reader's experience through a reading of this poem.

This is a complex poem that is difficult to summarize. However, the complexity and difficulty are a part of its design that makes it so interesting to read. Its various languages, classical references, images and people of post-war London integrate to create a thrilling blend.

### (A) The Burial of the Dead

The first section yokes together the somewhat contrasting concepts of burial and growth. It twists the opening of the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, in which April is praised as the harbinger of rain and new life, and, at the same time, accused of being the most ruthless month as it breeds a sort of counterfeit life out of the dead land and carries along with it memories of bygone days and unfulfilled desires. The first four lines introduce the recurring symbol of water. The rain washes away 'forgetful snow', relentlessly exposing the dead dry land beneath.

An unidentified speaker then enters the poem as a stereotypical modern person who drinks coffee and speaks for an hour. The speaker then slips easily in and out of German before identifying herself as Marie and reminiscing about her extravagant childhood memories of a sled ride. There is a tonal shift and it plunges into a description of a very dry, dusty and deserted world. A girl once recognized as 'the hyacinth girl' substantiates her being 'neither living nor dead'. Thereafter, Madame Sosostris reads tarot cards and makes predictions that will come true in later part of the poem. A first mention is made of the 'Unreal City', the civilization reflected in the poem, which has been undone by death. A crowd of men walk and stare at the ground in front of their feet while a clock gloomily clangs a ninth stroke. Then a speaker sees a familiar face and calls him, asking if the corpse he has planted in his garden has begun to sprout and calling him a hypocrite reader, doppelganger and brother.

## (B) A Game of Chess

This section opens with a description of a glittery room of an extravagant woman. Hanging from the wall is an image of ‘the change of Philomel,’ a maiden from Greek mythology who was ravished and silenced by King Tereus who slit her tongue. By the end of the story of Philomel, both become nightingales, destined to sing the sad song, ‘jug jug’. The woman at her mirror may be an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Cleopatra*. Other old and withered stories told in paintings also surround the woman at the mirror. She begins speaking, admonishing the speaker of the poem to reply, but he or she never replies with words, only silent thoughts.

These thoughts sometimes answer the woman’s queries; at other times, they meander into a little song or musings about this speaker’s existence or, finally, the recollection of a previous conversation. The phrase in all-caps ‘HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME’ is effective in propelling the verse towards the end of the section through fast-paced repetition. The speaker of this section tells Lil to get into presentable attire. Albert has been in the army for four years and would expect a good time on returning, the speaker explains. Lil justifies the deterioration in her appearance because of the pills she consumed to abort her sixth child. The repetition of ‘HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME’ aggravates the feeling of anxiety, and the section concludes with an adaptation of Ophelia’s final lines in *Hamlet*.

## (C) The Fire Sermon

The third section opens with a speaker beside river Thames, and proceeds into a long and vivid portrayal of a littered and rat-infested London. The speaker fishes behind a gas house and, as mentioned through the poem’s third reference to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, muses on his brother and father’s death. The scene appears more like something out of the trenches of war, with naked bodies and bones scattered across the ground and rats scampering to and fro.

However, the sound of motors and horns reminds us that we are indeed in London and Sweeney, a devil-like character from some of Eliot’s other poems, comes to Mrs. Porter in spring.

Mrs. Porter and her daughter cleanse their feet in soda water and the nightingales that were once Tereus and Philomel cry out only sad sounds they are capable of making. The phrase ‘Unreal City’, seen before in Madame Sosostri’s tarot cards, reappears, followed by a description of the monotonous work day in which humans and machines are compared. At the violet hour, that is the hour this day ends, Tiresias, the new speaker of the poem and an ancient prophet from Greek drama, begins to visualize images. A female typist at home performs household errands. Tiresias observes the scene in her home in anticipation of the forthcoming situation. A young clerk arrives and disappears into darkness with the woman in all physical intimacy.

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### (D) Death by Water

The third section deals with Eliot's interest in transformation. The tarot reader Madame Sosostris carried out the most offensive form of 'reading' possible, wherein a series of ambiguous symbols are transformed into predictions. The reader will witness that most of these predictions come true in the following sections of the poem. The traditional trot pact is transformed by Eliot in order to meet his objectives. A reference is made by the drowned sailor to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*—the greatest work of transformation and magic in English literature. These are clear in the following lines from the play: 'Those are pearls that were his eyes'—a quote from one of Ariel's songs).

However, in this play, transformation is the result of the highest art of humankind. Nevertheless, in this section of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, transformation is associated with deception, cheap mysticism and vulgarity. That Madame Sosostris will prove to be correct in her predictions of death and transformation is a direct commentary on the failed religious mysticism and prophecy of the preceding desert section.

Phlebas the Phoenician (the drowned sailor seen in Madame Sosostris' tarot cards in the first part of the poem) is a fortnight dead. He has forgotten the cry of gulls and the swell of the sea and the profit and loss of living. His bones were collected by whispering currents under the sea. As his body rose and fell, it traversed the stages of age and youth, entering the whirlpool. Gentiles and Jews alike are urged to remember Phlebas as they steer their ships.

### (E) What the Thunder Said

The fifth section transmutes you to a stony landscape devoid of water. Vivid descriptions of thunder, death, dryness and rock are given. The speaker yearns for water, an end to the dryness. He asks a question inspired by Ernest Shackleton's *Endurance*, during which three men crossed an island in the Antarctic waste land after being lost for three months, and seemed sometimes to see a fourth person walking with them. There are overtones of maternal lamentation, rather than open or loudly expressed grief. A list of cities follows, ending with London and 'Unreal'. The city is described as dry and desolate using appropriate imagery. Bells keep the hours and voices sing out of empty cisterns too. A rooster standing on the roof tree crows in French. There is a flash of lightning followed by a damp gust finally bringing rain.

The great river Ganga in India is sunken, longing for water. Then the thunder speaks in the manner of a Hindu fable, uttering the single syllable, 'DA.' 'Give alms, be compassionate, control yourselves,' says the thunder. Eliot explains these as symbols of troubled society. The story returns to a speaker fishing on the river shore. A course of bible quotations, songs,

sayings and quotations flash across his thoughts ending with the repetition of the Hindu word *Shantih* meaning ‘Peace which passeth understanding’ and no period.

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## 6.4 VARIOUS ASPECTS OF *THE WASTE LAND*

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Here is T. S. Eliot writing to his brother, Henry Ware Eliot, Jr. about what the poem meant to him.

“Various critics have done me the honour to interpret the poem in terms of criticism of the contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, as an important bit of social criticism. To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling.”

Clearly, Eliot is not going to help you interpret but neither is he going to let you interpret his work in the way you want. The influential critic I. A. Richards praised Eliot for describing the shared post-war ‘sense of desolation, of uncertainty, of utility, of the groundlessness of aspirations, of the vanity of endeavour, and a thirst for life-giving water which seems suddenly to have failed.’ Eliot later complained that ‘approving critics’ like Richards ‘said that I had expressed ‘the disillusionment of a generation,’ which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention.’

Nonetheless, the poem did emerge as a representative of a post-World War I generation. To compare Eliot’s comments on the poem with the way it was received substantiates the fact that, as William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley put it : ‘The poem is not the critic’s own and not the author’s [it is detached from the author at the point of creation and goes about the world beyond his/her power to control it]. The poem belongs to the public.’

To many, *The Waste Land* indeed creates the sense of speaking for an entire culture in crisis. It can be read as a poem about spiritual dryness, about the kind of existence in which no regenerating belief gives significance and value to men’s daily activities, sex brings no fulfilment and fruitfulness, and death pre-empts no resurrection.

### 6.4.1 Waste Land Myth as the Central Myth

What Eliot describes as a Waste Land in a poem is geographically speaking London of the 1920s but flows into Baudelaire’s Paris and other contemporary cities of Eastern Europe. In short what we have is Europe at the height of its decadence, sandwiched between the two World Wars. This decadence is linked to the influence of a decadent industrial culture not only in the mind of Eliot but in the minds of a stream of novelists, poets and philosophers before and after him.

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To an intellectual positioned at this point in history, life was fairly troublesome. All systems of belief had been questioned, found wanting and forcibly abandoned without caring for any kind of replacement. In short, contemporary history appeared, as Eliot put it, ‘an immense panorama futility and anarchy’.

But what had brought things to this point? Put simply it is the ‘rational/scientific attitude’ of man; carefully nurtured since the beginning of the Renaissance and unfolded in its destructive glory in the first half of the 20th century. It was an attitude which strove for secularization, categorization and de-humanization of the world around in the interest of comprehension and control. *The Waste Land* is a logical consequence of this attitude.

To compound the problem further, the movement of history around Eliot’s time had been very rapid – producing changes with alarming speed – changes difficult to understand and even more difficult to control. Eliot takes this theme one step forward – right into the centre of a moral framework and describes the condition as anarchic and futile.

Edmund Wilson would have us believe that it comes from Eliot’s Puritanical background – a background that gave him a horror of vulgarity and a shy sympathy with common life. In other words, it is ‘the desolation, the aesthetic and spiritual drought of the Anglo-Saxon puritan middle class society which provides the foundation to this framework.’

However, not only a puritan, anyone who grew up at this time shared this view. The optimistic industrial future that the west grew up with in the late 19th century was within a few decades crushed with the irreconcilable reality of death, destruction, exploitation and a total loss of direction. Once we have Eliot positioned within these coordinates we can understand why he proclaims his motive for writing the poem as expressing the load of inhabiting a Waste Land.

The key question, however, is, if this is what he wanted to do, why did he use myths to do it? Eliot himself suggests a coherent response. In the use of myths, he found a convenient way of manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity – a manipulation that would serve the purpose ‘of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history’. It was a way of ‘making the modern world possible for art’.

He found the technique perfected in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and set himself a similar task. Meanwhile Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* and Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* were published in an accessible form. The two books combined gave to his thoughts the very fillip they needed to crystallize. From Weston’s analysis he got ‘the title, the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism’.

### 6.4.2 Eliot's use of Myths

If we question why Eliot wants to give shape and significance to his contemporary world, we arrive at an impulse at the heart of many modernist discourses. If the futility and anarchy are given shape and significance they cease to be what they are. If the Waste Land can be concretized either into an image, or through a series of references, rejuvenation becomes a concrete possibility. However, it is precisely the use of myths to concretize the Waste Land that will frustrate this possibility and transform this into a desire for escape.

The use of myths is underlined by a longing for coherence and order of the imagined past, the past as a repository of higher teachings and spiritual insights. This is a longing which represents the fear of history – a fear engineered by the futility and anarchy of the present. Eliot attempts a re-enactment of the Waste Land myth at a spiritual level, hoping that by re-enacting the myth spiritually he will be able to concretize the spiritual Waste Land that the modern man inhabits.

So in the first section 'Burial of the Dead', Eliot, in an idiosyncratic mode, develops the theme of the attractiveness of death or the difficulty of rousing oneself from the death-in-life in which the people of the Waste Land live. The second section 'A Game of Chess' gives a series of images to evoke a concrete picture of what it feels like to be alive and interacting in the Waste Land. The third section 'The Fire Sermon' is a direct attack on the fire of sterile burning desires evoked through the senses, which constitutes an important characteristic of the inhabitants of the Waste Land. The fourth section 'Death by Water' projects the force of this ritualistic death as a symbol of surrender and the relief through surrender. The final section 'What the Thunder Said' maps the distance the inhabitants of Waste Land have travelled from the possibility of redemption.

### 6.4.3 Outcome of Eliot's Technique of Using Myths

Look at specific images and the way they are treated in the poem and you will be able to figure out that this is not the product of a unified mythic imagination but an effort to define and construct the present with the help of the past serving as a free playing signifier.

A disparate set of references and images are juxtaposed with each other within a section to form a mosaic. When one repeatedly negotiates this mosaic with some critical aid a pattern begins to emerge – patterns similar to the thematic summary provided earlier. But because of the huge element of subjectivity involved in the creation of these patterns one cannot be sure about their validity.

If the project is as problematic as this, what does Eliot achieve through it? If we take his own statements at face value, the satisfaction was only

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personal. To him it was just a rhythmical grumbling to shake off a weight off his chest. And that is where the problem begins. Eliot, unable to engage with the concrete historical situation that has produced this Waste Land, instead only grumbles through a mythic mosaic. The description could itself have been a point of engagement if Eliot had done it through an analysis of concrete historical circumstances but the use of myths frustrates precisely that.

It is evident that Eliot wanted to process and represent the state of dissolution and sterility in this poem, in which he thinks the European culture exists. He states that ‘not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie Weston’s book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance*’ (1920). He further acknowledges a general indebtedness to Sir James Frazer’s ‘*Golden Bough*’ (12 Volumes 1890–1915), ‘especially the two volumes Adonis, Attis, Osiris’ in which Frazer deals with ancient vegetation myths and fertility ceremonies’.

*The Waste Land* is the story of the Fisher King whose death, infirmity, or impotence (there are many forms of the myth) brought drought and desolation to the land and sterility to men as well as beasts.

This symbolic Waste Land can be revived only if a ‘questing knight’ goes to the Chapel Perilous, situated in the heart of it, and there asks certain ritual questions about the Holy Grail (or cup) and the Lance – originally fertility symbols, female and male, respectively. The proper asking of these questions revives the king and restores fertility to the land. Miss Weston’s study, drawing on material from Frazer and other anthropologists, traced the relationship of these myths and rituals to Christianity and most especially to the legend of the Holy Grail.

In other words, ‘Waste Land’, the central myth of the poem, is an idea that Eliot got from Weston and Frazer. He tried to understand, assess and represent the contemporary European culture in terms of this central myth using a series of other myths and allusions on the way. Frazer and Weston’s works gave Eliot a vehicle through which he could explore and represent his own theme.

The Waste Land myth did not only provide a trope to represent Eliot’s ideas about contemporary European culture. It also helped him explore, understand and shape those ideas. It helped him talk about the present in terms of the past, an idea he had seen perfected in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. . . . It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. . . . Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible in art.



#### 6.4.4 *The Waste Land* as a Modern Poem

Eliot, Emerson  
and Dickinson

The term ‘modern’ expresses the state of contemporariness. With reference to art and culture, however, the terms modern, modernist and modernism conform to the beliefs and philosophy of the society during the late 19th to the early 20th century.

Modernism was a social and artistic movement that influenced the western society during World War I. Modernism is also considered as a break from the previous era and importance given to experimentation characterizes the period. Europeans and other western societies were disillusioned and perplexed after World War I, when the Victorian values of industrialization, social progress, and scientific advancement seemed to collapse. The effects of the war had ‘undermined humankind’s faith in the foundations of Western society and culture, and post-war modernist literature reflected a sense of disillusionment and fragmentation.’

The modernists therefore held previously accepted notions of order and security in human life as redundant, and tried formulating a new perspective of and a solution to the disillusionment triggered by World War I. Bentley and Booker argue that in modern art and culture, artists ‘responded by trying to find new ways of seeing, new models of knowing . . . abandoning rules of perspective, and in literature, abandoning a fixed point of view.’ The modern period and the modernist movement had important and sustained effects on culture, art, literature, and philosophy of the society. Eliot, being a witness of the social disorder and transformation engulfing World War I, was greatly influenced by the modernist movement.

*The Waste Land* in the modern context metaphorically, symbolically and sometimes is a direct allusion to the real situation that exists in modern Europe and the nature of human life that forms a part of it. The barren and lifeless landscape of *The Waste Land* is a metaphor of Europe post World War I just as the nature of the people, their actions, words and relationships are symbolic of absence of meaning and importance in the lives of the people.

There is repeated reference to the decay of western civilization through the use of metaphors and images. The speaker observes the ‘Unreal City,’ London, after the War—‘under the brown fog of a winter dawn / A crowd [flowing] over London Bridge’. He is disillusioned and perplexed at the scene; he ‘had not thought death had undone so many’ (63). This surreal and foggy image of London—its streets filled with ‘sighs, short and infrequent,’ and ‘each man fixed his eyes before his feet’ (64-65)—accurately and sharply demonstrates the misery and dismal reality of modern Europe.

According to Eric Svarny, the dry, barren, lifeless images in the poem and the undeniable sense of futility form an ‘evocation of post-war London’. Svarny notes that the image of London in the poem is characterized by ‘guilt, shock, [and] incomprehension of a traumatized society manifested . . . through

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historical, cultural, psychic dislocations'. For example, in the first section 'The Burial of the Dead,' the speaker observes and describes London after the Great War as a broken, dry, and lifeless place full of dead bodies. London, a city once featured by progress and abundance, has become nothing more than an 'Unreal City' (60); it has lost its cultural and social liveliness and has been reduced to a heap of fragments.

Kristian Smidt's analysis of the poem's commentary on modern Europe helps us understand this idea further specially its relation to the poem's style. As a modern poem, '*The Waste Land*' deviates from traditional norms in terms of ideas as well as style. Just as the modern man has found it 'impossible to hold beliefs of bygone days', Eliot reflects this modernist perspective in his experimental and unique style, transcending ordinary and traditional form, aesthetics, logic, and thought. This is a conscious effort in attempting to discover 'new order through contemplation and exhibition of disorder'. The disjointedness that initially does not make sense in the poem is an artful yet realistic expression of the Modern Age's attempt to construct a different paradigm and a solution that would explain reality and re-establish the sense of security of the past that has been lost after the War.

The speaker's listless attitude in contrast to his eager search for meaning in *The Waste Land* reflects a sense of exhaustion, showing that despite the modern man's craving for redemption, he does not really hope to derive contentment and relief from the society he dwells in. The extensive references to the past and exotic phrases in the poem are reflective of the modern man's conflict against the contemporary and the intensifying tendency to delve into other societies and time periods for answers to questions raised by his culture.

The choice of characters, images and ideas in *The Waste Land* implies that Eliot was chiefly interested in and concerned with the society and the modernist mind-set surrounding him. The crisis of Europe during the modern era was the collapse of this mind-set. Eliot establishes a connection between the poet's mind and society's mind; his ideas communicated through the modern individual's perspective in the poem reflect his perception of the condition of European society from a holistic perspective.

Eliot depicts the mind of modern Europe as being characterized by distress, agony, and restlessness. Despite his lamenting the hopelessness and despair in modern Europe, Eliot does not leave his commentary on European society as an open-ended criticism but rather attempts to provide, or suggest, a solution to get Europe out of this predicament. He compares Europe's condition to 'schizophrenia' as reflected in the image of 'crowds of people, walking round in a ring' (56) in the midst of the 'heap of broken images' (22) and the disintegrated nature of the poem itself. This portrayal suggests a sense of intellectual absurdity as well as circularity.

### 6.4.5 Allusions in *The Waste Land*

Eliot, Emerson  
and Dickinson

The poem is endowed with references to seventy-seven ancient, classic, and religious texts. Its seemingly scattered and confusing references form part of Eliot's strategy of restoring the mind of Europe. A meaning and design probably features even in the poem's most obscure aspects. Eliot believed that 'people should bring special knowledge to the reading of texts. In order to collaborate with the poet in the making of a poem, readers must be willing to close the book and dwell awhile with Ezekiel and Dante'.

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The allusions significantly contribute to the theme of the poem. The opening epigraph, although initially mysterious, is a reference to Cumaean Sibyl's words in a work by an ancient Roman writer Petronius in first century A.D. Sibyl's words, 'I want to die,' conveys a sense of despair and hopelessness, and the sense of being trapped such that death feels like a pleasant escape.

The poem also alludes to more recent writers of the modern era such as Chaucer and Shakespeare. The first line of the poem, 'April is the cruellest month,' is often compared to the description of April in the General Prologue of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, 'which adopts a more conventional and cheerful treatment of spring'. Eliot's portrayal of the infertile and lifeless land as opposed to Chaucer's fresh and fruitful image of spring highlights the distorted vision of spring and the unnatural and adverse condition of the infertile land.

Eliot cites various verses from the Bible—in fact, references to Christianity and its tradition form the maximum part of religious allusions. For instance, the image of the barren land in 'The Burial of the Dead' is an allusion to *Ecclesiastes 12*. The poem's description of 'the dead tree [giving] no shelter, the cricket no relief' (23) echoes the description of the 'evil days' when 'the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened' and 'the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper is a burden, and desire fails' (*Ecclesiastes 12:1, 5*). The correlation between the poem and *Ecclesiastes* portrays and highlights the barrenness, meaninglessness, and the grim vision feature of modernity.

In 'The Fire Sermon,' contrastingly, the poem quotes Buddha's Fire Sermon. Eliot explains that the Fire Sermon corresponds in importance to the Sermon on the Mount. '*The Waste Land*' combines contrasting religious references creating a sense of multiplicity, ambivalence, and confusion.

An effect of these allusions on the poem as a whole is the repeated disruption in the flow of reading and understanding the poem. These breaks in the flow of the poem lead to a fragmented structure and content. They loosen the unity of the poem by producing a sense of disjointedness, almost 'a heap of broken images'.

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It is through the allusions that the poem suggests a solution to the modernist predicament. The thunder in line 400 says *Da*, a phrase Eliot picks up from a particular episode of the *Brihadranayaka Upanishad* which describes how gods, men and demons approached *Prajapati*, their father and guru, for instruction after completing their formal education. *Prajapati* responds with the monosyllable *Da* which the gods interpret as *Damyata* or self-control, the humans as *Data* as give and the demons as *Dayadhvam* or be compassionate. Perhaps Eliot wants the modern man to follow all these three to escape the terrible state that modern man is in.

### Check Your Progress

1. Why is T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* a complex poem?
2. How are myths and illusions used in Eliot's *The Waste Land*?

## 6.5 RALPH WALDO EMERSON: ABOUT THE POET

Emerson was born on 25 May 1803 in Boston, Massachusetts, to Ruth Haskins and Reverend William Emerson. His father was a pastor of the First Unitarian Church of Boston, chaplain of the Massachusetts Senate and an editor of *Monthly Anthology*, a literary review. Emerson, when only two-years old, was referred by his father as 'a rather dull scholar'. After William's death in 1811 due to stomach cancer, the family was in a very poor state. Emerson was brought up by Ruth Haskins and his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, whose sharp and decisive intelligence had an enduring influence on him. These two women played a vital role in helping Emerson to complete his studies at the Boston Public Latin School.

In 1817, Emerson went to Harvard College on a scholarship and completed his graduation in 1821. After completing his graduation, he moved to Boston where he taught at his brother, William's Boston school for young ladies. It was in Boston where he started to experiment with fiction and verse. In 1825, he resigned from the school and entered the Harvard Divinity School from where he completed his master's degree in 1826, which qualified him to preach.

As Emerson started suffering from symptoms of tuberculosis, he went to Georgia and Florida with a hope to recover from his ailing health. After coming back to Boston, he started preaching occasionally. Emerson met his first wife, Ellen Louisa Tucker (who was also suffering from tuberculosis), in Concord, New Hampshire, in 1827, and married her in September 1829 when she was only eighteen years old. The two were married just after Emerson had been ordained pastor of the Second Unitarian Church of Boston. Although they were leading a happy married life, both of them were suffering from

tuberculosis. Less than two years of their marriage, Ellen died at the age of twenty in 1831.

After Ellen's death, Emerson began to disagree with the church's methods. He resigned his pastorate at Second Unitarian Church. One of his reasons for resigning was his refusal to manage the sacrament of the Last Supper, which he believed was not a useful theological rite. Another reason for him to resign was his belief that the ministry was an 'antiquated profession'. Despite being severely ill, he left for Europe in 1832, where he met several leading thinkers of his time. Some of these intellectuals were the economist and philosopher, John Stuart Mill; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose *Aids to Reflection* Emerson admired; the poet William Wordsworth; and Thomas Carlyle, the historian and social critic, with whom Emerson established a lifelong friendship.

After returning from Europe in 1833, Emerson started his career as a public lecturer with an address in Boston. 'The Uses of Natural History' was one of his first lectures, which aimed to improve science by explaining that 'the whole of Nature is a symbol or image of the human mind'. He also gave lectures on varied subjects, such as English literature, the philosophy of history, human culture, etc.

In September 1834, he moved to Concord, Massachusetts, as a lodger in his step-grandfather, Ezra Ripley's house. After a year, in September 1835, he married Lydia Jackson in Plymouth, Massachusetts, after which they moved for the rest of their lives to their own house in Concord. From Lydia, Emerson had three children, named Ellen, Edith and Edward Waldo Emerson.

On 9 September 1836, Emerson's first book, *Nature*, was published incognito. The book briefly describes the whole substance of his thoughts and ideas. The essay basically deals with the foundation of transcendentalism, a belief system that advocates a non-traditional appreciation of nature. Following this essay, Emerson delivered his famous speech entitled 'The American Scholar' on 31 August 1837 at Harvard. The address, then known as 'An Oration, Delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge', was very popular and, when printed, sold well. It was after this speech that he was invited to Harvard Divinity School to address the graduating class. In this speech, which came to be known as his 'Divinity School Address', Emerson discounted Biblical miracles. This resulted in such a hue and cry that he was not invited back to his alma mater for thirty years. According to Amos Bronson Alcott, an American teacher, writer, philosopher and reformer, 'Emerson's church consists of one member — himself'.

In 1836, Emerson joined the Transcendental Club which comprised of American philosopher, poet and environmental scientist, Henry David Thoreau; American author, journalist, critic and women's rights activist, Margaret Fuller; and American novelist, Louisa May Alcott. In 1840, the

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group, including Emerson, published its flagship journal, *The Dial*, a journal of literature, philosophy and religion that focused on transcendentalist views. After two years, Emerson became the editor of the journal, succeeding Fuller, and became closely associated with the movement of transcendentalism. However, the publication of the journal was ceased after two years.

In 1841, Emerson published his second book, *Essays*, which included some of his best-remembered writings, including 'Self-Reliance' and 'The Over-Soul'. A second series of *Essays*, entitled *Essays: Second Series*, was published in 1844, which firmly established his reputation as an authentic American voice. The collection included 'The Poet', 'Experience', 'Gifts' and an essay entitled 'Nature', a different work from the 1836 essay of the same name.

In 1842, Emerson's son, Waldo, died because of scarlet fever. His poem *Threnody*, which was included in his collection *Poems* (1846), was an elegy expressing his grief for Waldo.

From 1847 to 1848, Emerson travelled to England and Scotland to give his lectures, which were immensely successful. He also toured Europe in 1833 and compiled the experiences of his travels in *English Traits*, which was published in 1856. Before this, his collection entitled *Addresses and Lectures* was published in 1849, following which *Representative Men* was published in 1850.

After 1850, Emerson's works were not very highly regarded as his writings previously. However, he remained active intellectually and socially, gave several lectures in different parts of England, and continued to write and publish. He also supported the anti-slavery movement during the 1850s and the Northern cause when the American Civil War broke out.

In 1866, Emerson was invited by Harvard again to give the Phi Beta Kappa address, entitled 'May-Day and Other Pieces'. The essay, published in 1867, was a second collection of his poems, and his later essays were collected in *Society and Solitude* (1870).

However, Emerson's health and mental acuteness started declining as he grew older. His intellectual sharpness further declined when in 1872, his Concord home was badly damaged by fire.

In 1879, he set up the Concord School of Philosophy along with Amos Bronson Alcott and others. On account of his failure of his memory, he ceased his public appearances by 1879, as the problems with his memory had become embarrassing to him. On 27 April 1882, Emerson died of pneumonia.

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## 6.6. EMERSON'S *BRAHMA*: SUMMARY

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Emerson composed the poem *Brahma* in the nineteenth century. The composition of the poem is in form of an Utterance; in this type of composition



the form consist of a sublime or metaphysical content along with the ballad quatrain-music configuration. This kind of dramatic form was not in fashion and noticeably dissimilar from dramatic developments of Browning. Hence this form of Western verse framework is considered to be one of its kinds that consist of the Oriental poetical material.

Emerson initiated and headed the transcendentalist movement during the middle of the nineteenth century. He continued to be a supporter of individualism and a prophetic critic of the countervailing societal pressures till the end of his days with the help of his public lectures which he gave across. He covered varied subjects through his essays. None of his work adopts a static philosophical views, rather each one tries to develop a positive philosophy like individualism, self-determination, the capability for manhood to comprehend almost anything, and the connection between the soul and the adjoining domain. The essay “nature” was hardly naturalistic in fact it was mostly philosophical: “Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul.” Emerson is among few personalities who “took a more pantheist or pandeist approach by rejecting views of God as separate from the world.”

He continues to be regarded as one of the significant figures of the American Romantic Movement, and his work has been a tremendous source of inspiration for his successors and future thinkers, writers and poets. While presenting a summary of all his work Emerson once commented that the core of his doctrine was “the infinitude of the private man.” Emerson is considered as a guru and friend of famous transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau.

The central narrator in the poem is Brahma himself. According to Hindu philosophers, *Brahma* is considered to be all-powerful, all-knowing and all-pervading. The poem strongly impresses upon the study of the *Gita*, and the *Katha Upanishad*. The body of a man is not everlasting and as a result its existence, it is bound to end but the soul is everlasting and lives for ever. The soul is believed to have a divine inspiration which keeps it alive as it is a part of the supreme power of the universe, the God.

Emerson was the leader of the pioneering group of American thinkers who perceived the Non-western philosophy; this group came to be known as the Transcendentalists. Some of the other prominent members of this group were Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Alcott and Elizabeth Peabody. Transcendentalism condemned the dogmatic perception of acceptance and insisted on thinking freely.

All religions have varied faiths concerning their deity however the central concern of all is the Brahma, the supremo. Hence, the poem has a universal theme: The Brahma, the superpower; it has several tiny parts such as the Atman, the human, and these parts have to acquire salvation (link of Atman to the Brahma). However, they are entangled in *Maya*, ephemeral one

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which is regarded as the physical beauty of the world. All those who are able to overcome the *Maya* would definitely be able to interpret the Brahma and thus achieve salvation.

Brahma is the metaphysical clarification of the universal spirit by that name. The solemn nature of the subject is represented in a poetic form by using elastic quatrain. Brahma seems to be the only speaker in the entire poem and this helps in establishing a sense of continuity of the poem. The supreme power of Brahma is stressed upon by the poet by maintaining a single narration.

The poem starts with an examination of the general view that death of an individual is the end of the spirit as well. The poet maintains that the body may be destroyed but Brahma, which exist in every individual as the spirit, never dies, “*If the red slayer think he slays, / Or if the slain think he is slain, / They know not well the subtle ways/ I keep.*” According to the poet after death the body is destroyed, but the spirit appears again in a different form. By using the examples of both the slayer and the slain, the narrator is maintaining the general view according to which the spirit might not be eternal and at the same time proposing the contradiction that usually characterizes an individual’s perception.

The contradiction reappears in the second stanza, in which contrasting views such as far and near, shadow and sunlight, vanishing and appearing, and shame and fame are compared. To the narrator, who unites the universe, the apparently the vast differences concerning opposite concepts may be easily fixed; therefore, the contradictory proclamations. In the third stanza, the great powers of Brahma are described. In this stanza the spirit says that it is able to comprehend yet surpasses everything, “the doubter and the doubt,” the subject and object, and matter and mind. Moreover the scheme of rhyme adopted by the poet aptly supports the interweaving powers of the spirit; it generates a feeling of amaze because of the uncommon metrical symmetry.

Altered from the ethereal spirit in Hinduism, nonetheless, the transcendent spirit denoted in the poem shows the followers a path towards the existing world and not the Heaven. With the use of the conjunction “but” in the concluding stanza, the poet readies the readers of the poem to come up with their own understanding of the universal spirit. The closing statement of the poem substantiates self-contained survival in this world, “*But thou, meek lover of the good! / Find me, and turn thy back on heaven,*” the statement makes the poem typical to the style of Emerson.

### 6.6.1 Themes in the Poem *Brahma*

The central theme of “*Brahma*” is that humans will find fulfilment and satisfaction only once they have the realisation that they are a part of a universal entity. According to most of the work done by Emerson, real world

is the spiritual world and not the material world. He insisted in his writings that material world is an illusionary world created by the human senses and it is essential to overcome this illusion. He often employed one part of the world as a miniature copy of the universe as a whole; he believed that if individuals could just understand at least a single aspect of the reality, the individuals will have a clearer understanding of the whole.

One more core theme of Emerson seen in this poem is the close connection between nature and humans. The physical nature is like a mirror which helps in reflecting to man the spiritual facts that lie in the background and enlighten all physical facts. Shadow and sunlight, for instance, may disclose that they are unavoidable parts of a single phenomenon and hence one spiritual reality. The person needs to realize that shadow is merely the lack of light; similarly individuals need to realize that evilness is merely the lack of goodness.

Additional significant theme which is seen in this poem is the notion of compensation, for instance, there exists a universal principle of balance, each time something is given to an individual in the next instance something will be taken away and vice versa. In the spiritual sense, nobody loses anything as the loss is always followed by a gain.

### 6.6.2 *Brahma*: An Analysis

On the whole, “*Brahma*” is an outstanding reproduction and illustration of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s work. He is more popular as an essay writer but his poetry helps in acting as a prelude to his unique style and themes found in his writings. This poem is one such example. As far as style is concerned, the poem has the similar spiral method seen in most of his prose. He does not employ the straight liner style seen in the work of other poets of his era. Theme-wise the poem is similar to his essays, he maintains the spiritual and physical unity and harmony in the universe. The language of both his poetry and prose is all-encompassing and dense. The readers have to be attentive while studying his work.

The poem “*Brahma*” has sixteen lines; it has been divided into four stanzas. Knowledge of Hinduism is essential for readers to be able to interpret and appreciate the thoughts presented in the poem. According to Hindu doctrine, Brahma is regarded as the ultimate spirit in the universe, the everlasting spirit which has created everything and is considered to be the provider and taker of all his creations. Emerson has referred to Brahma as the Over-Soul of this reason. The “super gods” mentioned in the first line of the fourth stanza are subordinate gods who along with the mortals wish to be finally joined with the supreme god the Brahma. The gods who have been referred to as super gods include the god of the sky-Indra, the god of fire- Agni, and god of death-Yama, the poet has mentioned him as “the red slayer” in the starting line of the poem. The “sacred Seven” mentioned in the

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concluding stanza of the poem are the chief holy persons in Hinduism, they also wish to be joined with Brahma. In the first stanza the poet has insisted that nothing dies in the spiritual universe and the spirit is eternal and gets a new existence.

From the poem, it is evident that Emerson has employed the standard poetic meter and rhyme which was followed in the poem during that time: The four stanzas are in iambic tetrameter and by using coupled rhymes (abab), Emerson has reflected upon his thematic sense of the inevitable polarity in the universe.

The speaker and the central feature of the poem is Brahma; the poet has referred to him as the Over-Soul as he is the creative spirit in the universe. Choosing the Brahma as the narrator permits Emerson to suggest the unity in the world's divergent structure; although disputations appear to be present, the poet regards these disputations as significant contradictions and not pointless ones. Emerson's poetic strategy has been to generously use irony; he proposes that death is not indeed death, shadow and sunlight are one and the same, and Brahma contains both the doubter and doubt within himself and each individual wishes to come back to him. There are few more ironies in the poem: there is a clear implication in the first line of the last stanza of the poem that all want to seek the abode of Brahma instead of the Christian heaven and secondly, those who embrace the Darwinian perception according to which only the fittest of all survive actually don't realise that in actuality everyone survives.

The poet has employed imagery in the poem which has been borrowed from the Hindu scriptures; the purpose of these images is to successfully reveal the corresponding pattern and unanimity in the physical universe. During ancient times Hindus believed that Brahma embraced the essence of the entire universe. The name of the poem is meant to refer to not only the Brahma the creator but also the all-encompassing essence of the universe.

### 6.6.3 Narrative Techniques in *Brahma*

The poet has assumed the role of Brahma, hence most of the poem, till the fourteenth line has been presented from the narrative of the first-person. The concluding lines (15 and 16) the poet has addressed the readers from the point of view of the second- person. In the concluding lines, *Brahma* informs the readers that once they find the path to the essence of Brahma, they will not need anything till eternity.

### 6.6.4 Figure of Speech in the Poem

The poet has used the following figures of speech in the poem. These are:

- (a) Alliteration has been used in following lines of the poem:

Lines 1 and 2: *If the red slayer think he slays, / Or if the slain think he is slain*

Lines 5 and 6: *Far or forgot to me is near/ Shadow and sunlight are the same*

Lines 10 and 11: *When me they fly, I am the wings / I am the doubter and the doubt*

Line 14: *And pine in vain the sacred Seven*

(b) Metaphor has been used in following lines:

- Brahma has been compared to a bird in line 10: *When me they fly, I am the wings*
- Brahma has been compared to a doubter and to doubt at the same time in line 11:

*I am the doubter and the doubt*

- In line 12, Brahma has been referred to a hymn which is sung by the priest: *And I the hymn the Brahmin sings*

(c) Paradoxes are seen in lines 5, 6 and 8

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3. Who is the central narrator of R.W. Emerson's poem, *Brahma*?
4. What are the different types of speech used in the poem *Brahma*?

## 6.7 RALPH WALDO EMERSON'S *TERMINUS*: SUMMARY

*Terminus* is a poem about how time is a limit in the life of individuals. The poem was composed by Ralph Waldo Emerson when he himself had become old and he wanted to be able to work with the same energy as he did when he was younger. He did not want his old age to be a deterrent for his work.

*Terminus* exemplifies the tussles of a man who is soon going to die yet he wishes to ardently carry on working as he used during his younger years. The old age and fear of death have not made him negative; he is well aware that soon he will be invalid yet he is passionate about life. He feels sorry for those who lack passion and courage. He is resolute and has faith in God; these qualities help him to face the hardship of his life. Through this poem Emerson is trying to establish that an individual can achieve a lot in life if he is equipped with courage and passion. The poem is based on the poet's personal struggles during his old age when because of his ailment, he was not able to carry on with his work about which he was very passionate. His aphasia increased with age and as a result it became hard for him to carry on with his activities like writing, lecturing, and promoting Transcendentalism movement.

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In the opening lines, the poet has illustrated the need to roll back. The line stating, *sets to seas a shore* is meant to convey that the end has come as the ocean ends at the shore. The poet is feeling that someone is preventing him from moving towards the shore. In this poet seems to be referring to the Roman god when he says *the god of bounds*. His presence there shows that a boundary needs to be crossed.

In the following lines, the poet explains the difference between young age and old age. He feels that it is only once individuals reach their old age they are able to formulate their views which have developed and grown through the years. The years of maturity help in letting go the irrelevant things of the younger years. Though half way through the poem the poet contradicts himself, by saying "*maturing the unfallen fruit*", even in old age, growth is taking place. This contradicts his previous statements as maturing of the fruit can take place only once it has been plated previously.

In the subsequent lines, the poet claims that nothing can alter the process of aging. The younger generation also will not be able to bring back the time which has passed. The children will not be able to help as they are also part of the same legacy. The poet uses the first person for the first time in the concluding sentence of the poem. His purpose of changing the narration to first person in the end reinforces the fact that throughout the poem the poet has been envisioning his own end. In the concluding lines of the poem, Emerson was willingly manning the rudder to the storm. His willingness is a sign of acceptance to his death and he is proud of all his achievements in life: "*the port, well worth the cruise, is near*". In the concluding stanza, the poet also stresses that all events of life should be dealt with courage and passion, all opportunities should be availed to the fullest. Emerson's remark holds true for his poem, "*Shallow men believe in luck. Strong men believe in cause and effect*"

### 6.7.1 *Terminus*: An Analysis

*Terminus* was the last poem which had been composed by Emerson and it is a common belief that in the poem, the poet is contemplating his own death. The title of the poem has two meanings. In first instance, terminus denotes the end but the poet has left certain amount of obscurity about the second meaning. *Terminus* also refers to the Roman god of boundaries. These boundaries could denote life and death, the old and the new, or may be another essential change.

*Terminus* is a forty line poem and each line consists of six words roughly. The metre used by the poet in the poem resembles an iambic trimeter with a rhyme scheme of abcdcddeeeXeeffggfcbecchXccciXbibidadX. The rhyming resembles that of Shakespearean sonnet. There are many punctuation marks but none of them is prominent. The poet has applied lexical repetitions in order to give emphasis to a particular image; and it is recurring.

### Check Your Progress

5. What is the main theme of Emerson's *Terminus*?
6. What is the form and structure of Emerson's *Terminus*?

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## 6.8 EMILY DICKINSON: ABOUT THE POET

Born on 10 December 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts, Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born into a family of lawyers. Her father, Edward Dickinson, was a lawyer who was educated at Amherst and Yale. After the completion of his education, Edward Dickinson returned to his family home the Homestead and joined his father Samuel Fowler Dickinson in his practice. Not much is known of Emily Dickinson's mother, except that she was dominated upon by her husband and remained inactive for the most part of her married life. However, she did compose a few letters (a record of which has been kept by Martha Ackmann) and received her primary education from Monson Academy.

All through her life, Emily Dickinson very rarely went out of her home and very few people came to visit her. She spent most of her life as a recluse and interacted with just a handful of people, although these limited number of people had a tremendous impact on her work as a poet. Reverend Charles Wadsworth is believed to have a great impact on her work; she had met him during a trip to Philadelphia. In 1860, he visited her home and then left for the West Coast. It is believed by few critics that she was deeply sad because of his departure, the verses which were composed post 1860 seemed very heartsick and sad. There is no clarity about the nature of their friendship; Dickinson has referred to him as "my closest earthly friend." Her friends Otis P. Lord, a Massachusetts Supreme Court judge, and Samuel Bowles, editor of the Springfield Republican are often regarded as the cause of her poems which have the obvious subject of unreciprocated love.

By the mid-1860s Dickinson had started to live a life of isolation, her only link with the outside world was her extensive reading and maintaining several correspondences. She used to spend a lot of her time with her family. Her father, Edward Dickinson, took a keen interest in state and national politics; he served in Congress for a term. She was extremely close to her brother, Austin, who was a lawyer and her younger Lavinia, her sister was also living in isolation. Both her siblings were her intellectual companions.

Her work had a deep influence not only from the Metaphysical poets of seventeenth-century England, but also from her reading of the Book of Revelation and her childhood which was spent in a simple New England town. It was during her childhood she adopted Calvinist, orthodox, and conservative approach towards Christianity.



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She was a great admirer of the work done by Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, along with John Keats. Although she was discouraged from reading the verse of Walt Whitman her contemporary as it was rumoured to be disgraceful but there is no denying the fact that together they are regarded as initiators of an exclusive American poetic voice. Even though Dickinson was exceptionally creative as a poet and frequently she included poems in her letters to friends, yet she came to be recognised for her poetry after her death. It was only after her death in 1886 that the first volume of her poems was published. Her first work was published in 1890 and her last volume of poems was published in 1955. Soon after her death, Dickinson's family found forty hand-bound volumes which contained over 1,800 poems. She had amassed the booklets together by folding and sewing five or six sheets of stationery paper and copied the final versions of poems. The handwritten poems display an assortment of dash-like marks of varied sizes and directions. Initially the poems were not bound and published as per the aesthetics of early editors of Dickson. They did away with her unusual and various dashes and instead replaced them with traditional punctuation. The present normal version of her poems substitutes her dashes with an en-dash, which seems to be nearer to her intended punctuations. The actual order of the poems was restored only in 1981, it was done by Ralph W. Franklin who discovered the physical evidence of the paper and restored Dickson's prearranged order and he was able to do so by relying on blur marks, needle punctures, and various other evidences to reconstruct the packets. After this reconstruction several critics have claimed that the order is not as per chronology in fact it is due to the thematic unity of the small collections. The only volume which has maintained the order is the Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson (Belknap Press, 1981).

### 6.8.1 Dickinson as an American Romantic Poet

Emily Dickinson is also seen by critics as an American Romantic poet. There is a sense of tranquility that is present in most of her poetry. Dickinson, however, throughout her life, never received the adequate acknowledgment for her unconventional choices or for her voluntary seclusion that was mainly a result of denial of the accepted social notions.

There is a certain degree of intensity and vitality that was present in her solitude. Nature, or the idea of creation of harmony through nature, did not lead to the development of a definite outlook or attitude in case of Emily Dickinson. Unlike the pantheism that can be witnessed in Wordsworth, Dickinson's inclination was more towards a comparison between the two worlds of man and nature.

This becomes most visible in her poem *A Bird Came Down the Walk*, where this impossible gap is most clearly depicted. There is no sense of profundity that Dickinson associates with the image of the birds. Instead,



they are significant only in their revelation of the conflicts that exist between the world of nature and the world of man—the bird, feeling at risk while present in the domain of man, willingly discards the offer that comes from the human world.

In Dickinson's poetry, unlike the popular opinion, there is a celebration of life instead of its denial. The poet, however, cannot even be placed in the category of the 'new woman'—Dickinson's revolution was internal. Her poetry was, thus, mostly personal, and came from her private experiences, which were recognized and appreciated openly by the public much later. Through her nature poetry, Dickinson also tried to portray the grotesque aspects of nature which had long been neglected by the moralists and avoided by the Romantics.

Dickinson's obsession with the theme of death is present at the heart of her nature poems. Certain transcendental overtones are evident that separated her sense of hopelessness from that of the transcendentalists. Her sense of death contains within it a finality that comes only in the presence of nature. Winter, for Dickinson, for instance, signifies death in nature and death within the mind.

Dickinson wrote during the time when Whitman was labeled as 'disgraceful' for the stimulating content of his poems. For a woman, articulation of any form of sexual reactions or desires could thus prove to be doubly problematic. The untraversed lands of female sexuality were explored through the imagery of a snake—Dickinson's poem *A Narrow Fellow* talks, for instance, about the movement of a snake and extends that to exploration of female sexuality.

Dickinson's poetry mostly contained a tone of isolation and solitariness, and the themes of love and death seem to present in most of her compositions. Dickinson's poetry seeks a refuge from the human society and finds comfort only in nature, which remains essentially connected for the poet with the idea of love. Dickinson's form of love, however, is connected also with a sense of motivation. Nature, for Dickinson, also enlightens the concealed thoughts usually present in the human mind. Another theme that is present in most of Dickinson's poetry is that of the debatable nature of human desire.

Regarding nature, there are two types of inclination that are usually present in the works of nearly all poets—one of them being that of escapism, when the poet tries to distance herself/himself from the city life, and another, of mysticism, that is, when there is a sense of oneness that develops within the poets by an association with nature. Dickinson, however, cannot be placed within these two boundaries—she is poet whose work modified, to a great extent, the very essence of nature poetry.

The understanding of nature that is present in the works of Emily Dickinson essentially stem from her perception of her own state of being. She

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associates a celestial symbolism with the colours and fragrances of nature. Besides this, Dickinson's nature, unlike nature as it was experienced by Wordsworth who saw it as comforting, is more glorious in the poet's vision.

## NOTES

### Check Your Progress

7. Why did critics call Emily Dickinson a Romantic poet?
8. Why did Dickinson's poetry mostly contain the elements of isolation?

## 6.9 THE SOUL SELECTS HER OWN SOCIETY: TEXT AND SUMMARY

In the first stanza of the poem, in lines one and two, one can distinctly hear alliteration. Dickinson makes the 'soul' do the selection. The usage of the phrase 'divine majority' is definitely interesting. The word 'divine' not only identifies something which is beyond human but then it is not just restricted to being the image of 'soul'. This soul is conferred with a status. And in Dickinson's poetry obtaining a status is an integral idea. Here, we should focus on the meaning of the word 'majority'. One can derive several meanings of the word: it could mean - more than half, it could also hint at the age of legal adulthood (one who is no longer a minor), or it could indicate the military rank of major, or superiority (the meaning is no longer in use now). The reader will find new interpretations with every reading of the poem. The gesture of shutting the door too could mean a few things: it could be identified as an action which gives the hope of a change but it could at the same time mean it is the final action. Again 'obtrude' could be used to highlight an action that is a charming interruption or it could probably be an offensive action.

By the time we reach the second stanza, we realize that the soul is not impressed by worldly rank or power. We understand that most of the words indicate status: low gate, emperor, kneeling, chariot, mat and so forth. While in line three, Dickinson starts eliminating words. A reader who is not careful might feel that a careless reader might think that it is the emperor who has remained unmoved. To others, it might appear confusing because he has visited her and is kneeling in her presence. Interestingly, Dickinson has decided to do away with the subject as well as the verb. But it is the one which she had highlighted in line one, 'she notes'. Ultimately, it is the soul which remains unmoved by the emperor kneeling before her.

In stanza three, Dickinson is emphasizing the judiciousness and the finality with which the soul makes its choice. The extent of choices (highlighted with the word 'ample nation') offered finally is contrasted with the narrowing of her choice to 'one'. After having made the final choice, the soul decides to close the 'valves' without showering anyone with her attention.

It would be interesting to have another look at the meter and line length. For every stanza, the first line is distinctly longer (contains more syllables) than the rest three lines. While the second and fourth lines are distinctly shorter (have much less syllables). However, in the last stanza, we find that the second and fourth lines are much shorter than what we had experienced in the preceding stanzas. Here, each line has only two syllables. Such demonstration of exceptionally short line makes the line stand out. These lines definitely feel and sound emphatic and conclusive, probably the most appropriate effect for the idea that has been shared in the lines.

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### 6.9.1 *The Soul Selects her Own Society: A Critical Analysis*

In the poem the speaker insists that ‘the Soul selects her own Society’— but then all of a sudden it ‘shuts the Door’, not allowing even ‘an Emperor be kneeling / Upon her mat.’ But then it is known that the soul often chooses not to select more than one person from what appears to be ‘an ample nation’ of humanity. And once this person is selected then the soul, on its own closes ‘the Valves of her attention’ to the world which it is part of.

A poem like *I’m Nobody! Who are you?* introduces a playful tone while conveying the idea of solitude and privacy. On the other hand, the tone of *The Soul Selects Her Own Society* is far more ominous than that of *I’m Nobody! Who are you?* In simple words, it implies that people like to choose their handful few companions who matter to them and gradually exclude others. The poem puts forth images of a serious ceremony where the ritual of the closing of the door draws our attention. We also witness the chariots as well as the emperor and idea of the ponderous ‘Valves’ of the soul which the reader cannot ignore. Especially, if we pay a close look at the middle stanza, we realize that it functions to emphasize the soul’s absolutely uncompromising stance towards each and everyone who makes an attempt to enter into her society, especially once the symbolic door is closed. The decision is so firm that even the chariots or the emperor can only make futile attempts to persuade the soul.

As we reach the third stanza, we come across a situation that illustrates the exclusivity of the soul’s existence. It is obvious that even from ‘an ample nation’ of options (in terms of human contact) the narrator has no issue settling down for one single option. And this inclusion will conclusively remove other associations out of her life. The concluding stanza gives a special emphasis on ‘One’. This one is someone who is chosen. Yet this one is responsible for making *The Soul Selects Her Own Society* a tragic feel, elevating it to the level of a tragic love verse. But of course, it will be unfair to reduce our understanding of the poem; being a poem of romantic nature. This poem is a beautiful example that highlights Dickinson’s ability to maneuver with metaphors and imageries. She keeps baffling the readers with her choice of words. Dickinson, without a doubt, surprises the readers with her beautiful

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yet unexpected series of images. Each of these images only consolidates the sombre mood of the poem.

Many critics have pointed out that the poem 303 denoting *The Soul Selects Her Own Society* was composed sometime around 1862. It usually relates to the year when Dickinson more or less decided to withdraw herself from the world outside. The poem when read from this perspective, in extremely simple words, suggests that an individual has a right to live by his or her one's own choice. Though such a reading, while might appear perfectly acceptable on the surface level, will obviously overlook several significant aspects that the poem is trying to highlight.

### 6.9.2 *The Soul Selects Her Own Society: Form and Language*

The metric form that *The Soul Selects Her Own Society* takes recourse to by all means is more irregular and prone to more pauses than a standard Dickinson poem would display. Although there is no denial that more or less it fits into the usual structure she prefers. As seen in her other works, she takes recourse to the usual iambic trimeter with the occasional inclusion of a line in tetrameter. The poem is also a departure from her preferred rhyme scheme. If we take into account the half-rhymes like 'Gate' and 'Mat' we see the ABAB scheme instead of ABCB. Here the first and third lines rhyme along with the second and the fourth line. Yet, at the same time, by incorporating long dashes systematically to pause the flow of the meter while creating an impact on the brief pauses. This form of the poem is very Emily Dickinsonian irrespective of its non-characteristics aspects.

One significant aspect would be the use of curious choice of language. It talks about 'divine Majority' (in line three). We realize that 'The Soul' mentioned in line one is not just 'a soul'; it is not even an individual, yet it shuts the door not only to people in general but also to the majority of the people at large. It is also closed for those people who bear the stamp of divine sanction. If read from this perspective, the poem underlines Emily Dickinson's decision not to join the world of the Elect. This will remain as it is even if it has 'an emperor be kneeling' right in front of her door. The conduit of grace- which turns into an analogy which is highlighted in the sermons of Jonathan Edwards; and these turns into 'the Valves' on the basis of which the soul discriminates.

We get to know that she remains 'unmoved'. The soul, of course, is neither nihilistic nor solipsistic. We figure out that the capitalized letter indicate towards a zero (0). It is the soul which chooses 'One' and then it soon stops paying attention to any other entities just 'Like Stone'. We probably cannot insist that this idea definitely indicates a leniency towards a Unitarian rather than a Trinitarian view of life. This interpretation carries the poem to a theological level.

However, simultaneously one gets to notice the skillfully designed description of the woman who is unavailable to just about any callers. Rather she responds to one or at best a few. If, we consider the poem from perspective that highlights other possible alternatives, *The Soul Selects Her Own Society* highlights the preference to lead a life which was not followed by most women from the nineteenth century. This lady intends to give up on the conventions of social obligation as well as what the society expects women to do. She has no intentions of changing her mind even if an emperor might make an attempt to persuade her to join the society at large.

This poem, irrespective of whether we identify it as poem of friendship or poem of love, highlights why Dickinson has been time and again referred to as the poet of exclusion. This poem highlights the need for choosing a friend (or may be a lover) while rejecting (or excluding) all others human options.

In this poem, the identity of the soul is assured. This belief in an individual's ability towards self-reliance and to achieve anything is quintessentially American in nature. The poem draws our attention towards Dickinson's inclination of writing in couplets.

#### Check Your Progress

9. What is the main theme of the first stanza of '*The Soul Selects Her Own Society?*'
10. What is the form and language of *The Soul Selects Her Own Society*.

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### 6.10 MY LIFE CLOSED TWICE BEFORE IT'S CLOSE: TEXT AND SUMMARY

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American poet Emily Dickinson was an extremely introverted individual. She spent most of her life confined to her home and did not interact with many people. Very few people were aware about her work and she did not have many friends. This was one of the reasons that her work became popular only after her death. It is believed her poem "*My life closed twice before it's close*" was inspired by the death of her parents as they were one of the closest people in her life. They died much before the publication of this poem.

Through the poem the poet is trying to convey her feelings about the loss of her parents. She feels that their death has already given her two moments when she has felt that her life is over. After these moments she is waiting for a third event to occur. The wait is killing her and all her time is spent in waiting for the third event to occur. The earlier two events were the death of her parents and now she is just passing time in wait of her own death. Dickinson experienced a feeling of hopelessness and was extremely troubled because of their death. Their death completely changed her life and

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she completely lost the will to live. Dickinson feels that people who die are sure to go to heaven and in heaven their life is going to be blissful, but their parting makes the life of people left behind a complete hell because of the grief they experience at their loss. The grief only ends once the life of those left behind also comes to an end.

### 6.10.1 *My Life Closed Twice Before it's Close: An Analysis*

It will not be wrong to assume that '*My Life Closed Twice Before Its Close*' is one of Emily Dickinson's best short poems. The poem has just two stanzas and in these short two quatrains, she manages to ponder on intense subjects like immortality and the concept of an afterlife. The opening line of the poem may be seen as a riddle and the reader is seeking answer to the question as to how can one's life close twice before it closes? The poet with such an opening line has managed to provide the readers with a puzzling enigma.

As found with several of Emily Dickinson's ultimate poems, it is not possible to provide a uniform analysis or understanding of her work, and in case, it is attempted, there is a chance to ruin the delicate and refined beauty of the language used by Dickinson. The poem is embedded with abstractions and vague ambiguities like most of her other poems. The ambiguities caused by reading the first line do get clarified by reading the rest of the poem. The readers assume that the two closes in her life are associated with the loss of the people who she deeply cared about. Besides her parents she could be referring to her friend Judge Otis Phillips Lord, she shared a passionate correspondence and friendship with him and he died two years before her death.

While analysing the first line of the poem, it may be rephrased in the following way: prior to her own death the poet has experienced the loss of two of her closest friends and their death has made such an impact on her life that she feels that she has lost the will to live. She is not sure whether there is an afterlife, and the concept is not easily understood so there is no point in wondering about it. With the death of others we have access to heaven, and luckily, it is the only way we learn about hell, awaiting our own death.

The last two lines are intriguing, as they seemingly suggest that while contemplating death of near and dear ones we gain some sense of what heaven is like, and also what hell is like. Their deaths tell us about afterlife, '*all we know*'; it is only after we experience the loss of a close relation we think about afterlife and prior to that we are afraid to even contemplate such subjects.

Due to the deaths of those close to her, Emily Dickinson felt that she had been able to get insight of what awaited her. So this could have been the reason for her to pen down this poem. The poem seems to be a biographical analysis of '*My life closed twice*' and it is sure to reach a dead end.



### 6.10.2 Form and Structure of the Poem

The poem has been written in two stanzas; each stanza has four lines which have been organized in iambs. The starting line first and third line of each stanza is in iambic tetrameter. In the alternate, and rhyming, lines, Dickinson adapts an iambic trimeter. For a mediocre poet this kind of metrical pattern may pose a creative challenge but Dickinson, with her talent to select the correct word managed to use this pattern of stanza and once again exhibited her command over the language without any difficulty. Another fascinating feature of the poem is that Dickinson has used traditional punctuations. In few of her other poems, she has substituted dashes with periods, commas and other punctuation marks. But, this poem contains two whole sentences, one long and one short and these have been punctuated with a semicolon, two commas and two periods.

### 6.10.3 Themes of the Poem

One of the themes which the poet is conveyed through the poem is permanence. The word “immortality,” used in the poem adds a lot of complexity. The poem is dealing with the fact that death is certain for all living things. The narrator of the poem states that she had already felt that she has died twice and she is just waiting for death to happen one final time. The irony here is that life would ultimately be restricted by the infiniteness of the soul or immortality. Initially the word “Immortality” is used the way it is used in most poems but subsequently its reference changes as the poet capitalizes it, and connects its reference with God and heaven. In the poem it has been pointed out that life is not stable and it can seem like it has ended several times before it finally ends. It is this tendency of life which has been a source of frustration for the poet and for this reason she is unable to conceive the concept of afterlife.

Emily Dickinson lived most of her life in isolation and maintained contact with very few people. She was very close to her parents and for this reason after their death she felt that her life had ended or closed. She felt that with their death had made her lose contact with her past life and relationships. Every time her life closed, she felt lost and alienated from what had gone before. Moreover, the narrator of the poem felt tortured due to the loneliness she experienced when her life closed on the previous occasions. In the line “*Parting is.... all we need of hell*” she explains that being away from your dear ones is like being in hell and she feels that all the parting and closing has already made her experience what hell would be like.

### 6.10.4 Figure of Speech in the Poem

The figures of speech used in the poem include:

- (a) Paradox is visible in the concluding lines of the poem. In these lines the poet has shown that parting in life is both heaven and hell.

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- (b) By using the title as the opening line in the poem, the poet has used it as a metaphor for describing the death of her parents.
- (c) She has used anaphora in the same line so that she is able to emphasise 'death'.
- (d) *'If Immortality unveil'* is an illustration of personification since immortality is capitalised and is 'unveiled'.

### Check Your Progress

11. List any one theme of "My life closed twice before it's close."
12. List the use of figures of speech in the poem.

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## 6.11 SUCCESS IS COUNTED SWEETEST: INTRODUCTION

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The lyrical poem "Success is Counted Sweetest" was written by Emily Dickinson in 1859; the poem was anonymously published in the Brooklyn daily Union on 27 April, 1864 and in 1878 it was republished as one of the poems in the collection of unknown poets titled as *A Masque of Poets*. In 1876 in spite of repeated pestering by Helen Hunt Jackson, Emily refused to submit her poem for publication. Jackson knew the poem by heart hence she on her own submitted the poem titled as "Success" for publishing in the book. The poem was altered slightly in phraseology. After the book came out Jackson wrote a review saying that the poem was "undoubtedly one of the strongest and finest wrought things in the book", and commented that wondering about the name of the poet would not be helpful. There were many who assumed that the poem had been written by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

### 6.11.1 Success is Counted Sweetest': Text and Summary

The poem starts with the speaker stating that people who have not experienced success are the ones who know its real value: 'Success is counted sweetest/ By those who ne'er succeed'. In order to understand the real taste of nectar, there should be a strong soreness in throat. She feels that even after being victorious in war, the soldiers of the winning side are unable to understand the true value of success. The feeling of success is actually felt by the dying soldier who is breathing his last breath as he listens to the music of the celebrating army.

In the first stanza, the poet conveys that in order to achieve success one needs to experience defeat as only then they will be able to realise the difference. So that the concept is well understood by the readers. In the second stanza, she talks about the soldiers who have won the war and talks about their celebrations and how they are completely unaware about the dying

soldier who is envying them from a distance. In the concluding stanza, she talks about the dying soldier from the losing side and how he is able to hear the victory songs and is feeling miserable and experiencing defeat.

With the help of this poem the poet is expressing that failure is very essential to realise the real value of success. This will create humility among individuals and they will value success and work hard to earn it. By talking about the winning soldiers in the second stanza, she says that in spite of winning, they are deprived from understanding true value of success. The person who knows the true meaning of success is the dying soldier; the failure has taught him the true value of success. The celebration of the winning army makes him yearn for success.

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### 6.11.2 Analysis of the Poem

'*Success is counted sweetest*' is one of the seven poems of Emily Dickinson which had been published during her lifetime. The poet has beautifully illustrated the sweetness of success by using the images of a victorious army and dying soldier who has been defeated. But he is the one who truly appreciates value of success. The poem reveals her ardent perception about intricacies of human desires. The poem starts with a strong message that success is most valued for those who have failed. The dying soldier is not only in pain because of his wounds but also his defeat and he is the sole person who realises the feeling of triumph.

The poem has three stanzas which are based on the iambic trimeter baring the starting two lines the second stanza, as they add a fourth stress at the end of the line. Most of the poems written by Dickinson are in an iambic meter with minor fluctuations as seen in this poem. Similarly the stanzas of the poem are according to ABCB rhyming pattern; this is seen in most of her poem. The second and the fourth line rhyme with each other.

### 6.11.3 Theme of the Poem

The theme of the poem is very evident from its title. Failure in life helps in desiring and relishing for achievements in life. The longing of the dying soldier make success most valuable thing for him. Through the poem the poet wants to convey that the failure is the biggest motivational force in life which helps people to succeed.

### 6.11.4 Figure of Speech in the Poem

Figure of speech used in the poem include:

- (a) The poem has been created over a paradox of triumph and defeat, the winner and the defeated. When the winners are basking in the splendour of their success, the defeated is evidently comprehending and stating the meaning of triumph. The winners are only experiencing the flavour, but it is the defeated soldier who is able to truly define it.

- b. The paradox is supported by the imagery of the war. The use of war helps in justifying the theme of the poem as well.

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### Check Your Progress

13. What is the main theme of *Success is Counted Sweetest*?  
14. What does the first stanza of the poem convey?

## 6.12 EMILY DICKINSON'S *I HEARD A FLY BUZZ – WHEN I DIED*: INTRODUCTION

The title of the poem “*I heard a Fly buzz—when I died*” is an informal name given to one of the untitled poem by Emily Dickinson. The narrator of the poem is breathing her last breath and during those last moments she talks about the events which take place.

“*I heard a Fly buzz*” is regarded as one of the most popular poems of Emily Dickinson; it outstandingly gives a description of the psychological diversions caused due to most unconnected minutiae at important times such as the moment of death. The poem continues to be weird and exceedingly cadaverous as it transforms the insignificant mostly unheeded fly into the icon of death since the wings of the fly cut off the speaker’s light till she is unable to “*see to see.*” However the fly has not grown powerful the final cutting act is conducted “*With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—.*” The poem has been considered to be extraordinary because of the way the poet recreates the deathbed scene.

### 6.12.1 *I Heard a Fly Buzz –When I Died*: Text and Summary

This poem is also based on the subject of death, though definitely less intense, but more grisly than the poem “*Because I could not stop for him.*” In this poem also, the poet tries to objectifying death moments before the narrator is about to die. The poet has recorded the reified experiences of the narrator in the fleeting moments just prior to her death till she actually dies. The last moments of death are conveyed through the image of a fly. In this poem the fly becomes the central figure that otherwise is regarded to have an unpleasant and trivial existence. The fly-image dictates the poem. It is typically the winding and the buzz of the fly which becomes an obsession for the narrator. The last breathing moments till the time of final death of the narrator have been signified with the help of the fly. As long as the dying individual is aware about the effervescent circling and the buzzing noise of the fly, he/she is aware about it being alive. However, slowly once the fly is no longer heard or visible, life goes out of the narrator. Therefore, the fly is very significant in the poem. The disturbing noises and energetic movements act as a reassurance for the narrator about her being alive.

The poem is a description of a scenario which prevails moments before somebody's death and how the atmosphere is altered with the introduction of the fly. The narrator begins the poem by pointing out how the noises made by the fly cut across the thick, silent air surrounding her deathbed. In the next line, the narrator puts aside the image of the fly and starts to give a description about the room in which she is going to die. She talks about how people standing in the room are gathering courage to face her death. She mentions that she has willed her belongings as she is ready for her death. At this moment, when the stage is set for her final moments, the fly intrudes into the room. The fly seems like an intruder, an eerie, redundant sort of tiny insect. The poem started on a sad note yet it was a peaceful poem. But the entry of the fly changes the complete mood of the poem; it no longer remained peaceful and comfortable.

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### 6.12.2 Analysis of the Poem

The flow of this poem depends on the poetic devices referred to as synesthesia and paronomasia. The predacious fly has a function to perform; it has to claim the body. There is an uncomfortable silence in the room which seems to be the calm which prevails before a thundering storm. The people in the room have cried all their tears and the person about to die is fully prepared for death; she has even willed her belongings. The language used is theological and legal at the same time: "*when the King/ Be witnessed—/ in the Room—*." It is at this moment that the fly enters the room and cuts in between the dying narrator and the light. The buzzing is "*Blue—uncertain stumbling.*" The windows fail, and the narrator is unable to "*see to see—*."

Typically, there is no illumination at the instant of death, simply a fading of the human entities intended to admit light. Therefore, human sight does not permit human indulgent. Dickinson had at one time written to Higginson, employing her characteristic capitalizations, that, "*The Ear is the last Face We hear after we see.*" Obviously, she classifies the "eye" with the "I." The King is there in order to act as a witness to the death, yet it is considered a legal transaction. Both do not have the will to change things, besides making sure that the material belongings fall in the hands of those who are the willed owners.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Dickinson, like most of her colleagues was worried about the facts concerning the prevailing traditional Christianity. Similar to that of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville, her questioning about the religion was partly an outcome of the universal downfall of the authority of Christianity in Western civilization. Several of Dickinson's poems cover the subject of varied issues about faith and doubt that would take place to an intense and creative mind in her culture. With this poem she attempted to penetrate into the outright blockade which stands amid the poet and the life further than death. It tries

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to give answer to the frequently asked question as to what happens in the instant after death.

The poet tries to place herself into the mind of the narrator who dies in the poem. She lives through the moment of death, attempting to imagine those moments and wished for light to follow. Just moments before the death she has clarity in her thoughts but the moment is broken by the entry of the fly as it disrupts the light and puts the mind in darkness. However, consciousness remains. The voice communicates from beyond the grave; however it is able to reveal only the part which the senses could detain prior to the death, as after that the senses no longer functioned. After that there is a void which has been symbolised by the fly. The fly guides the poet over the threshold submitted by its “*Blue—uncertain stumbling buzz.*” The fly pointed towards the path, but the living is unable to construe its buzz, and the narrator’s voice ceases.

Most of the poems written by Emily Dickinson did not have titles. They were mostly titled with their opening lines. Her editor, Thomas H. Johnson, had numbered the poems as per his assumptions regarding their order of work; this was the 465<sup>th</sup> number poem.

### 6.12.3 Techniques and Structure of the Poem

“*I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—*” contains four stanzas; they have the characteristic slant-or near-rhymes in the second and fourth lines of each stanza. The first-person speaker of the poem is at some remove from lyrical voice of Dickinson; the words emanate from beyond the grave. The poet has written several poems using this point of view and the best example of this point of view is her poem titled, “*Because I could not stop for Death—*” (poem number 712). Dickinson was very fascinated by this topic since she was keen to resolve the religious doubts with regards to life post death. In this poem the narrator has died and she remembers her last moments prior to her death. After stating that she had heard buzzing of a fly when she died, the narrator gives a description about the moments which led to this event. In the first stanza the silence in the room resembles the calm prior to a storm. The second stanza has the description about the people who are present around the narrator’s deathbed and their feelings. How they are waiting for the moment of the final loss. The third stanza has the entry of the fly and how it barged into the room and spoiled the peaceful atmosphere. The concluding lines of the third stanza start the long sentence which carries on to the final stanza. In these lines, the poet gives the description of the fly blotting the light and this leaves everything dark, even though the narrator is conscious but she is unable to see anything. In the beginning of the poem, it is established that sound will be important. In the middle of the poem, temporary and fragile silence is emphasized. In the concluding part of the poem, the silence is broken by buzzing of the fly.

“*I heard a Fly buzz*” engages all of Dickinson’s formal patterns: trimeter and tetrameter iambic lines (each stanza has four stresses in the first and third line, three stresses in the second and fourth line. This pattern has been followed by Dickinson); the meter has been interrupted by rhythmic insertion of the long dash. The poem has an ABCB rhyme scheme. Fascinatingly, all the rhymes prior to the final stanza are half-rhymes (Room/Storm, firm/Room, be/Fly); the full rhymes are found only in the concluding stanza (me/see). She has employed this technique in order to create a tensed atmosphere; narrator’s death brings a sense of true completion to the poem.

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### Check Your Progress

15. What is the significance of *I heard a Fly buzz—when I died*?
16. What is the technique and structure of the poem?

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## 6.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

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1. *The Waste Land* is a complex poem. Most of the difficulty in the poem arises from the web of allusions, quotations and imitations from primitive myths, European history and contemporary popular culture woven into the poem. In a span of 433 lines, we have references – direct or indirect – to thirty–five different authors, for instance, Shakespeare and Dante, bits of popular songs, and passages in six foreign languages including Sanskrit. Nonetheless, the poem did emerge as a representative of a post-World War I generation.
2. The use of myths is underlined by a longing for coherence and order of the imagined past, the past as a repository of higher teachings and spiritual insights. This is a longing which represents the fear of history – a fear engineered by the futility and anarchy of the present. Eliot attempts a re-enactment of the Waste Land myth at a spiritual level, hoping that by re-enacting the myth spiritually he will be able to concretize the spiritual Waste Land that the modern man inhabits. The poem is endowed with references to seventy-seven ancient, classic, and religious texts. Its seemingly scattered and confusing references form part of Eliot’s strategy of restoring the mind of Europe. The allusions significantly contribute to the theme of the poem. The poem also alludes to more recent writers of the modern era such as Chaucer and Shakespeare.
3. The central narrator in the poem is Brahma himself.
4. The poet has used the following figures of speech in the poem. These are:



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(a) Alliteration has been used in following lines of the poem:-

Lines 1 and 2: If the red slayer think he slays, / Or if the slain think he is slain

Lines 5 and 6: Far or forgot to me is near/ Shadow and sunlight are the same

Lines 10 and 11: When me they fly, I am the wings / I am the doubter and the doubt

Line 14: And pine in vain the sacred Seven

(b) Metaphor has been used in following lines:-

- Brahma has been compared to a bird in line 10: When me they fly, I am the wings

- Brahma has been compared to a doubter and to doubt at the same time in line 11:

I am the doubter and the doubt

- In line 12, Brahma has been referred to a hymn which is sung by the priest: And I the hymn the Brahmin sings

(c) Paradoxes are seen in lines 5, 6 and 8

5. *Terminus* exemplifies the tussles of a man who is soon going to die yet he wishes to ardently carry on working as he used during his younger years. The old age and fear of death have not made him negative; he is well aware that soon he will be invalid yet he is passionate about life. He feels sorry for those who lack passion and courage. He is resolute and has faith in God; these qualities help him to face the hardship of his life.

6. *Terminus* is a forty line poem and each line consists of six words roughly. The metre used by the poet in the poem resembles an iambic trimeter with a rhyme scheme of abcdcddeeXeeffggfcebcbccchXccciXbibidadX. The rhyming resembles that of Shakespearean sonnet. There are many punctuation marks but none of them is prominent. The poet has applied lexical repetitions in order to give emphasis to a particular image; to, and is recurring.

7. Emily Dickinson is also seen by critic as an American Romantic poet. There is a sense of tranquility that is present in most of her poetry. Dickinson, however, all throughout her life, never received the adequate acknowledgment for her unconventional choices or for her voluntary seclusion that was mainly a result of denial of the accepted social notions. There is a certain degree of intensity and vitality that was present in her solitude. Nature, or the idea of creation of harmony through nature, did not lead to the development of a definite outlook or attitude in case of Emily Dickinson. Unlike the pantheism that can be



witnessed in Wordsworth, Dickinson's inclination was more towards a comparison between the two worlds of man and nature.

8. All through her life, Dickinson very rarely went out of her home and very few people came to visit her. She spent most of her life as a recluse and interacted with just a handful of people, although these limited number of people had a tremendous impact on her work as a poet. Dickinson's poetry mostly contained a tone of isolation and solitariness, and the themes of love and death seem to present in most of her compositions. Dickinson's poetry seeks a refuge from the human society and finds comfort only in nature, which remains essentially connected for the poet with the idea of love.
9. In the first stanza, in lines one and two, one can distinctly hear alliteration. Dickinson makes the 'soul' do the selection. The usage of the phrase 'divine majority' is definitely interesting. The word 'divine' not only identifies something which is beyond human but then it is not just restricted to being the image of 'soul'. This soul is conferred with a status. And in Dickinson's poetry obtaining a status is an integral idea.
10. The metric form that *The Soul Selects Her Own Society* takes recourse to by all means is more irregular and prone to more pauses than a standard Dickinson poem would display. Although there is no denial that more or less it fits into the usual structure she prefers. As seen in her other works, she takes recourse to the usual iambic trimeter with the occasional inclusion of a line in tetrameter. The poem is also a departure from her preferred rhyme scheme. If we take into account the half-rhymes like 'Gate' and 'Mat' we see the ABAB scheme instead of ABCB. Here the first and third lines rhyme along with the second and the fourth line.
11. One of the themes which the poet is conveyed through the poem is permanence.
12. Figures of speech used in the poem are:
  - (a) Paradox is visible in the concluding lines of the poem. In these lines the poet has shown that parting in life is both heaven and hell.
  - (b) By using the title as the opening line in the poem, the poet has used it as a metaphor for describing the death of her parents.
  - (c) She has used anaphora in the same line so that she is able to emphasis 'death'.
  - (d) 'If Immortality unveil' is an illustration of personification since immortality is capitalised and is 'unveiled'.

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13. The theme of the poem is very evident from its title. Failure in life helps in desiring and relishing for achievements in life. The longing of the dying soldier make success most valuable thing for him. Through the poem the poet wants to convey that the failure is the biggest motivational force in life which helps people to succeed.
14. The poem starts with the speaker stating that people who have not experienced success are the ones who know its real value. ‘Success is counted sweetest/By those who ne’er succeed’. In order to understand the real taste of nectar, there should be a strong soreness in throat. She feels that even after being victorious in war, the soldiers of the winning side are unable to understand the true value of success. The feeling of success is actually felt by the dying soldier who is breathing his last breath as he listens to the music of the celebrating army.

In the first stanza, the poet conveys that in order to achieve success one needs to experience defeat as only then they will be able to realise the difference. So that the concept is well understood by the readers.

15. “*I heard a Fly buzz*” engages all of Dickinson’s formal patterns: trimeter and tetrameter iambic lines (each stanza has four stresses in the first and third line, three stresses in the second and fourth line., This pattern has been followed by Dickinson); the meter has been interrupted by rhythmic insertion of the long dash. The poem has an ABCB rhyme scheme.
16. “*I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—*” contains four stanzas. They have the characteristic slant-or near-rhymes in the second and fourth lines of each stanza. The first-person speaker of the poem is at some remove from lyrical voice of Dickinson; the words emanate from beyond the grave. The poet has written several poems using this point of view and the best example of this point of view is her poem titled, “*Because I could not stop for Death—*” (poem number 712).

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## 6.14 SUMMARY

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- *The Waste Land* is a difficult complex poem. Most of the difficulty in the poem arises from the web of allusions, quotations and imitations from primitive myths, European history and contemporary popular culture woven into the poem. In a span of 433 lines, we have references – direct or indirect – to thirty-five different authors, for instance, Shakespeare and Dante, bits of popular songs, and passages in six foreign languages including Sanskrit.
- In other words, ‘Waste Land’, the central myth of the poem, is an idea that Eliot got from Weston and Frazer. He tried to understand, assess and represent the contemporary European culture in terms of this central

myth using a series of other myths and allusions on the way. Frazer and Weston's works gave Eliot a vehicle through which he could explore and represent his own theme.

- Brahma is the metaphysical clarification of the universal spirit by that name. The solemn nature of the subject is represented in a poetic form by using elastic quatrain. Brahma seems to be the only speaker in the entire poem and this helps in establishing a sense of continuity of the poem. The supreme power of Brahma is stressed upon by the poet by maintaining a single narration.
- The poem "*Brahma*" has sixteen lines; it has been divided into four stanzas. Knowledge of Hinduism is essential for readers to be able to interpret and appreciate the thoughts presented in the poem. According to Hindu doctrine, Brahma is regarded as the ultimate spirit in the universe, the everlasting spirit which has created everything and is considered to be the provider and taker of all his creations. Emerson has referred to Brahma as the over-Soul of this reason.
- *Terminus* exemplifies the tussles of a man who is soon going to die yet he wishes to ardently carry on working as he used during his younger years. The old age and fear of death has have not made him negative; he is well aware that soon he will be invalid yet he is passionate about life. He feels sorry for those who lack passion and courage. He is resolute and has faith in God; these qualities help him to face the hardship of his life.
- Dickinson's poetry mostly contained a tone of isolation and solitariness, and the themes of love and death seem to present in most of her compositions. Dickinson's poetry seeks a refuge from the human society and finds comfort only in nature, which remains essentially connected for the poet with the idea of love. Dickinson's form of love, however, is connected also with a sense of motivation.
- Emily Dickinson lived most of her life in isolation and maintained contact with very few people. She was very close to her parents and for this reason after their death she felt that her life had ended or closed. She felt that with their death had made her lose contact with her past life and relationships. Every time her life closed, she felt lost and alienated from what had gone before.
- 'Success is counted sweetest' is one of the seven poems of Emily Dickinson which had been published during her lifetime. The poet has beautifully illustrated the sweetness of success by using the images of a victorious army and dying soldier who has been defeated. But he is the one who truly appreciates value of success. The poem reveals her ardent perception about intricacies of human desires. The poem starts

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with a strong message that success is most valued for those who have failed.

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### 6.15 KEY WORDS

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- **The American Romantic Movement:** American Romanticism was the first full-fledged literary movement that developed in the U.S. It was made up of a group of authors who wrote and published between about 1820 and 1860, when the U.S. was still finding its feet as a new nation.
- **Transcendentalism:** This is an American literary, political, and philosophical movement of the early nineteenth century, centered on Ralph Waldo Emerson. Other important transcendentalists were Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Amos Bronson Alcott, Frederic Henry Hedge, and Theodore Parker.
- **The Shakespearean Sonnet:** It has the rhyme scheme ABAB CDCD EFEF GG, forming three quatrains (four lines in a group) and a closing couplet (two rhymed lines). The problem is usually developed in the first three quatrains, each quatrain with a new idea growing out of the previous one.
- **The Iambic trimeter:** This is a meter of poetry consisting of three iambic units (each of two feet) per line. In ancient Greek poetry and Latin poetry, an iambic trimeter is a quantitative meter, in which a line consists of three iambic metra. Each one consists of the pattern.
- **Paradox:** A statement or proposition which, despite sound (or apparently sound) reasoning from acceptable premises, leads to a conclusion that seems logically unacceptable or self-contradictory.

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### 6.16 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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#### Short Answer Questions

1. Discuss life and works of T.S.Eliot.
2. What is the main theme of *The Waste Land*.
3. Write a brief note on the central narrator of Emerson's *Brahma*.
4. Explain the significance of figures of speech in the poem, *Brahma*.
5. Enumerate the main theme of Emerson's *Terminus*.
6. Analyse Emily Dickinson's life and works.

7. Write a brief note on the metric form in *The Soul selects her own Society*.
8. Analyse the theme of Dickinson's "My life closed twice before it's close".
9. Explain the poet's interpretation in 'Success is counted sweetest/By those who ne'er succeed'.

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### Long Answer Questions

1. Discuss why T.S. Eliot is regarded as one of the greatest poets in English Literature?
2. Analyse the impact of numerous myths and philosophies which led the poet to write *The Waste Land*.
3. Write a comprehensive note on the life and works of R.W. Emerson.
4. Discuss the influence of Orientalism in Emerson's *Brahma*.
5. Write a comparative overview of themes in Emerson's *Terminus*.
6. Analyse the contribution of Emily Dickinson as an American Romantic poet.
7. Discuss the form and language in Dickinson's poems.
8. Write a comprehensive note on the technique and structure of Dickinson's "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—".

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## 6.17 FURTHER READINGS

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## UNIT 7 FROST, STEVENS AND HUGHES

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### NOTES

#### Structure

- 7.0 Introduction
- 7.1 Objectives
- 7.2 Robert Frost: About the Poet
  - 7.2.1 Frost as an American Poet
- 7.3 Robert Frost's *Birches*: Summary
  - 7.3.1 *Birches*: An Analysis
  - 7.3.2 Robert Frost as a Modern Poet
  - 7.3.3 Frost's Philosophy of Life
- 7.4 Wallace Stevens: About the Poet
  - 7.4.1 Stevens and Yeats: A Comparative Study
- 7.5 Stevens's *Sunday Morning*: Summary and Theme
  - 7.5.1 *Sunday Morning*: An Analysis
- 7.6 Langston Hughes: About the Poet
  - 7.6.1 Important Works of Langston Hughes
- 7.7 *The Weary Blues*: Text and Critical Appreciation
  - 7.7.1 Summary of *The Blue Weariness*
  - 7.7.2 *The Weary Blues*: An Analysis
- 7.8 *Dream Variations*: Text and Critical Appreciation
  - 7.8.1 Summary of *Dream Variations*
  - 7.8.2 *Dream Variations*: An Analysis
- 7.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 7.10 Summary
- 7.11 Key Words
- 7.12 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 7.13 Further Readings

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### 7.0 INTRODUCTION

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Robert Frost is acknowledged as the master of native speech. In Frost's language, one gets to meet the demands of syntax, drama and metre. *Birches*, *Mending Wall*, *West Running Brook* are the poems which reveal the poet in a realistic language and dialectical terms. His conception of the sentence is central to his poetic theory. His poetic style is made up of self-identifying symbols which are accessible and comprehensible with little considerable effort. There is an adequate relationship of the imagery and the thought of Frost's poetry. *Birches*, published in 1916 is one of the most widely quoted and anthologized of the nature-lyrics of Robert Frost.

Wallace Stevens was an American poet. Though considered as one of the major American poets of the century, he didn't receive the widespread recognition till his *Collected Poems* was published. Stevens' first book of

poems, *Harmonium*, published in 1923, exhibited the influence of both the English Romantics and the French symbolists, an inclination to aesthetic philosophy. *Harmonium* bears ample evidence of Stevens's wide-ranging talents: an extraordinary vocabulary, a flair for memorable phrasing, an accomplished sense of imagery. More than any other modern poet, Stevens was concerned with the transformative power of the imagination. *Sunday Morning* is a meditative poem in which Stevens presents a woman who is frightened by the thought of death when she hears the church bells.

An American poet, social activist, novelist, playwright, and columnist, Langston Hughes was one of the earliest innovators of the literary art form called jazz poetry. Hughes' intention for writing *The Weary Blues* was to celebrate African American heritage, one which he was very proud of. The poet simply wants to give a realistic portrayal of the plight of the black people during that period. *Dream Variations* was written during the period when Harlem Renaissance artistic movements were rife in the country.

This unit aims at analyzing the poetry of Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens and James Langston Hughes and presents a critical view of poems written by them.

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### 7.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the poetry of Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens and Langston Hughes
- Explain the life and works of Robert Frost
- Enumerate the meaning and theme of Frost's *Birches*
- Analyze the contribution of Wallace Stevens in modern English poetry
- Enumerate Stevens' *Sunday Morning*
- Explain Langston Hughes' poems
- Explain Hughes' *The Weary Blues*
- Analyze critically Hughes' *Dream Variations*

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### 7.2 ROBERT FROST: ABOUT THE POET

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Robert Frost was introduced to poetry through his mother, and at a young age, he became acquainted with the Romantic poets as well as New England poets like Emerson. In his early childhood, his mother also introduced him to organized Christian religion.

After the death of Frost's father, his family returned to New England. Frost finished high school (studying classics) from Lawrence, Massachusetts,



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as the class valedictorian. Three years later, he married his classmate and fellow valedictorian Eleanor White.

Frost studied for a short time at Dartmouth College, taught in schools and later enrolled as a special student at Harvard where he was influenced by American philosopher and psychologist William James and George Santayana, a philosopher, essayist, poet and novelist. He took courses in English, philosophy and classics. From Harvard, he entered into a completely different world.

His grandfather bequeathed him a farm in New Hampshire, where his wife and his four children endured years of hardship. While he was struggling with depression and thoughts of suicide, Frost was also composing poetry and establishing a close link with nature. In the years 1906-07, he wrote many of the poems that would later appear in *North of Boston* and *Mountain Interval* (1916). In 1909, Frost left the farm to teach in New Hampshire. From there, he sold his farm and moved to England in 1912 because he was unable to find publishers for his work.

Within a month of his arrival in England, he was able to publish his poems and *North of Boston* won him praise from American poet and critic Ezra Pound. Within two years, his volumes had appeared in America and he was bestowed a number of honours, including election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

### 7.2.1 Frost as an American Poet

Frost returned to New England in 1915 and started teaching in Amherst College two years later. English short-story writer, poet and novelist Rudyard Kipling had already pointed out that Frost's language sounded strange to English readers. Many other critics suggested that Frost's poetry sounded unfamiliar, even to Americans outside New England. Frost found this strangeness of language as an advantage—he realized that his language had the 'freshness of a stranger' and that strangeness in language or metaphor is intrinsic to poetry.

Frost inherited the technique of using the ordinary to suggest something other than itself from a variety of sources—the Bible, classics, the poetry of Wordsworth and New England writers such as Thoreau or Emerson. He admired Emerson's use of simple words and expressions to suggest something that had profound meanings. He merged the use of New England vocabulary and turns of phrase with the classical pastoral tradition and the Romantic tradition of poetry about nature.

While a poet such as Wallace Stevens was drawn to the fine arts or music as a source of influence, Frost was more attracted towards science and philosophy. He felt that poets should try to establish a link between sound, sense and emotion. Metre was considered important as well. He was a master

in the use of a number of verse forms, such as the blank verse, sonnet, rhymed couplets and rhyming quatrains. For him, drama was also important in making writing exciting and interesting.

However, Frost believed that the effect of poetry should be carefully controlled in order to avoid excesses. He believed that the charm of the poem was in its beauty and in its slow, dignified exploration of reality, a momentary relief from confusion. For him, a poem was an affirmative entity that emanated from belief—the belief in God, in the poet’s own self, in art, in culture or in the country.

All his important poems were written before 1930. While his first love was always poetry, he also took time to teach and to recite his poems in public. His longest association was with Amherst College (1917-20, 1923-38, 1949), though he also spent time at Dartmouth, Michigan and Harvard. Robert Frost was a popular teacher. He helped establish the famous Bread Loaf School of English in Middlebury College, Vermont. He won four Pulitzer prizes before the publication of two ambitious works of drama, *A Masque of Reason* (1945) and *A Masque of Mercy* (1947). His last work was *In the Clearing* (1962). He won many honours, including honorary degrees from Oxford and Cambridge universities in 1957. He was invited to read a poem at President John F. Kennedy’s inauguration in 1961, where he recited *The Gift Outright* from memory. Robert Frost is considered to be the quintessential New England poet. His poems are spare, meditative and have a close affinity with nature—a characteristic he shares with the Romantic poet Wordsworth. Often, ordinary natural objects suggest something greater in his poems. He plays around with metre in order to capture the easy rhythms of the speaking voice. His poems flow like a good conversation—smoothly and coherently.

In 1912, he took the crucial decision of his life and chose poetry for his vocation. In 1913, Frost published his first collection of poetry under the title *A Boy’s Will*. His other major volumes of poems are *North of Boston* (1914), *Mountain Interval* (1916), *New Hampshire* (1923), *West Running Brook* (1928), *A Further Range* (1936), *A Witness Tree* (1942), *Steeple Bush* (1947), *In the Clearing* (1962) and many others. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prizes four times during his lifetime for *New Hampshire: A Poem with Notes and Grace Notes* (1924), *Collected Poems* (1931), *A Further Range* (1937) and *A Witness Tree* (1943).

In 1960, Frost was awarded a United States Congressional Gold Medal for enriching the culture of the United States and the philosophy of the world through his poems and contribution to literature. Frost became the Poet Laureate of Vermont on 22 July 1961. In 1962, he was awarded the Edward MacDowell Medal for outstanding contribution to the arts by the MacDowell Colony.

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Frost was eighty-six when he read his well-known poem *The Gift Outright* at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy on 20 January 1961. He died in Boston two years later, on 29 January 1963, of complications from prostate surgery. He is buried at the Old Bennington Cemetery in Bennington, Vermont.

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### 7.3 ROBERT FROST'S *BIRCHES*: SUMMARY

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The title is *Birches*, but the subject is birch 'swinging'. Moreover, the theme of the poem reflects, in a more general and a deeper sense, the motion of swinging. The force behind the swinging comes from the attraction of the opposites—truth and imagination, earth and heaven, concrete and spirit, control and abandon, and flight and return.

The lyric begins in a tone of easy conversation. When the poet sees birches bending to right and left across the line of '*darker, straighter trees*', he imagines that some boy has been swinging them. But soon the truth dawns upon him, and he realizes that swinging cannot bend them down permanently. It is the ice-storm alone which can bend birches down to stay. After rain and storm, the birches are covered with ice. The poet has observed the phenomenon minutely, and his description is vivid and picturesque. When the wind blows, the birches swing up and down and the ice on them shines, and turns many coloured, as the rays of the sun are refracted in passing through ice. As the sun grows warmer, the ice is shaken down. It falls on earth covered with snow. It seems as if the central dome of heaven has cracked and the earth is covered with heaps of broken glass. It is with the burden of ice that the birches are bowed so low for so long that, '*they never right themselves*'.

This is the true reason, the hard fact, for the permanent bending of birches. But from this truth, the poet again returns to his fancy that the birches have been thus bowed down permanently by, '*some boy's swinging them*'. He imagines that some boy, who lives too far from the town to learn baseball, devises a game for himself, a game which he can play alone, summer or winter. He takes to birch-swinging as a pleasant sport. He climbs the birches over and over again, so much so that not a single tree remains unconquered and unbent. He has painstakingly acquired such skill that even when he reaches the top, he is able to maintain perfect balance, and then he comes to the ground with a swift movement:

*Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish*

*Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.*

In the first section of the poem, Frost explains the appearance of the birches; how they are bending towards earth. Only the ice-storms bend them, when the ice melts and cracks with the onset of sunlight, branches of birches bend as if a girl sitting on her knees is spreading her hair in sunlight to warm

them up. Frost, therefore, adds beautiful imagery comparing the bent branches 'trailing their leaves on the ground' to 'girls on hands and knees throwing their hair before them to dry in the sun'. Subsequently, Frost suggests that he had rather imagine a little boy bending of the branches by swinging and playing on them.

He begins to tell a story within the poem. The poet is in a reminiscent mood. With a wistful longing, he remembers the time when he himself was a swinger of birches. He dreams that he would take to birch swinging once again, sometime in the future, when he is, 'weary of considerations'. Then by birch-swinging, he would get away from earth awhile, 'and then, come back to it and begin over'. The poet would never like to leave this earth permanently. After a momentary climb to heaven, he would like to return to it, for,

*Earth is the right place for love  
I do not know where it is likely to go better;*

Robert Frost is a romantic cum pragmatic poet. He knows that the worldly considerations trouble mankind, but he does not find solace in the lap of nature like William Wordsworth, the English poet. Frost's approach towards life is very practical. He wants to take a flight from earth momentarily as he believes in reconciliation of fact and fancy, dignity and desire, pleasure and purpose, imagination and reality. He does not want to go back to his childhood innocence when he used to be a swinger of birches. Rather, he is cherishing those moments so that the worldly burden of tensions and anxiety can be relieved to some extent. He would like to climb up towards heaven by mounting the birches, but then he would also like that they should set him down on earth after a moment. Birch swinging 'is good both going and coming back'.

Frost describes life as:

*A pathless wood  
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs  
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping  
From a twigs having lashed across it open*

It is when the poet is 'weary of considerations' that he wants to forget the bitterness of this earthly existence. The poem is reminiscent of Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* where the poet wants to 'fade, far away', into the world of the nightingale, so that he might have a momentary escape from 'weariness the fever and the fret' of life. But Keats wants to escape this misery of life because he cannot hear it. On the other hand, Robert Frost clearly states that his withdrawal is momentary; it is a period of probation to face 'life' all the more courageously. He certainly loves to return for he knows that 'Earth's the right place for love'. It is this awareness which shows how much Frost is rooted in reality. Like Wordsworth's *Skylark*, Frost is,

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*Type of the wise who soar but never roam,  
True to the kindred points of heaven and home.*

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The poem is symbolical also. Birches are hard but flexible and they do not break due to over stress of ice-storms. In the same way, man should not be rigid; rather they should be flexible in their approach to life. In today's world several people are pushed to the ultimate breaking point in life due to stress and heavy burden. Yet they have the strength to bear the burden and survive, and thereby do not break. In this poem, according to Frost, the character is reminded of his carefree and good old days by the birch trees. Frost uses the poem *Birches* as an example to show that poetry helps us to cross these thresholds of time. It enables us to experience beauty and find a path to a long ago buried feeling or desire. The poem is instilled with beautiful and overwhelming images. In an age of disbelief, *Birches* bring to mind feelings and memories of innocence.

### 7.3.1 *Birches*: An Analysis

*Birches*, published in the Mountain of Interval, 1916 is one of the most widely quoted and anthologized of the nature-lyrics of Robert Frost. Frost is remarkable for its skillful blending of fact and fancy, observation and imagination. Birches are a common sight in New England. The poet has observed their 'habits' minutely, and in this admirable lyric, he describes them precisely and accurately.

Frost always believes in following a practical approach towards life. No doubt, the dark and greenwoods enchant him as the birches remind him of his childhood, still he believes in duty and responsibility. As he can fulfil his duties on earth only, he cannot forget to come back to earth and begin all over after having an imaginative swinging of birches. He gives a lesson to mankind that one has to live and fulfil his responsibilities during his life span on earth; one can enjoy the beauties of nature and cherish the lovely moments spent in the lap of nature but ultimately he has to face the hardships of life. *Birches* illustrates this exquisite blending of fact and fancy most eloquently, for in this lyric the climb, 'toward heaven' ultimately results in a move 'earthward'. The withdrawal is momentary and it makes him see life more clearly and face it more courageously. Wisdom and whimsy join to make a poem that delights the mind and endears itself to the heart. The popularity of *Birches* lies in its combination of picture and human appeal. It is all the more appealing because of the shrewd turns and the, 'rare twinkle'. In other words, the poem is an expression of Frost's, 'rich and ripe philosophy'.

### 7.3.2 Robert Frost as a Modern Poet

Critics have regarded Frost as a traditional 19th century poet, and have emphatically denied his modernity. For one thing, it has been pointed out that his poetry has a disarming simplicity while modern poetry is characterized

by complexity and intricacy. In his poetry, we do not find irregular verse, fragmentary sentences, learned allusions and references, ironic contrasts, and erudite and abstruse symbolism, to all of which we are used and which is regarded as the hallmark of modernity. Frost writes of mountains, fields and brooks, and of farmers at their humble task; these things have become part of our imaginative inheritance and one must be insensitive, indeed, not to be conscious of the beauty in them. But there are other subjects now more frequently before our eyes as factories, skyscrapers, machines, etc. One of the most serious limitations of Frost's poetry is that he is out of tune with modern age and all its problems.

Moreover, Frost admires man as a creature of impulse and instinct, and ridicules the idea of man as a reasoning creature, and this is in marked opposition to modern thought. In this respect, he has his affinities with the great 19th century romantics rather than with the great moderns. Some say his work is rural and leads folks not to seek to solve complex problems, but only to escape from social responsibility. Perhaps, that word is something less than altogether fair. It is true that Robert Frost was neither radical nor conservative.

However, such views arise from a one-sided, superficial reading of his poetry. Cleanth Brooks, John Lyden, Trilling and a host of other competent critics have now conclusively shown that Frost is essentially a modern poet, and that the surface simplicity of his poetry is deceptive and misleading. There is no doubt that he withdraws into rural New England and writes of New Englanders, of their simple occupations carried on in their primitive setting, away from the haunts of modern civilization, and the concerns of modern life. But, John Lyden rightly points out that 'his retreat into country side is not a romantic escape from the harsh, unpleasant realities of modern life, rather, it provides him with a point of view, a frame of reference, for studying and commenting on the facts of modern life.'

It is the same method of indirection as is used by such modern poets as T.S. Eliot. Just as Eliot in his poems, for example, *The Waste Land*, juxtaposes the present and the past, which is made to reveal and interpret the present, so also in his poetry, Frost juxtaposes rural and the urban, the rural setting as a comment on the urban. And, as in T.S. Eliot, the comment is implicit rather than explicit. A simple everyday situation from rural life is presented, and the situation is such that it serves to illuminate and clarify some aspect or problem peculiar to the modern age. Thus, in his poem *Mending Wall*, the necessity of fences is emphasized—'Good fences make good neighbours'.

Frost is modern in his attitudes towards nature. The 19th century poets picture nature as benevolent and kindly with a holy plan, and emphasized the harmony, the oneness of man and nature. Modern science, on the other hand, conceives nature as merely matter, soulless and mechanical, and so entirely different from, and alien to, man. Frost, too, is constantly emphasizing this,

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‘otherness’ of nature. He is a great poet of boundaries, and he shows at every step that some fence or boundary separates man from nature. Another sense in which Frost is a truly modern poet is his portrayal of the disintegration of values in modern life and disillusionment of the modern man. Most of his poems deal with characters who suffer from frustration, isolation as in modern poems like, *The Waste Land*.

Frost’s poetry reflects modern life not in the events and conditions, but it brings out the central facts of 20th century experience—the uncertain and painful sense of loss. The poem *The Road Not Taken* depicts the confusion which prevails in modern life. The modern man does not know which way to go and it is difficult for him to make a choice of the means he should adopt in order to come out of the present impasse. He is confused and his life does not have a clear purpose. The protagonist in the poem (the poet himself) represents the modern man, who habitually wastes energy in regretting any choice made but belatedly sighs over the attractive alternative which he rejected:

*I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Some ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood and I—  
I took the one less travelled by  
And that has made all the difference*

There are several levels in a Frost’s poetry. The common man may read him for charming depictions of rural scenery and rural life. They may go to him as an escape from the ‘urban murk and roar’, on the other hand, may read him for his presentation of the human predicament in an alien, if not hostile, environment. They may read him for the clarification and illumination which he provides. A careful reading reveals that Frost’s simplicity is deceptive, and that his poetry has layers within layers of meaning. This expressiveness and richness of texture becomes possible only because Frost, like the great modern poets, employs a metaphysical-symbolist technique of expression. In the manner of the metaphysical poets and their 20th century admirers, he juxtaposes such opposites as man and nature, the real and the urban, and the regional and the universal. He seeks to synthesize such opposites in the same way as, ‘my two eyes make one sight’.

*Mending Wall* is a symbolic poem in which the poet symbolizes the conflict between the new trend of bringing down barriers between men and nations, and the old view that for good neighbourly relations, fences and boundaries are essential. The poem relates an anecdote typical of the conservative approach of the rural people in New England, but its implication has universal application. In this way, the poem becomes a symbol of the modern conflict in the mind of the people. The poet simply portrays that conflict, and does not give his judgment on it, because in spite of his standing



for the bringing down of barriers, he appreciates the view of his neighbour who insists on following the old principle of his forefathers that ‘Good fences make good neighbours’.

He may not depict the outward conditions and events of modern life, but the central facts of modern experience, the uncertainty, sense of loss, the disintegration are all there, and they seem more bleak and terrifying because they are presented in their nakedness stripped of all their social, political and economic manifestations. And his mode of expression is symbolic and indirect. All this is the mark of a genuinely modern poetry.

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### 7.3.3 Frost’s Philosophy of Life

From a study of Frost’s poetry, we know much about his view on man, God and nature, and his views are a measure of his sanity and profundity. As Wilfred Gibson tells us, beneath his apparent simplicity and whimsicality, there runs, ‘the clear stream’ of his, ‘rich and ripe philosophy’. Therefore, we would be justified in calling him a poet-philosopher. Frost has written a large number of poems which are essentially philosophical.

By philosophical poetry, of course, we mean poetry that raises fundamental questions about life and death and man’s destiny in this universe. Frost does certainly raise philosophical questions, though his answers are vague and often ambivalent. The reason for this vagueness and ambiguity is that Frost does not have any systematic or coherent philosophy to preach. It is impossible to reduce Frost’s philosophical thinking to a diagrammatic accuracy. In this connection, we should not forget what Frost says in the following lines:

*We dance round in a ring and suppose,  
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.*

In other words, it is impossible to solve the mystery of the universe in which we live. Frost pictures man as a solitary, lonely figure, isolated and alienated from nature, from God, and from his fellowmen. He conceives of nature as soulless, mechanical and impersonal. Man and nature are two different principles separated from each other by barriers. Nature may, on some special occasions, show some love or concern for man, but such occasions are in the nature of a ‘favour’, and not the general rule. Man is a lonely and solitary figure in a vast and alien universe. He is also alienated from God his Maker. His reason, his rational self is the barrier that separates him from God. In the poem, *The Bear*, rational man is said to act like a bear in a cage in his attempts to understand the mystery of the universe. Man’s reason is imperfect, and through reason he cannot understand either the ways of God or the mystery of life.

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Human life on this earth is a trial and, therefore, suffering is inherent in the human lot. In another poem, the poet goes to the extent of saying that there is no God at all to listen to human shrieks and cries:

*I turned to speak to God*

*About the worlds despair;*

In short, God in Frost's poetry is either a creature of man's own imagination or so remote from him as to be meaningless. Frost is a realist and ameliorate. He studies the human predicament, examines its different facets, and then suggests ways and means by which human lot can be improved and bettered. First, he suggests that we must respect the 'otherness' of other individuals, and not try to impose ourselves upon anybody. Distances must be maintained. In *Mending Wall*, he teaches us that, '*Good fences make good neighbours*'. Amicable human relationship is possible only in this way. Loneliness and alienation may be the subject of his inquiry in many a poem, but this does not mean that he admires isolation, and dislikes democracy and brotherhood. Rather, he advocates the Aristotelian golden mean between self-centredness and self-love, and society and companionship. A man must try to understand his fellow men, and love and sympathy would follow upon such understanding. Healthy social life is possible only in this way. In a way, his pre-occupation with the theme of alienation may be taken as a psychological expression of his intensely felt need for human society.

Secondly, he advocates devotion to work which in his view is necessary to make life bearable. Nature is imperfect and chaotic, and man must seek to perfect and order it through a constant process of gardening. Fact is the sweetest dream that labour knows, and one must do one's duty under all circumstances. The woods may be '*lovely and deep*', but their enchantment must not make one forget that,

*But I have promises to keep*

*And miles to go before I sleep.*

The true purpose of life is to test the heroism of the human soul. Therefore, one must struggle, dare and suffer the uttermost on earth, for only in this way, can man deserve the bliss of heaven and the mercy of God. Thirdly, he advocates that man must have faith in God. The mystery of life and the ways of God cannot be understood through reason. His salvation lies in absolute faith. While on earth, do your duty with sincerity and devotion and with faith in the Divine. Fourthly, it should be remembered that in postulating as soulless and mechanistic universe, he is merely echoing the teaching of modern science. Nature is pure matter and man has a soul or spirit. Frost repeatedly asserts the superiority of man over nature. Man can impose his will over the chaotic world of nature and order, and complete it. Man is superior to the lower creatures and other objects of nature.

In short, Frost loves the world and life in it, even though he often finds faults with it, quarrels with it as a lover. In *Birches*, he tells us, 'Earth is the right place for love'. He does not regard the universe as chaotic, though he is conscious of many imperfections. He does not shut his eyes to the hardness of man's lot, but suggests ways and means for its amelioration.

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1. What does the theme of Frost's *Birches* reflect?
2. Explain the philosophy of life in Frost's poems.

## 7.4 WALLACE STEVENS: ABOUT THE POET

Wallace Stevens was born in 1879 in Reading, Pennsylvania. His family belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church and when Stevens became eligible he enrolled in parochial schools. From 1904 to 1907, Stevens worked for a number of New York law companies between and was appointed as a lawyer for the American Bonding Company in 1908.

After winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1955, Stevens was offered to teach at Harvard. From 1922 to 1940, Stevens visited Key West Florida many times and stayed at the Casa Marina, a hotel on the Atlantic Ocean. This place had a tremendous influence on Stevens' poetry which is evident in a variety of his works, especially poems published in his initial collections such as *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order*.

It was at the age of thirty-five when Stevens wrote his first major publication. It compiled four poems from a sequence titled *Phases* in the November 1914 issue of the *Poetry* magazine. He wrote his most distinguished literary works after the age of fifty. His first book of poetry which was a volume of rococo inventiveness entitled *Harmonium* was published in 1923.

### 7.4.1 Stevens and Yeats: A Comparative Study

Much of Stevens' poetry, like that of Yeats, imitates to Martz's category of thoughtful poetry as a 'drama of the mind' which goes through various thought-processes. Critics such as Joseph Riddel, Harold Bloom, and Helen Vendler have convincingly claimed that Stevens, like Yeats, is essentially a Romantic poet who repeatedly reflects on the relationship between reality and imagination in his meditative poems. Unlike the meditative poetry of Yeats, however, much of Stevens' poetry (as Bevis' extended study points out) enacts forms of meditation which correspond to spiritual disciplines such as Zen, Tao, and Yoga. Though Stevens' interest in Eastern meditation was far less overt than Yeats', his poetry nevertheless enacts a similarly meditative sensibility.

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If, as Stevens contends, '[t]here can be no poetry without the personality of the poet', then, the personality of the poet is reproduced in the poetry he or she composes. Yeats monitored an interest in Hinduism, Buddhism, and meditative consciousness by logically immersing himself in these subjects and by using them as inspiration for his writings. Bevis notes that the influence of 'Theosophists, Pound, plays of Noh, Tagore's poetry of 1912-1915, and a flood of information present in journals and books and from friends' fuelled Yeats' interest. Because he frequently sought to master his own impulses and weaknesses of thought, he advanced a form of meditative poetry which passes this internal struggle—a dialectic meditative poetry.

In Stevens' writings, on the other hand, perceptions of reality are of leading interest. Rather than trying to master his own thought-processes, however, Stevens found pleasure in them for their own sake. Though there is surely a development in Stevens' poetry, this development is enacted through several stages of perception rather than through a logical argument. Where Yeats is prescriptive in his assessments of how one should think, Stevens is vivid in his observations of how one does think. Yeats continually sought to achieve a state of consciousness which apparently came quite logically to Stevens, while struggling to overcome a form of thinking which Stevens seems to have included as fully human and, therefore, necessarily creative.

What Yeats came to define as an escape from realism or mere flight into fancy, Stevens might define as a significant mental activity. In a letter to Jose Rodriguez Feo, Stevens offers this advice:

True, the desire to read is an insatiable desire and you must read. Nevertheless, you must also think ... spend an hour or two a day even the beginning you are staggered by the confusion and aimlessness of your thoughts.

Stevens' love of lonely long walks indicates that he often indulged in states of meditative reverie where opinions wander without direction. Meditative reverie is presented as a form of self-examination in Stevens' early poetry where rather than observing the natural world, the mind detects the process of thinking itself.

### Check Your Progress

3. State the similarity between Stevens and Yeats' poetry.

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## 7.5 STEVENS'S *SUNDAY MORNING*: SUMMARY AND THEME

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One of the first and most basic suggestions that the speaker makes in Stevens' *Sunday Morning* is that religion has never been a satisfactory institution.

Ideally, faith is supposed to bring a sense of understanding and bliss to those who subscribe to it. However, lines six and seven of the poem read ‘she feels the dark / Encroachment of that old catastrophe.’ Encroach can be defined as ‘[entering] by gradual steps or by stealth into the possessions or rights of another’. With this in mind, it is inarguable that religion acts a positive and motivational force.

In fact, it is a force of guilt that infringes on the right of the woman to enjoy a Sunday morning in peace. Furthermore, as the poem progresses to Stanza III, it is revealed that the history of religion can be traced back to classical mythology. Stevens’ description of cruel Jove—the king god from a religion that is now essentially devoid of believers—is juxtaposed with the choice of words like ‘blood’ and ‘virginal’ (which act as clear references to Christ), highlighting a change from polytheism to monotheism and indicating how easily a widely accepted belief can change dramatically.

Through this, Stevens simultaneously points out the differences and similarities that do not fit them together. With this in mind, it is not difficult to see how this lack of uniformity makes all belief system seem like nothing more than stories. The world lacks a faith that would unite all of mankind, so, there is no way to determine which the correct way of thinking is. Therefore, if no single faith is right, what makes any of them worth the devotion?

Although Brown claims that the woman is burdened by the threat of mortality, she is in fact burdened by the threat of religion. In stanza IV, the woman compares herself to a baby bird learning to fly. She contemplates how their ‘sweet questionings’ lead them to venture past the boundaries of their field and move ahead. After they leave, she longs for ‘June and evening’—the beginning of summer, when birds remain in their nest.

Similarly, the woman breaks free of boundaries and questions what she has been told about her faith. In his criticism, Brown writes that this passage is filled with a ‘poignancy of her sense that what she desires is absent and that the birds in autumn are about to be gone’. According to Brown, this implies that beauty and love can only be experienced when paired with the painful sense of loss brought on by mortality.

This sense of loss only exists because the woman is unable to see bliss in the nature that surrounds her. She is troubled by the guilt of not going to church and convinces herself that satisfaction comes with the ‘prophesy’ and ‘spirits’—aspects of faith. This concept is supported by repetition of the word ‘endured’ in lines fifty-six to fifty-seven, suggesting thoughts of Christ and the religion he brought forth.

This is the central idea that leads her to the question present in line fifty—‘Where, then, is paradise?’—which is an upsetting question as she is not capable of seeing that she has already experienced it and that it is not gone. Her confidence that faith is vital stops her from thinking that the birds

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have left forever. They must fly away for the winter in order to survive, but will come back with the spring and the bliss of summer. Similarly, the lady must venture past all that she knows and has been taught in order to truly flourish. In this metaphor, the nest is her blind faith in what she has been told about Christianity and the process of learning to fly is the act of coming to an end for herself.

*Sunday Morning* also implies that only through nature can one experience ardent feelings and therefore, this is the only way to ensure involvement with ardent bliss. Each picture of the natural world harmonizes with a strong sense of feelings. In contrast, paradise and religion are represented as still and emotionless. In lines eleven and twelve, it reads, 'Winding across wide water, without sound. / The day is like wide water, without sound.'

The alliteration formed by the soft 'w' in this phrase conveys a sense of stillness and silence—as if one can actually picture a large body of water, unmoving and impersonal. The epistrophe of 'wide water, without sound' adds stress to this concept. This phrase is even repeated near the end of the poem, in line 114 that reads 'that wide water, inescapable'. All together, this tone implies that religion is restrictive in not only what one can say but also with regard to how one is supposed to feel. The satisfaction that the lady searches for will not be found in such a setting.

Not only does *Sunday Morning* suggest that religion is unsatisfactory, but it also implies that searching for bliss through faith is meaningless. In Stanza VI, Stevens uses metonymy, referencing to 'that perfect sky' to discuss heaven and by association, the search for contentment through religion. On this topic, the unknown speaker in the poem states 'rivers like our own that seek for seas / They never find, the same receding shores / That never touch with inarticulate pang?'

There exists an essential energy within humans to search for a higher power—like a river penetrating for the sea. However, because this hunt will inevitably end without satisfaction, a mysterious agony will accompany it. To emerge out of this, one must take away the self what appears to be a natural desire. Once one forsakes the search for a higher power, they can escape the disappointment that haunts them.

Despite this, Section VIII does not end in a completely sarcastic and fatalistic view of mankind's destiny, rather, it acts as a warning for the action of flying or not flying. In his criticism, Brown proposes that this passage contains feelings of frailty and a threat of death. However, he fails to include textual evidence for this claim. Throughout the poem, the unnamed narrator encourages the woman and readers to abandon the façade of creed and embrace a relationship with the natural world. He implicitly warns that if they fail to do so, they will be stuck in a descending path to darkness and unhappiness. The closing lines of the poem read:



*And, in the isolation of the sky,  
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make  
Ambiguous undulations as they sink  
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.*

*Frost, Stevens and Hughes*

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Again, the sky mentions heaven, and thus, the pigeons flying in ‘ambiguous undulations’ represent the people who wander, mostly aimlessly, through life, searching in vain for satisfaction through divinity. They drop into everlasting sadness unknowingly and unintentionally and constantly fight back the path to true bliss. ‘On extended wing’ shows the confrontation which they have to break free of because of the limitations placed on them by religion. If the birds fly (and humans see this flight as liberation), both will survive and thrive, as is evident in the metaphor of flight in section IV.

While professing that search for bliss through creed is a useless act, the unknown narrator in *Sunday Morning* advises that bliss can be found through a feeling of genuine gratitude and respect for nature. Section VII expresses of a group of men dancing in admiration of the sun. Brown claims that their devoutness is ‘dependent on their mutual sense of frailty, on their constant sense that they will perish, on their feeling that their strength is fragile ... as the dew upon their feet’, yet flops once again to deliver concrete maintenance for this claim. Instead, this passage is inspirational—it serves as an example for the woman in the poem that one can find heaven in the beauty of nature. The ring of men praise the sun—‘Not as a god, but as a god might be’. The sun is not a deity, but is the foundation of life on Earth and makes possible all things that the unknown speaker admires in nature.

Through these vehicles, it offers to people the amenities that are estimated to come with religion, hence, ‘as a god might be’. Surely, it is a foundation of inspiration for life—inspiration, contentment, bliss, and finally, happiness. Theirs is a ‘chant of paradise’, and though they know they will ultimately die and are as momentary as ‘the dew upon their feet’, they are perhaps at harmony with this concept because they have found a type of spirituality through nature.

The narrator in *Sunday Morning* admits that most people are incapable of finding contentment in life and thus, must wait for death to experience it. Lines sixty-three to sixty-five mention that ‘Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her, / Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams / And our desires.’ Having disallowed the idea of heaven, death is the concluding resting residence and for those who were incapable of finding bliss during life, the place where one is lastly unencumbered of human shortcomings, namely, the obsession with religion.

The drive to look for motivation is natural and innate, but only through struggling with this predisposition can one be freed from domination and fault that accompanied it. Also, death in itself is beautiful. This takes one back to

the woman's sorrow for the departing of the birds—even though they leave and the leaves on the plants die, it is all in training for the recurring spring.

### 7.5.1 *Sunday Morning*: An Analysis

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*Sunday Morning* is certainly a complex poem that takes on the intimidating task of analyzing creed and its part in society. Not only does the narrator discard the notion that religion is the path to happiness, but he also offers his estimation as to how to truly achieve it. Using his inevitability and conditional happiness as evidence, it may even be conceivable to claim that the narrator is suggesting that a simple way to achieve ecstasy and satisfaction is by eliminating oneself from religion completely and accepting nature as the only foundation of inspiration. Religious conviction is not only unacceptable and useless but much more than what was initially proposed—religious conviction is a restrictive, destructive force.

### Check Your Progress

4. What does the narrator in *Sunday Morning* explain?
5. State how *Sunday Morning* is a complex poem.

## 7.6 LANGSTON HUGHES: ABOUT THE POET

The Harlem Renaissance was a black cultural movement that was prevalent in the 1920s and 1930s. It was also called the 'New Negro Movement'. Though the movement was initially confined to the Harlem neighbourhood in New York, many black writers from the Caribbean and African colonies were also subsequently influenced by it.

James Langston Hughes was amongst the greatest poets of the Renaissance. At a time when segregation was widespread and the black community was still considered a second rate, he was one who was unabashedly proud of his colour and his culture, a trait which is reflected in a majority of his poems.

James Langston Hughes was born on 1 February 1902, in Joplin, Missouri. His parents separated when he was still a small child, and his father moved across the border to Mexico. He lived with his grandmother till he was thirteen. Later, he moved to Lincoln, Illinois, to live with his mother and his stepfather. Their family was to finally settle down in Cleveland, Ohio. It was in Lincoln, Illinois, that James Langston Hughes started writing poetry. After graduation, he lived in Mexico for a year and he spend another year at Columbia University. In this period, Langston Hughes held odd jobs, such as a cook and a busboy, among others, and later travelled to Europe and Africa plying his trade in the seas. He moved to Washington, DC in November

1924. His first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, was published in 1926. In 1929, he finished his college education at Lincoln University, Pennsylvania.

Hughes was influenced by African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, American writer Carl Sandburg and Walt Whitman. He is particularly famous for his perceptive, effervescent portrayals of the lives of black people in America. Though he is remembered as a poet, he successfully dabbled in short stories and plays. He was deep into jazz music and that can be clearly felt in some of his works, most notably in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. Langston Hughes' contribution was significant in shaping the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Unlike other prominent black poets of that period, Hughes wrote about everything affecting blacks in America. He did not hold back from penning down his own experiences. His stories and poems reflect black culture, including their suffering, their love of music, laughter, etc.

Langston Hughes suffered from prostate cancer. He died on 22 May 1967, in New York. Subsequently, his residence at 20 East 127th Street in Harlem, New York City, has been renamed 'Langston Hughes Place'.

Apart from poetry, Hughes wrote eleven plays and several other works of prose, including the popular 'Simple' books—*Simple Speaks His Mind*, *Simple Stakes a Claim*, *Simple Takes a Wife* and *Simple's Uncle Sam*. His autobiography, *The Big Sea*, is also a much acclaimed work.

### 7.6.1 Important Works of Langston Hughes

Let us analyse the important works of Langston Hughes.

#### Poetry collections

- *The Weary Blues*, Knopf, 1926
- *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, Knopf, 1927
- *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations*, 1931
- *Dear Lovely Death*, 1931
- *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, Knopf, 1932
- *Scottsboro Limited: Four Poems and a Play*, Golden Stair Press, New York, 1932
- *Let America Be America Again*, 1938
- *Shakespeare in Harlem*, Knopf, 1942
- *Freedom's Plow*, 1943
- *Fields of Wonder*, Knopf, 1947
- *One-Way Ticket*, 1949
- *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, Holt, 1951
- *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 1958

## NOTES

- *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*, Hill & Wang, 1961
- *The Panther and the Lash: Poems of Our Times*, 1967
- *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Knopf, 1994

## NOTES

### Novels and short story collections

- *Not Without Laughter*, Knopf, 1930
- *The Ways of White Folks*, Knopf, 1934
- *Simple Speaks His Mind*, 1950
- *Laughing to Keep from Crying*, Holt, 1952
- *Simple Takes a Wife*, 1953
- *Sweet Flypaper of Life*, photographs by Roy DeCarava, 1955
- *Tambourines to Glory*, 1958
- *The Best of Simple*, 1961
- *Simple's Uncle Sam*, 1965
- *Something in Common and Other Stories*, Hill & Wang, 1963
- *Short Stories of Langston Hughes*, Hill & Wang, 1996

### Non-fiction books

- *The Big Sea*, New York: Knopf, 1940
- *Famous American Negroes*, 1954
- *I Wonder as I Wander*, New York: Rinehart & Co., 1956
- *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America*, with Milton Meltzer, 1956
- *Famous Negro Heroes of America*, 1958
- *Fight for Freedom: The Story of the NAACP*, 1962

### Major plays

- *Mule Bone*, with Zora Neale Hurston, 1931
- *Mulatto*, 1935 (renamed *The Barrier*, an opera, in 1950)
- *Troubled Island*, with William Grant Still, 1936
- *Little Ham*, 1936
- *Emperor of Haiti*, 1936
- *Don't You Want to be Free?* 1938
- *Street Scene*, contributed lyrics, 1947
- *Tambourines to glory*, 1956
- *Simply Heavenly*, 1957
- *Black Nativity*, 1961

- *Five Plays by Langston Hughes*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963
- *Jericho-Jim Crow*, 1964

*Frost, Stevens and Hughes*

### Books for children

- *Popo and Fifina, with Arna Bontemps*, 1932
- *The First Book of the Negroes*, 1952
- *The First Book of Jazz*, 1954
- *Marian Anderson: Famous Concert Singer*, with Steven C. Tracy, 1954
- *The First Book of Rhythms*, 1954
- *The First Book of the West Indies*, 1956
- *First Book of Africa*, 1964
- *Black Misery*, illustrated by Arouni, 1969, reprinted by Oxford University Press, 1994

**Source:** Wikipedia

#### Check Your Progress

6. What do you understand by the Harlem Renaissance?
7. List a few of Langston Hughes' plays and work of prose.

### NOTES

## 7.7 THE WEARY BLUES: TEXT AND CRITICAL APPRECIATION

Let us study the summary and analysis of *The Weary Blues*.

### 7.7.1 Summary of *The Blue Weariness*

Hughes' intention for writing *The Weary Blues* was to celebrate African American heritage, one which he was very proud of. The poet simply wants to give a realistic portrayal of the plight of the black people during that period. There were some, however, who disagreed with this aspect of Hughes' work, which at times showed black Americans in a negative light; for example, prostitution and poverty. They felt that Hughes would have been better served to show only the positive aspects of black America.

In this poem, Hughes tells about the cultural experiences that blacks have to go through in a land dominated by the whites. The use of the blues structures is prominent in this work as well. A majority of Hughes' poems have a racial context, which is indicative of the struggle that black people underwent in America. This poem is no different.

### 7.7.2 *The Weary Blues*: An Analysis

#### NOTES

It is clearly indicated in this poem that the blues unites the speaker and the performer in some level. There is an implied relationship between the two; the music compels the speaker's participation. The performer is anonymous, as he is not famous. He is just one of the dedicated practitioners who never made the big time as some of the blues artists did. The words 'drowsy syncopated tune' (line one) refers to activity as well as rest. It highlights the tension between fantasy and reality, and induces the speaker to explore the relationship between the performer's stoic stance and his sad acceptance of what lies in store for him. This is clearly evident in the words of the poem.

The performer seemingly has only the blues in his life and nothing else. However, blues is significant in his life; it reveals 'a black man's soul' and it keeps him alive. The blues gives him an identity. When singing the blues he is singing about life and how the black man has to struggle to gain an identity in a land dominated by the whites. As his black hands play the piano, music as the world has come to know seems to change. The piano becomes an extension of the performer and comes to life. It moans, seemingly controlled by the pain and the sorrow felt by the performer.

Finally, that same tradition and culture gives him an identity and keeps him alive; and long after he is done playing, he sleeps like a de-animated object, while the blues keeps on playing beyond his conscious state. Another thing to note in this poem is that there is no real connection between the speaker and the performer. They do not talk nor share a drink. The speaker simply observes, and he feels in the performer's song the weariness of blacks in America.

#### Check Your Progress

8. What was Hughes' intention for writing *The Weary Blues*?
9. State the meaning of the blues in *The Weary Blues*.

## 7.8 *DREAM VARIATIONS*: TEXT AND CRITICAL APPRECIATION

Let us study the summary and critical appreciation of *Dream Variations*.

### 7.8.1 Summary of *Dream Variations*

The poem *Dream Variations* combines two different motifs. The structure is based on American blues music which is repetitious, and at the same time, the poet attempts to make his work exciting to the younger audience. The poem was first published in 1932 in the collection, *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*. Blues music structure (repetition) is clearly evident in the



poem, where the first, second and fourth lines of both stanzas more or less resemble each other.

The poem *Dream Variations* talks about black segregation. This is clearly evident in the second and fourth lines of the first stanza. The second line ‘in some place of the sun’ could refer to a place where only whites were allowed, and the fourth line ‘white day is done’ may imply the power that the white people wielded.

In this poem, Hughes uses the blues structure to relate to the blacks. The blues style also helps to efficiently convey the gamut of emotions, most significantly fear and hope that black Americans felt during that period.

### 7.8.2 *Dream Variations*: An Analysis

During the Harlem Renaissance (1920–1930) artistic movements were rife in the country. The art community in New York was especially responsible for this. This poem was written during that period. At first glance, *Dream Variations* seemingly does not intend to offend anyone. This possibly has to do with the period it was written—the time of Harlem Renaissance was one where direct arguments still did not have a place in black American poetry. However, there is no doubt that Langston Hughes intended a subtler and more powerful meaning when he wrote his poem.

In this poem, the speaker wants to dance in the sun and rest under a tree during night time. In lines three and four, ‘To whirl and to dance/Till the white day is done,’ white is the first metaphor in the poem. The term ‘white’ could symbolize anything. In this poem, it is evident that the poet intended it to mean the Caucasian person. The ‘white man’ dominated the blacks for several generations, as history would attest. The ‘white day’ could mean that the white man had total dominance of the day; in other words, they controlled the black man’s activities. ‘White’ could also refer to the colour of the sunlight, when it is shining at its brightest.

*Then rest at cool evening  
Beneath a tall tree  
While night comes on gently,  
Dark like me—*

*That is my dream!*

These lines convey speaker’s desire to be free and do whatever he wants to do. The fact that he can only dream about it shows how much oppression the black person faced during that period. This makes the meaning of the poem very effective at every level. The words, ‘Dark like me’ stresses that the speaker still does not belong to the same level as some higher race. In so many ways, the poem serves the purpose of putting the message across without indulging in any kind of blatant criticism.

## NOTES

NOTES

**Check Your Progress**

10. Describe the motifs of the poem, *Dream Variations*.
11. What does the term 'white' symbolize in *Dream Variations*?

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**7.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS**

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1. *Birches*, published in the *Mountain of Interval*, 1916 is one of the most widely quoted and anthologized of the nature-lyrics of Robert Frost. Frost is remarkable for its skillful blending of fact and fancy, observation and imagination. Birches are a common sight in New England. The poet has observed their 'habits' minutely, and in this admirable lyric, he describes them precisely and accurately.
2. By philosophical poetry, of course, we mean poetry that raises fundamental questions about life and death and man's destiny in this universe. Frost does certainly raise philosophical questions, though his answers are vague and often ambivalent. The reason for this vagueness and ambiguity is that Frost does not have any systematic or coherent philosophy to preach. It is impossible to reduce Frost's philosophical thinking to a diagrammatic accuracy.
3. Much of Stevens' poetry, like that of Yeats, imitates to Martz's category of thoughtful poetry as a 'drama of the mind' which goes through various thought-processes. Critics such as Joseph Riddel, Harold Bloom, and Helen Vendler have convincingly claimed that Stevens, like Yeats, is essentially a Romantic poet who repeatedly reflects on the relationship between reality and imagination in his meditative poems. Unlike the meditative poetry of Yeats, however, much of Stevens' poetry (as Bevis' extended study points out) enacts forms of meditation which correspond to spiritual disciplines such as Zen, Tao, and Yoga. Though Stevens' interest in Eastern meditation was far less overt than Yeats', his poetry nevertheless enacts a similarly meditative sensibility.
4. The narrator in *Sunday Morning* admits that most people are incapable of finding contentment in life and thus, must wait for death to experience it. Lines sixty-three to sixty-five mention that 'Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her, / Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams / And our desires.' Having disallowed the idea of heaven, death is the concluding resting residence and for those who were incapable of finding bliss during life, the place where one is lastly unencumbered of human shortcomings, namely, the obsession with religion.

5. *Sunday Morning* is certainly a complex poem that takes on the intimidating task of analyzing creed and its part in society. Not only does the narrator discard the notion that religion is the path to happiness, but he also offers his estimation as to how to truly achieve it. Using his inevitability and conditional happiness as evidence, it may even be conceivable to claim that the narrator is suggesting that a simple way to achieve ecstasy and satisfaction is by eliminating oneself from religion completely and accepting nature as the only foundation of inspiration.
6. The Harlem Renaissance was a black cultural movement that was prevalent in the 1920s and 1930s. It was also called the ‘New Negro Movement’. Though the movement was initially confined to the Harlem neighbourhood in New York, many black writers from the Caribbean and African colonies were also subsequently influenced by it. James Langston Hughes was amongst the greatest poets of the Renaissance. At a time when segregation was widespread and the black community was still considered a second rate, he was one who was unabashedly proud of his colour and his culture, a trait which is reflected in a majority of his poems.
7. Apart from poetry, Langston Hughes wrote eleven plays and several other works of prose, including the popular ‘Simple’ books—*Simple Speaks His Mind*, *Simple Stakes a Claim*, *Simple Takes a Wife* and *Simple’s Uncle Sam*. His autobiography, *The Big Sea*, is also a much acclaimed work.
8. Hughes’ intention for writing *The Weary Blues* was to celebrate African American heritage, one which he was very proud of. The poet simply wants to give a realistic portrayal of the plight of the black people during that period. There were some, however, who disagreed with this aspect of Hughes’ work, which at times showed black Americans in a negative light; for example, prostitution and poverty. They felt that Hughes would have been better served to show only the positive aspects of black America.
9. It is clearly indicated in this poem that the blues unites the speaker and the performer in some level. There is an implied relationship between the two; the music compels the speaker’s participation. The performer is anonymous, as he is not famous. The performer seemingly has only the blues in his life and nothing else. However, blues is significant in his life; it reveals ‘a black man’s soul’ and it keeps him alive. The blues gives him an identity. When singing the blues he is singing about life and how the black man has to struggle to gain an identity in a land dominated by the whites.

## NOTES

## NOTES

10. The poem *Dream Variations* combines two different motifs. The structure is based on American blues music which is repetitious, and at the same time, the poet attempts to make his work exciting to the younger audience. Blues music structure (repetition) is clearly evident in the poem, where the first, second and fourth lines of both stanzas more or less resemble each other.

The poem *Dream Variations* talks about black segregation. This is clearly evident in the second and fourth lines of the first stanza. The second line 'in some place of the sun' could refer to a place where only whites were allowed, and the fourth line 'white day is done' may imply the power that the white people wielded.

11. In lines three and four, 'To whirl and to dance/Till the white day is done,' white is the first metaphor in the poem. The term 'white' could symbolize anything. In this poem, it is evident that the poet intended it to mean the Caucasian person. The 'white man' dominated the blacks for several generations, as history would attest. The 'white day' could mean that the white man had total dominance of the day; in other words, they controlled the black man's activities. 'White' could also refer to the colour of the sunlight, when it is shining at its brightest.

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## 7.10 SUMMARY

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- Robert Frost is considered to be the quintessential New England poet. His poems are spare, meditative and have a close affinity with nature—a characteristic he shares with the Romantic poet Wordsworth. Often, ordinary natural objects suggest something greater in his poems. He plays around with metre in order to capture the easy rhythms of the speaking voice. His poems flow like a good conversation—smoothly and coherently.
- The title is *Birches*, but the subject is birch 'swinging'. Moreover, the theme of the poem reflects, in a more general and a deeper sense, the motion of swinging. The force behind the swinging comes from the attraction of the opposites—truth and imagination, earth and heaven, concrete and spirit, control and abandon, and flight and return.
- *Birches*, published in the *Mountain of Interval*, 1916 is one of the most widely quoted and anthologized of the nature-lyrics of Robert Frost. Frost is remarkable for its skillful blending of fact and fancy, observation and imagination. Birches are a common sight in New England. The poet has observed their 'habits' minutely, and in this admirable lyric, he describes them precisely and accurately.
- In short, Frost loves the world and life in it, even though he often finds faults with it, quarrels with it as a lover. In *Birches*, he tells us, 'Earth

is the right place for love'. He does not regard the universe as chaotic, though he is conscious of many imperfections. He does not shut his eyes to the hardness of man's lot, but suggests ways and means for its amelioration.

- Not only does *Sunday Morning* suggest that religion is unsatisfactory, but it also implies that searching for bliss through faith is meaningless. In Stanza VI, Stevens uses metonymy, referencing to 'that perfect sky' to discuss heaven and by association, the search for contentment through religion.
- *Sunday Morning* is certainly a complex poem that takes on the intimidating task of analyzing creed and its part in society. Not only does the narrator discard the notion that religion is the path to happiness, but he also offers his estimation as to how to truly achieve it.
- James Langston Hughes was amongst the greatest poets of the Renaissance. At a time when segregation was widespread and the black community was still considered a second rate, he was one who was unabashedly proud of his colour and his culture, a trait which is reflected in a majority of his poems.
- The poem *Dream Variations* talks about black segregation. This is clearly evident in the second and fourth lines of the first stanza. The second line 'in some place of the sun' could refer to a place where only whites were allowed, and the fourth line 'white day is done' may imply the power that the white people wielded.
- During the Harlem Renaissance (1920–1930) artistic movements were rife in the country. The art community in New York was especially responsible for this. This poem was written during that period. At first glance, *Dream Variations* seemingly does not intend to offend anyone. This possibly has to do with the period it was written—the time of Harlem Renaissance was one where direct arguments still did not have a place in black American poetry.

## NOTES

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### 7.11 KEY WORDS

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- **Metaphysical-Symbolism technique:** A loosely organized literary and artistic movement of certain French poets against the rigid conventions governing both technique. They spoke about the world which is a system of symbols expressing metaphysical realities.
- **The Harlem Renaissance:** This was the development of the Harlem neighborhood in New York City as a black cultural mecca in the early 20th Century and the subsequent social and artistic explosion that resulted. Lasting roughly from the 1910s through the mid-1930s, the period is considered a golden age in African American culture, manifesting in literature, music, stage performance and art.

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## 7.12 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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### NOTES

#### Short Answer Questions

1. Enumerate the life and works of Robert Frost.
2. State the theme of Robert Frost's *Birches*.
3. Describe the elements of symbolism in Frost's *Birches*.
4. Enumerate Frost's philosophy of life in his poetry.
5. Write a brief note on the writings of Wallace Stevens.
6. State the theme of Stevens' *Sunday Morning*.
7. Write a brief notes on the life and works of Langston Hughes.
8. Write a brief note on the form and structure of *Dream Variations*.

#### Long Answer Questions

1. Discuss the contribution of Robert Frost's poetry in English Literature.
2. Analyse Frost's *Birches* as a nature lyric.
3. Discuss Robert Frost as a modern poet.
4. Write a comparative analysis on the central idea of Stevens' *Sunday Morning*.
5. Discuss the influence of the Harlem Renaissance on Langston Hughes' poetry.
6. Present a critical analysis of Hughes' *The Weary Blues*.
7. "The structure of the poem *Dream Variations* is based on American blues music." Discuss this statement.

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## 7.13 FURTHER READINGS

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- O'Neill, Michael. 2010. *The Cambridge History of English Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grierson, Herbert. and J. C. Smith. 2014. *A Critical History of English Poetry*. London: A&C Black.
- Longenbach, James. 1991. *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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- Leggett, Bobby Joe. 1992. *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext*. London: Duke University Press.



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**BLOCK - III**  
**POETRY VIII - XI**

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*Denise Levertov and  
Sylvia Plath*

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**UNIT 8 DENISE LEVERTOV AND  
SYLVIA PLATH**

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**NOTES**

**Structure**

- 8.0 Introduction
- 8.1 Objectives
- 8.2 Denise Levertov: About the Poet
- 8.3 *A Marigold From North Vietnam*: Summary
  - 8.3.1 *A Marigold From North Vietnam*: A Critical Analysis
- 8.4 Levertov's *Advent 1966*: Summary
  - 8.4.1 *Advent 1966*: An Analysis
- 8.5 Sylvia Plath: About The Poet
- 8.6 Sylvia Plath's *Lady Lazarus*: Summary and Interpretation
- 8.7 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 8.8 Summary
- 8.9 Key Words
- 8.10 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 8.11 Further Readings

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**8.0 INTRODUCTION**

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The American poet Priscilla Denise Levertov's work revolves around the theme of politics and war. The Vietnam war had a great impact on her as an individual and she felt that it was the moral duty of all to bring out the ills about the war; she decided to fulfil her duty by writing about the war in her poems. The poet has maintained her central theme of Vietnam War in "*A marigold from North Vietnam*." Levertov explores every aspect of the world around in her quest for the real. Levertov's poetic powers to the fullest in "*Advent 1966*" to bring out the ravages of war. In many of her poems, Levertov looks for ways of attaining spiritual wholeness in a world that is fragmented and chaotic. Her quest for the authentic and her exploration of experience leads her ultimately to the recognition of her own person.

Sylvia Plath occupies a unique position in the American poetry of the post-World War II period. The brilliant poems of her posthumously published volume *Ariel* reflect the strong confessional impulse of contemporary poetry and establish her as a leading poet of the confessional movement. Plath is a writer whose life and work have aroused a great interest since her tragic and untimely death.

## NOTES

The autobiographical writings of Plath reveal her endeavors to assert herself a strong female identity. She has concentrated upon death and disintegration, as the two primary themes of her poetry and fiction. For Sylvia Plath, life was poetry. She herself said so - “The blood jet is poetry/ There is no stopping it.”

This unit aims at analyzing the poems of Danise Levertov and Sylvia Plath and explain in detail the main themes of those poems.

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### 8.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the poetry of Danise Levertov and Sylvia Plath
- Examine an insight into the impact of war on Levertov’s poems
- Understand Levertov’s contribution to American Literature
- Explain the theme of Levertov’s poem, *A Marigold from North Vietnam*
- Enumerate the impact of horrors of the Vietnam War in Levertov’s poem, *Advent 1966*
- Explain the theme of Sylvia Plath’s poem, *Lady Lazarus*

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### 8.2 DENISE LEVERTOV: ABOUT THE POET

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The American poet Priscilla Denise Levertov was born on 24 October 1923. All her work revolves around the theme of politics and war. The war had a great impact on her as an individual and she felt that it was the moral duty of all to bring out the ills about the war; she decided to fulfil her duty by writing about the war in her poems. She developed her personal lyrical style of poetry for the purpose of exhibiting the influences of the war. As a poet, she felt that she could use her poems to describe injustices which took place during the Vietnam War. Besides writing war poems, she keenly took part in rallies and even recited her poems during the rally. In 1971, some of her war poems were published in a book titled as, “*To Stay Alive*”. This collection had letters about anti-Vietnam War, newscasts, diary entries, and conversations also. Through her poems Levertov wanted to bring about change and she wanted individuals to use the power of their imagination to bring that change. She also felt that personal experience is closely connected to justice and social reform.

Her war poetry’s central theme was suffering during and post war. Her poems “*Poetry, Prophecy, Survival*,” “*Paradox and Equilibrium*,” and “*Poetry and Peace: Some Broader Dimensions*” revolve around war, prejudice, and chauvinism. In her collection, *Life at War*, she has used imagery to describe

the distressing violence which took place during the Vietnam War. The poems only deal with the violence and savagery during the war, but, in spite of such gruesome subjects, the language used by the poet is commendable. The themes of her poems, particularly “*Staying Alive*,” emphasize on not just the cost of war but also on the suffering of the people of Vietnam. *The Sorrow Dance*, *Relearning the Alphabet*, *To Stay Alive*, *Candles in Babylon*, along with most of her poem collections, deal with several socio-political themes, such as the Vietnam War, the Detroit riots, and nuclear disarmament.

With her poems, she wanted to generate awareness among people on serious issues like the Vietnam War and environmental concerns. Her first popular book on Vietnam poetry was *Freeing of the Dust*. Few of the poems were based on the theme of distrust among people of North Vietnam. She used her poems to attack every day events like dropping of bombs by the US pilots and how much loss of life and property they caused. Generally, her war poems incorporated suffering so that she could stress that violence was a routine activity. She wrote war poems for several years and in the end she realized that poetry was too delicate and beautiful and it was not possible to mix it with politics as they are two extreme aspects. In the later part of her career, she began to write poems based on the theme of religion. During her writing career she has written and published 24 books. They are not only on poetry but also include her work on criticism and translations. Several anthologies had been edited by her. For her contribution to American Literature, she had been awarded various awards and grants such as the Shelley Memorial Award, the Robert Frost Medal, the Lenore Marshall Prize, the Lannan Award, a Catherine Luck Memorial Grant, and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

## NOTES

### Check Your Progress

1. What was the central theme of Denise Levertov’s war poetry?
2. List a few of Denise Levertov’s poems.

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### 8.3 *A MARIGOLD FROM NORTH VIETNAM:* SUMMARY

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The poet has maintained her central theme of the Vietnam War in “*A Marigold from North Vietnam*” as well. The poem is a part of the collection titled, *Relearning the Alphabet*. The poet has used the marigold in the poem in order to stress on its recurring quality. The poem moves from death to life with the help of love. The seasonal cycle of the nature is reflected through the life, death and rebirth on the earth. The poet has stressed upon the resilience of life even in a war zone of Vietnam. The poem tries to deliver a promising future.

## NOTES

In the poem, the speaker nourishes the marigold because of its resurrected qualities, it has been used a symbol for nurturing new life in a land which is full of tragedies. In “*A Marigold from North Vietnam*,” the lines are incoherent, with large gaps in between the imagery. The poet has adopted a form so that she is able to illustrate not only the consequences of war on Vietnam but also how it has hampered the spirit of Americans fighting war.

The poet has written her single stanza poem using a free verse, with a form which does not resemble the traditional forms of verses. The lyrical poem with its subtlety beauty tries to project that things will get better and creates a beautiful future for the stricken country. The recurrences accrue in the meaning and the complete tone of the poem proposes the faltering but promising peace that will happen in future.

It is a rare occasion that a poem featuring the Vietnam War ends with a thread of hope about peace: “*to the root- threads cling still/some crumbs of Vietnam.*”

### 8.3.1 *A Marigold From North Vietnam: A Critical Analysis*

Denise Levertov’s reaction to Vietnam War is visible through her work. She saw the war as an ultimate source of unreasonableness and disorder of art. It clouded the minds of the people and violated the actual order of the things from its source. It is the damage and illogicality of vision which made the war horrifying for the poet and this can be told without any condemnation of her empathy or kindness. Her apprehensions are not just based on aesthetics: she did not just care about the damage to the potentials of art but also regarding the damage to the precision which gets affected at the deep levels where art and life cannot be separated. Once vision has reached that level, love and compassion are normal phenomenon. The nature of the scene at that level is full of tenderness as their core is full of things which are proper order and beautiful.

The poems written by Levertov before the Vietnam War project her as an accomplished and poised woman and her poems reflected her experiences of art and the world. She found that world could be dealt with and could be understood, and there were beautiful things all along the path. In a way, she was satisfied with the way things were. But the war changed all this and it seemed to have cast a shadow on the things around and killed imagination.

#### Check Your Progress

3. Why has Levertov used the marigold in the poem?
4. How is the poem written as reaction to the Vietnam War?

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## 8.4 LEVERTOV'S *ADVENT 1966*: SUMMARY

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Denise Levertov and  
Sylvia Plath

“*Advent 1966*” can be regarded as the poet’s most influential statement of the altered landscape in which the delicate eye, whose purpose was to unify the “I” with the spiritual scene, is now only able to see a demonic form of life. The poem had gathered positive reactions because of her skillful use of the season of Advent to provide a blunt political interpretation about the horrors of the Vietnam War.

Denise Levertov used her poetic powers to the fullest in “*Advent 1966*” to bring out the ravages of war. The poem was published in *The Nation* and it was a part of her collection, “*Sorrow Dance*”. In the poem she has made several powerful statements to illustrate the gruesome war as she saw it. The poet has built a series of contrasts around the mystical vision of Robert Southwell’s poem titled “*The Burning Babe*,” which is regarded as one of the most celebrated and influential Christmas poems in the English language. She has used Southwell’s vision with the haunting images of the actual burning of young children during the Vietnam War. While one vision predicts revitalization and cleansing, this helps in increasing the spiritual powers and imagination of the poet the other damages and rescinds the imaginative powers. One of them is “unreal” and expresses the uppermost reality; while the other is actual reality and arises out of chaotic unreality. Burning babe of Southwell is solo and distinctive while Levertov’s infants are many burning babe is singular, unique; the babes of Vietnam are multiple and the poet is unable to believe what she has witnessed; she feels that the blurredness of her sight is making them seem so many.

*because of this my strong sight,  
my clear caressive sight, my poet's sight I was given  
that it might stir me to song, is blurred.  
There is a cataract filming over  
my inner eyes. Or else a monstrous insect  
has entered my head, and looks out  
from my sockets with multiple vision,*

The speaker is wondering as to what has caused the vision to become blurred. She is questioning what she is seeing is real or just her imagination. Has the blurring been caused by an insect or is it an image of the messy war? The poem’s understanding appears to be, in fact, that the disheveling of the vision and the disheveling of reality are one and the same thing. This interpretation is completely in tune with poetics of Levertov. She feels that the images have affected her “caressive” sight. *Claritas* which means brightness in English is possible only at the junction where an orderly mind

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## NOTES

meets an orderly object; the imagination is not able to add or alter but helps in giving a clearer picture enters the order of the objects. However, during the war, there is no order and it completely lacks spirit, thus the imagination will not be able to focus accurately on the image of the burning babe. The poet is compelled to see the vision which is formed and in case, she tries to look anywhere else, the images is dull and not clear.

Hence the poet's imagination, which previously was able to clearly see past all the disorder, has now become blurred and it is unable to see the surfaces which are in order as well. This has happened due to the murky experience of the war. When the imagination makes repeated attempts to pass through objects which are not orderly it is bound to become dull and blunt and moreover all the strength is lost.

Denise Levertov made a remark that her mind is made of poetic order: "my notion of organic form is really based on the idea that there is form in all things--that the artist doesn't impose form upon chaos, but discovers hidden form by means of the poet's attentive listening, not only his listening but also his feeling, his meditating upon his experience, and by means of his accurate transcription of that experience into words." Needless to say, the war had cast a disabled shadow over her mind.

### 8.4.1 *Advent 1966: An Analysis*

Denise Levertov felt that as a poet she had a social obligation to spread awareness about violence and sufferings caused because of the war. Through her poems, she wants the readers to become aware. *Advent 1966* is one such attempt in which, to a large extent, she has been successful. Her clarity of vision and skillful use of language helps in awakening the creative perception of all those reading the poem. Her readers have witnessed the malice of human affairs, but the amazing and charming blend of formal beauty, power and sophistication of language, and horrifying images, has helped them to comprehend the horror and made them turn away fearfully and loathingly. Levertov has given details about the nightmare in depth yet managed pacify the readers.

When the Vietnam War started, she asked herself hard questions about the form of her poetry. She wanted to awaken the response from her readers by narrating to them facts about the war in a manner which did not make them feel repulsed. She wanted to highlight true and relevant facts and leave the insignificant aspects out of her poems.

She can be easily labelled as one of the most active of poet-protester who voiced her opinion against war not only through her politicized poetry and war poems but she also took part in demonstrations, revised anthologies, planned welfares. Her poems were full of statements, declarations, and in-depth knowledge of war. She even surprised few of her contemporaries from the way she began to write during the war. The Black Mountain poet and



one of her keen admirer Duncan was shocked at her style. He even tried to dissuade her from writing in such a manner. Yet she continued to write and create meaningful political poetry. In spite of the criticism she received her poetry did not lose its intensity and continued to write about public issues in a language which was easily understood by people.

## NOTES

### Check Your Progress

5. What was the poet's main purpose to compose the poem *Advent 1966*.
6. Why was Denise Levertov labelled as a poet-protester?

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## 8.5 SYLVIA PLATH: ABOUT THE POET

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Sylvia Plath, an American poet, novelist and short story writer, was born on 27 October 1932 to middle class parents in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. Her talent in writing was evident at an early age. She published her first poem when she was eight. She was a sensitive and intelligent girl who aimed at perfection in all that she did. Popular in school, she was a brilliant student receiving straight A's and winning prizes. At the time of joining Smith College on a scholarship in 1950, Plath had an impressive list of publications. During her student days, she wrote over four hundred poems.

Though overtly Sylvia was a perfectionist, she was troubled by personal sorrows which probably surfaced after the death of her father (a college professor) when she was only eight-year-old. During the summer following her junior year at Smith, having returned from a stay in New York City where she had been a student 'guest editor' at *Mademoiselle Magazine*, Sylvia nearly succeeded in killing herself by swallowing sleeping pills. In her autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia wrote about this experience. Her recovery from this involved electroshock and psychotherapy after which she continued her academics and literary pursuits. She graduated from Smith summa cum laude in 1955 and won a Fulbright Scholarship to pursue her studies at Cambridge, England.

It was at Cambridge that she met the English poet, Ted Hughes with whom she fell in love. They were married in 1956. In 1960, at the age of twenty-eight, Plath published her first book *The Colossus* in England. The poems in this book were formally precise and well-wrought yet they only give an indication to the kind of poems she wrote in early 1961. Plath settled with her husband, Ted Hughes, in an English country village in Devon. The life of marital bliss did not last long and less than two years after the birth of their first child, the marriage broke apart. Sylvia's life after that was filled with difficulties. She now lived in a small London flat with her two small children and struggled to survive in spite of ill health and a meagre income.

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This prompted her to write more than before and she often wrote between four and eight in the morning while her children were still asleep. At times, she managed to write a poem a day pushed by some unseen force that drove her on relentlessly. Her last poems reflected her state of mind; it seemed as if she was controlled by some deeper, powerful force. Death was considered cruelly attractive and psychic pain was something that could physically be felt.

Sylvia killed herself with cooking gas on 11 February 1963, at the young age of thirty. It was the tragic end of a troubled life. Two years after her death, *Ariel*, a collection of some of her last poems, was published; this was followed by *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees* in 1971, and, in 1981, *The Collected Poems* appeared, edited by Ted Hughes.

### Check Your Progress

7. Why was Sylvia Plath troubled in her life?
8. List some of Sylvia Plath's work.

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## 8.6 SYLVIA PLATH'S *LADY LAZARUS*: SUMMARY AND INTERPRETATION

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### Stanzas 1-4

What makes Sylvia Plath intriguing to her readers is her being a tortured soul as a majority of her readers have had a feeling of agony at least once while reading her works. And very often the agony and pain felt by people is so intense and deep that there are no appropriate words to express the true anguish present. However, Plath has a way of putting fragile yet beautiful words in dark lonesome feelings.

The first stanza of Plath's *Lady Lazarus* can't actually be understood until one has read the entire poem till the end.

On the face of it, it appears as though there isn't much meaning in the first stanza but, once having read through the entire poem, it is inferred that the poet is actually referring to 'suicide'. The poet seems to be making a confession that she's tried to end her life once every decade that she's lived so far. She goes on to explain to the readers why she's attempted suicide so many times and conjures up poignant imagery to compare her own suffering to that of the persecution of the Jews. The allusion is to the atrocities on the Jews by the Nazis during the Second World War. During this period, the Nazis used the skins of Jewish people to make lampshades and in this context Plath compares her own skin to a Nazi lampshade. Plath compares her own suffering with that of the Jews, suffered in the Nazi concentration camps, by using the horrific metaphor.

She uses the comparison of a paperweight to her right foot to convey the heaviness of her pain. The poet uses this comparison to convey to her readers that her pain was so real that it felt like real physical weight attached to her body. The nature of Plath's physical pain is conveyed by the paperweight.

Plath doesn't feel that she has any identity or is cut-out to fulfil a specific purpose in life and this is expressed in the imagery of a faceless face. She feels like a face lost in the crowd; one that no one would remember.

### Stanza 5-7

In these lines Plath likens her face to fine Jewish linen. The reference here is to the Jewish linen which was used to wrap Lazarus's body as he was laid in his tomb. Similar Jewish linens were also used to wrap the body of Jesus Christ prior to laying his body in his tomb. The poet's reference to Jewish linen re-establishes that she feels quite dead herself. In other words, she feels nothing inside as though she were dead. And it is this incapacity to feel that causes her to suffer. She goes on using such imagery to express her innermost feelings.

Plath throws down a gauntlet to the readers and challenges them to look at her for what she actually is by saying "peel off the napkin." However, she believes that no one would wish to know her or peek into her soul for that matter and feels that people who tried it would actually be terrified. The reason why she feels people would be terrified is that people will become aware of the fact that while she's alive in the flesh, her soul is dead inside. This is why she continues to use imagery of death and decomposition to describe herself.

It is at this point in the poem that the readers realize that the poet Plath doesn't identify herself with Lazarus who's risen from the dead, but identifies with the one that's dead and whose body has begun to decompose. To signify a decomposed appearance, she uses the words like prominent nose cavity, eye pits and teeth to describe herself as these features are primarily seen in a rotting corpse. Continuing the effects of death, the poet explains that the sour breath and the putrid smell will soon vanish. This imagery essentially signifies the poet's numb emptiness that's been torturing her soul. Plath employs the usage of actual physical decomposition to express how she feels inside i.e., how her soul is decaying.

Further in the poem, the poet goes on to say that she's actually alive and not a dead woman. But the poem's tone reveals her disappointment at being alive as she identifies more with death than being a living being.

Hereafter the poet goes from talking about herself as though she were a deceased woman and spoke as a woman who was very much alive. But the poem's tone is very telling of her disappointment at being alive. Obviously Plath identifies more with death than she does with life. When she looks at herself in the mirror and though she's a woman of only 30 years, she thinks of herself as a decomposing dead body. Plath also tells the readers about her

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disappointment that like a cat, she too has many more attempts in order to attain death.

### Stanzas 8-10

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The poet reveals that with each passing decade that she's lived, she's come closer and closer to her death. Her saying, "this is number three" is suggestive of the fact that she already tried to die a number of times. She then diverts the reader's attention off of her own miserable life and being and begins to criticize the people around her.

Addressing the people around her, Plath brands them as the "peanut crunching crowd," which is suggestive of the fact that their purpose in her life is to only scoff at her and create a scene. A similar opinion of people is conveyed when she compares herself, once again, to Lazarus. But on this instance she compares herself not with the Lazarus that's dead and entombed, but to the one that has risen from the dead and is stepping out of the tomb enveloped in the burial cloth. But instead of being triumphant the poet's tone is rather sceptical and calls her exiting from the tomb, "a big strip tease" exposing those people who'd come to her as she was dying, but was somehow brought back to life; they had only converged not to mourn her passing or to rejoice at her coming back to life; but to be entertained by her. Her sarcasm reveals her frustration with the spectators and her disappointment that she was unable to stay dead.

### Stanza 11-13

Although Plath realises that she's alive, she still wishes she were buried in the tomb. Plath creates the image of her gazing at her own self; her hands, her knees and her flesh, realizing that physically she's still alive. She realizes that she is just the same as she was before experiencing death. She writes,

*Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.*

*The first time it happened I was ten.*

*It was an accident.*

She explains that she's the same woman now as she was before her near death experience. She then goes on to explain to the readers her experiences with death and says that her first encounter with death was in the form of an accident when she was only ten years old. This can be perceived as a traumatizing experience for Plath who had come face to face with death at the tender age of ten years. Despite this, she was left wanting more death like experiences.

On the second instant, Plath doesn't reveal her age when she experienced death for the second time in the form of a suicide attempt. As she'd mentioned earlier that she'd encountered a deathly experience once every ten years, we

can reasonably assume her age to be around 20 or so years at the time of her second experience. She explains this experience,

*The second time I meant  
To last it out and not come back at all.  
I rocked shut  
As a seashell.  
They had to call and call  
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.*

The above lines suggest that the poet had experienced death from such close quarters that she believed that she'd actually died. She "meant to last it out" which reveals that she truly does not wish to live any longer.

### **Stanza 14-19**

Plath's belief in death is so deep and she's so far removed from life, that she says,

*Dying  
Is an art, like everything else.  
I do it exceptionally well.  
She explains her own interest and "talent" in this "art" when she says,  
I do it so it feels like hell.  
I do it so it feels real.  
I guess you could say I've a call.*

The poet says that her true calling lies in death, which suggests that she has no other purpose in life than to die. Her only respite from suffering, emptiness and numbness, which had plagued her life, was in her encounters with death. Much to her dismay, each time that she does encounter death, she ends up surviving only to go through the same pain and sufferings she'd been experiencing earlier on.

The next four stanzas reveal her thoughts about her return to her life of suffering. Plath expresses her belief that ending her life would be far easier than continuing to live miserably. She adds further that the hardest part about returning to a miserable life was facing the crowd. When people refer to her life as "a miracle", she feels as though she's been put up on a stage and sarcastically adds that looking at her and touching her should be made chargeable.

### **Stanza 20-27**

It is in these paragraphs that Plath reveals the source of all her sufferings as she writes,

*Denise Levertov and  
Sylvia Plath*

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*So, so, Herr Doktor.*

*So, Herr Enemy.*

Here we find references to Nazi doctors, especially in the use of German words like ‘Herr’ which means ‘Mr.’ and ‘Doktor’, who nursed the Jewish victims back to health only to inflict more suffering on them. By using ‘Herr’ twice in the stanza, the poet conveys that it is men who are the cause of her sufferings. Plath goes on to tell her readers why she considers men her enemy in the following manner:

*I am your opus,*

*I am your valuable,*

*The pure gold baby*

*That melts to a shriek.*

In these lines she evaluates her worth in the lives of men who see her only as a beautiful object but one that is hard and inanimate. She concedes that she’s of definite value to some people, especially men, to whom she is merely an object of beauty and not living person. She likens her death to the loss of a piece of jewellery burning in fire.

Her sarcasm is intense when she says, “*do not think I underestimate your great concern*”.

Plath continues to imply that the people in her life, particularly men, value her only as an object. This is revealed when she writes,

*Ash, ash—*

*You poke and stir.*

*Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—*

*A cake of soap,*

*A wedding ring,*

*A gold filling.*

During the time of the Second World War, the Nazis were known to make soaps from the burnt remains of Jewish prisoners from the concentration camps. The Nazis were also known to rummage through piles of human ashes only to scour out jewellery and gold fillings. This is exactly how she feels is her worth for people around her.

In the following stanza, Plath takes on a vengeful tone as she continues to blame men, God and the Devil, specifically pointing out that both God and Lucifer (the Devil) are men. This also reveals that she feels powerless under men. She refers to the Doktor, God, and the Devil all as men who hold some kind of power over her.

It is difficult to tell whether Plath is referring to herself when she “rises from the ashes” as a physically alive woman who has failed yet again at trying



to end her life, or as one who has died and will return as an immortal. She may plan to stop attempting suicide and take her revenge on men instead of herself. Or she plans to come back as an immortal after she has died to take her revenge on men. The red hair suggests and symbolizes the mythical creature, phoenix, who can burst into flames and then be reborn from its ashes. Either way, Plath warns men everywhere, that she is no longer a powerless victim under them, but that she is ready to take her revenge.

Denise Levertov and  
Sylvia Plath

## NOTES

### Check Your Progress

9. What challenges does the poet, Sylvia Plath, throw to readers in *Lady Lazarus*?
10. What does the poet mean when she refers to these words, “rises from the ashes” in *Lady Lazarus*?

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## 8.7 ANSWERS TO ‘CHECK YOUR PROGRESS’ QUESTIONS

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1. Through her poems Levertov wanted to bring about change and she wanted individuals to use the power of their imagination to bring that change. She also felt that personal experience is closely connected to justice and social reform. Her war poetry’s central theme was suffering during and post war. In her collection, *Life at War*, she has used imagery to describe the distressing violence which took place during the Vietnam War.
2. Some of Levertov’s poems include “*Poetry, Prophecy, Survival*,” “*Paradox and Equilibrium*”, and “*Poetry and Peace: Some Broader Dimensions*”.
3. The poet has used the marigold in the poem in order to stress on its recurring quality. In the poem, the speaker nourishes the marigold because of its resurrected qualities, it has been used a symbol for nurturing new life in a land which is full of tragedies.
4. Denise Levertov’s reaction to the Vietnam War is visible through her work. She saw the war as an ultimate source of unreasonableness and disorder of art. It clouded the minds of the people and violated the actual order of the things from its source. It is the damage and illogicality of vision which made the war horrifying for the poet and this can be told without any condemnation of her empathy or kindness.
5. “*Advent 1966*” had gathered positive reactions because of her skillful use of the season of Advent to provide a blunt political interpretation about the horrors of the Vietnam War.

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6. Levertov can be easily labelled as one of the most active of poet-protesters who voiced her opinion against war not only through her politicized poetry and war poems but she also took part in demonstrations, revised anthologies and planned welfare. Her poems were full of statements, declarations, and in-depth knowledge of war. She even surprised few of her contemporaries from the way she began to write during the war.
7. Though overtly Sylvia was a perfectionist, she was troubled by personal sorrows which probably surfaced after the death of her father (a college professor) when she was only eight-year-old. During the summer following her junior year at Smith, having returned from a stay in New York City where she had been a student “guest editor” at *Mademoiselle Magazine*, Sylvia nearly succeeded in killing herself by swallowing sleeping pills. Plath settled with her husband, Ted Hughes, in an English country village in Devon. The life of marital bliss did not last long and less than two years after the birth of their first child, the marriage broke apart. Sylvia’s life after that was filled with difficulties.
8. Plath published her first book *The Colossus* in England. The poems in this book were formally precise and well-wrought yet they only give an indication to the kind of poems she wrote in early 1961. Two years after her death, *Ariel*, a collection of some of her last poems, was published; this was followed by *Crossing the Water and Winter Trees* in 1971, and, in 1981, *The Collected Poems* appeared, edited by Ted Hughes.
9. Plath throws down a gauntlet to the readers and challenges them to look at her for what she actually is by saying “peel off the napkin.” However, she believes that no one would wish to know her or peek into her soul for that matter and feels that people who tried it would actually be terrified. The reason why she feels people would be terrified is that people will become aware of the fact that while she’s alive in the flesh, her soul is dead inside. This is why she continues to use imagery of death and decomposition to describe herself.
10. Plath is referring to herself when she “rises from the ashes” as a physically alive woman who has failed yet again at trying to end her life, or as one who has died and will return as an immortal. She may plan to stop attempting suicide and take her revenge on men instead of herself. Or she plans to come back as an immortal after she has died to take her revenge on men.

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## 8.8 SUMMARY

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- Through her poems Levertov wanted to bring about change and she wanted individuals to use the power of their imagination to bring that

change. She also felt that personal experience is closely connected to justice and social reform.

- The poems written by Levertov before the Vietnam War project her as an accomplished and poised woman and her poems reflected her experiences of art and the world. She found that world could be dealt with and could be understood, and there were beautiful things all along the path.
- Through her poems, she wants the readers to become aware. Advent 1966 is one such attempt in which, to a large extent, she has been successful. Her clarity of vision and skillful use of language helps in awakening the creative perception of all those reading the poem.
- Denise Levertov can be easily labelled as one of the most active of poet-protester who voiced her opinion against war not only through her politicized poetry and war poems but she also took part in demonstrations, revised anthologies, and planned welfares. Her poems were full of statements, declarations, and in-depth knowledge of war.
- In several lines in the poem, Plath likens her face to fine Jewish linen. The reference here is to the Jewish linen which was used to wrap Lazarus's body as he was laid in his tomb. Similar Jew linens were also used to wrap the body of Jesus Christ prior to laying his body in his tomb. The poet's reference to Jew linen re-establishes that she feels quite dead herself. In other words, she feels nothing inside as though she were dead.
- Although Plath realises that she's alive, she still wishes she were buried in the tomb. Plath creates the image of her gazing at her own self; her hands, her knees and her flesh, realizing that physically she's still alive. She realizes that she is just the same as she was before experiencing death.
- In the poem *Lady Lazarus*, Sylvia Plath expresses her belief that ending her life would be far easier than continuing to live miserably. She adds further that the hardest part about returning to a miserable life was facing the crowd. When people refer to her life as "a miracle", she feels as though she's been put up on a stage and sarcastically adds that looking at her and touching her should be made chargeable.

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### 8.9 KEY WORDS

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- **The Vietnam War:** This was a long, costly and divisive conflict that pitted the communist government of North Vietnam against South Vietnam and its principal ally, the USA.

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- **The Black Mountain poets:** Also called projectivist poets, they were a group of mid-20th-century American avant-garde or postmodern poets centered on Black Mountain College in North Carolina.
- **Nazi:** The National Socialist German Workers' Party commonly referred to in English as the Nazi Party was a far-right political party in Germany that was active between 1920 and 1945, that created and supported the ideology of Nazism.

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## 8.10 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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### Short Answer Questions

1. Write a short-note on the life and works of Denise Levertov.
2. Analyze the theme of Denise Levertov's *A marigold from North Vietnam*.
3. Discuss Levertov's attempt to spread awareness about violence in *Advent 1966*.
4. Write a brief note on the writings of Sylvia Plath.
5. Discuss the theme of Sylvia Plath's *Lady Lazarus*.

### Long Answer Questions

1. Discuss the style of poetry that Denise Levertov developed to expose the influence of conflict in her poem.
2. Critically analyze the poem, *A Marigold from North Vietnam*.
3. Discuss the influence of the Vietnam War on Levertov's war poetry.
4. Write a comprehensive note on Sylvia Plath's troubled life.
5. Analyze those stanzas in *Lady Lazarus* wherein the poet says that her true calling lies in death.

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## 8.11 FURTHER READINGS

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*Denise Levertov and  
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## NOTES

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## UNIT 9 EZEKIEL, RAMANUJAN AND DAS

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### NOTES

#### Structure

- 9.0 Introduction
- 9.1 Objectives
- 9.2 Nissim Ezekiel: About the Poet
  - 9.2.1 Interpretation of Some Major Works by Nissim Ezekiel
  - 9.2.2 Some of the Themes in Ezekiel's Poetry
- 9.3 Nissim Ezekiel's *The Company I Keep*: Summary and Text
  - 9.3.1 Nissim Ezekiel's *The Company I Keep*: An Analysis
- 9.4 *Night of the Scorpion*: Text and Summary
- 9.5 *Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher*: Text and Summary
- 9.6 A. K. Ramanujan: About the Poet
  - 9.6.1 Features of Ramanujan's Work
- 9.7 Ramanujan's *Snakes*: Summary and Critical Appreciation
  - 9.7.1 Themes of *Snakes*: Indianness with a Difference
  - 9.7.2 Memories in Ramanujan's Poems
  - 9.7.3 The Snake as a Metaphor
- 9.8 Ramanujan's *A River*: Summary
  - 9.8.1 Ramanujan's *A River*: An Analysis
  - 9.8.2 Tone and Theme of the Poem
- 9.9 Kamala Das: About the Poet
  - 9.9.1 Exhibit Memorial for Kamala by K. Kunhikrishnan
- 9.10 Kamala Das' *The Old Playhouse*: Text And Summary
- 9.11 Critical Analysis Of *The Old Playhouse*
- 9.12 Kamala Das' *The Freaks*: Text, Summary and Analysis
- 9.13 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 9.14 Summary
- 9.15 Key Words
- 9.16 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 9.17 Further Readings

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### 9.0 INTRODUCTION

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The three Indian poets in English — Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan and Kamala Das — have contributed immensely in English literature especially in Indian English. They are the most well-known names among Indian poets writing in English. Ezekiel's association with Indian beliefs and worldview paved the way for him to express his complex notion regarding the predicaments of those writing in a foreign language. *Night of the Scorpion*, *Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher*, *The Railway Clerk*, *Latter-day Psalms*, *In the Theatre*, *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.*, and *The Professor* are some of Ezekiel's popular poems. His compositions concentrated on issues such



as love, death, parting, sex, solitude and prayer to identify a few. Ezekiel's poetry reflects his quintessentially Indian qualities. Ezekiel has beautifully used Indian experiences as expressions of what we call Indianness. Realism is one of the most frequently used themes of Ezekiel's poems.

Acknowledged as a natural poet who has redefined Indian poems in English, A. K. Ramanujan can write poems in Kannada, Tamil and English with the same decree and talent and this has earned him the title of being a trilingual writer. A recurring theme of the poet's work is a strong presence of 'Hindu heritage'. In *Conventions of Despair*, the poet has specifically mentioned that he is unable to ignore his religious beliefs. Ramanujan's poetry portrays realistic emotions. This feature is evident in many of his poems for example *Ecology*, *Love Poem for a Wife I*, *Self Portrait* and *Conventions of Despair*. In *Self-Portrait*, the character has misplaced his individuality and he describes his state with extremely real emotions. Ramanujan is often compared to John Keats because of his skilled creations.

In her poems, Kamala Das, also known as Kamala Suraiyya, celebrates the spirit of the Indian women of contemporary times and chronicles their agony of being bereft of love and longing for emotional fulfillment. The nature of her poetry is confessional. Her poems express her inner-most desires in their existing sentiments stripped of any superfluous veil of emotions. Love and marriage are ever-permeating themes in Das' poetry. These themes are mostly always rooted in her Nair heritage, her own home situated in Kerala and her grandmother's place. Her poems like '*Summer in Calcutta*', '*In Love*', '*Composition*' '*The Suicide*', '*An Intensity*' reflect the intensity of her feelings with an underlined feeling of protest.

This unit aims at analyzing poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, A.K.Ramanujan and Kamala Das along with a brief biographical note of these poets.

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### 9.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Analyse the contribution of Indian poets, Ezekiel, Ramanujan and Kamala Das in English
- Evaluate and critically analyze Nissim Ezekiel's poems
- Explain the Indian flavour and realism in poems like *The Company I Keep*, *Night of the Scorpion* and *Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher*
- Interpret the treatment of themes in Ramanujan's *Snakes* and *A River*
- Analyse critically Kamala Das' poems, *The Old Playhouse* and *The Freaks*

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## 9.2 NISSIM EZEKIEL: ABOUT THE POET

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Nissim Ezekiel was born on 16 December 1924. He lived till the age of eighty years and died on 9 January 2004. Ezekiel is considered to be one of most well-known names among Indian poets writing in English. His Jewish Parsi background allowed him to emerge as a personality that could not be subjected to simple analysis. His poetry reflects a kind of deep rumination of predicaments that are central to an Indian sensibility.

Ezekiel can be compared to the likes of A.K. Ramanujan and R. Parthasarathy. On a professional level he served as a Professor of English in Bombay University and proved himself to be a man of great intellect. He was a philosopher as well as a poet. Given his Jewish-Parsi upbringing and cultural roots, his affinity for writing in English as an Indian, was truly remarkable. His association with Indian beliefs and worldview paved the way for him to express his complex notion regarding the predicaments of those writing in a foreign language. Ezekiel had his initial schooling in Bombay (now Mumbai) and after that he joined Wilson College. But after his college he flew to Birkbeck College (London) to pursue higher education. His sojourn to England was undertaken so that he could study philosophy under the guidance of C.E.M. Joad. But once there, Ezekiel displayed equal interest in other creative fields such as visual arts, theatre and poetry. While studying he had taken up the position of a clerk at the high commissioner's office in London. But his professional life had not marred his interest either for his intellectual pursuits or for his creative acumen.

Ezekiel being a man of versatile talent, held many significant positions besides being a professor in Bombay. Ezekiel was appointed as the editor of *Quest, Imprint* as well as the poetry section of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. He was also a visiting professor to several universities (in India as well as in the US and Australia). Ezekiel also worked as director of a theatre unit in Bombay. The synthesis of poetic aesthetics with philosophical inclinations can be seen clearly in Ezekiel's poetry.

Nissim Ezekiel received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for his work, *Latter-Day Psalms*. The book is a collection of his poetical works. His poetry compilation includes *Time to Change* (1952), *Sixty Poems* (1953), *The Discovery of India* (1956), *The Third* (1959), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965), *Snakeskin and Other Poems* (translations of the Marathi poet Indira Sant, 1974), *Hymns in Darkness* (1976), *Latter-Day Psalms* (1982) and *Collected Poems 1952-88* (1989). His plays are collected in the book *The Three Plays* (1969). Some of Ezekiel's popular poems include *Night of the Scorpion*, *Poet*, *Lover*, *Birdwatcher*, *The Railway Clerk*, *Latter-day Psalms*, *In the Theatre*, *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.*, and *The Professor*. His compositions concentrated on issues such as love, death, parting, sex, solitude

and prayer to identify a few. These works highlight the fact that Ezekiel was constantly engrossed with the complexities of life.

The poems confirmed his belief in the religion of the 'self'. He highlights the efficacy of prayer and makes repeated attempts to connect with his own being. Parthasarathy comments on Ezekiel as a poet whose 'poetry is both the instrument and the outcome of his attempt as a man to come to terms with himself. One finds in his poems the imprint of a keen, analytical mind trying to explore and communicate on a personal level, feelings of loss and deprivation'.

If we consider Nissim Ezekiel as a poet of the tradition of Indian English writing, we would realize he has made significant contribution to this body of work. One of the notable features of his poetry is the 'Indianness'. The Indian flavour is reminiscent of Ezekiel's engagement with his country and its countrymen. He used humour and wit to bring about the fallacies of local folks; and sincerely expected to bring about improvement in the situation of the country and his fellow compatriots through his creativity. Ezekiel used his poetry as a vehicle to highlight the deplorable condition that people of India lived in. In the world literature, W. B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot are representatives of the Irish sensibility and the modern ways of life. Ezekiel's poetry reflects his quintessentially Indian qualities. Ezekiel has beautifully used Indian experiences as expressions of what we call Indianness. Ezekiel hailed from an immigrant Jewish family though he himself was born and brought up in Mumbai. Besides undertaking trips to various foreign countries, he has lived, worked and earned his livelihood in Mumbai.

As a man of deep knowledge and a poet with gifted observational skills, Ezekiel understood the Indian way of life from close quarters. He has used his creativity to represent the long history of quintessential Indian identity through the socio-cultural representation expressed in a variety of ways.

In Indian writing in English, usually the term 'Indianness', refers to the collage of cultural patterns that reflect Indian society and other socio-political dimensions of Indian life. Ezekiel interweaves most of these elements of Indian life and culture into his poetical works. As a poet who preferred realism, Ezekiel displays an inclination towards seeing his country adopting better living conditions. His works reiterates his love for the nation that eventually became his home. Ezekiel's poems reflect various elements of Indian identity. The concept of Indianness occupies a vital place in Ezekiel's mind which is expressed through his symbolism and imagery. The theme of Indianness is of primary significance to Ezekiel and his poetry that is both: intense and personal. His thoughts and feelings surface through the ambience that is created in the poem and the characters who appear in the poems. The poems of Ezekiel undoubtedly are soaked in Indian flavour as they invariably follow the Indian way of life.

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### 9.2.1 Interpretation of Some Major Works by Nissim Ezekiel

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One of the most famous poems of Ezekiel is *Night of the Scorpion*. In this poem Ezekiel tells readers about an incident that took place in an Indian village where a woman was stung by a scorpion on a rainy night. The speaker of poem is the lady's son. Ezekiel, through his beautiful composition foregrounds the superstitions prevalent in the village and the love and sympathy that a mother nurtures for her child. Through that unnamed village of India, the poet sheds light on the gullible nature of the rural folk who say that:

*May he sit still, they said*

*May the sins of your previous birth be burned away tonight, they said.*

*May the poison purify your flesh of desire and your spirit of ambition.*

But the most amazing response comes from the mother. She sighs with relief and says:

*Thank God the scorpion picked on me and spared my children.*

The lines highlight the quintessential Indian mother figure who is constantly worried about the welfare and safety of her children. The general folks of the village keep repeating the name of God so as to ward off the ill effects of the bite. Soaked in superstition they believe that recalling God was the only means to find a solution.

The victim's husband is shown as a representative of the educated class who are enslaved by reason and skepticism. Ezekiel through this poem conveys the general mentality of the Indian rural population who are still untouched by modern learning. We will discuss the poem further in the subsequent section.

Another mother figure who is engrossed with her family even in the worst moment of crisis appears in *The Truth about the Floods*. We see the speaker pleading:

*I have not eaten for three days*

*My husband has been washed away*

*My parents have abandoned me*

*My son is dying*

*I cannot find my daughter.*

The bonds of family and at large the bonds of humanity that find a voice in Ezekiel's works. He appears to be in charge of representing the woes of humanity in general.

Nissim Ezekiel dealt with the interiors of the home, i.e., the domestic space in order to explore different relationships and bonds. In an interesting poem revolving around the age old rivalry of the daughter-in-law and mother-

in-law, *Edinburgh Interlude-lightly* Ezekiel depicts the perils of a newlywed bride. In a matter of fact way the mother-in-law tells her new daughter-in-law: *Ezekiel, Ramanujan and Das*

*Don't worry, dear,  
I need no help in the kitchen.  
Leave it to me, please.*

The daughter-in-law, not sensing anything harmful, innocently leaves the hearth and the kitchen to her mother-in-law. But soon afterwards the father-in-law tells the new bride in the family:

*You must try to understand  
your mother-in-law.  
She's a very kind woman, you know.  
There aren't many who do  
all the work in the kitchen.*

Much to the daughter-in-law's distress even her husband informs her,  
*If you quarrel with my mother,  
you quarrel with me.*

Ezekiel's alarming familiarity with the concerns of the domestic as well as the public sphere makes him a popular poet and a poet of the masses.

Despite being a land of plentitude, poverty was and to some extent remains synonymous with India. In *The Railway Clerk* Nissim Ezekiel focuses on urban India. He speaks about the poverty and ugliness that shrouds the big cities. As the title suggests *The Railway Clerk* is about a poor railway clerk. He struggles to survive in a wretched condition. Hailing from the middle class he says

*It isn't my fault  
I do what I'm told  
but still I am blamed.  
This year, my leave application  
was twice refused.*

His being obedient does not earn him any laurels. In fact, he is criticized severely for trivial issues. But this is not his only complaint; he mentions how his leave application had already been rejected twice in the same the year. To make matters worse, he says

*My wife is always asking for more money.  
Money, Money where to get Money?*

This tug of war between desire and dissatisfaction leads to corruption, which is one of the major troubles in India. The clerk reflects upon his state

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and laments his lack of a proper education which is why perhaps he is not getting any recognition.

*I am living far off in Borivali,*

*My children are neglecting studies,*

*How long this can go on?*

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The railway clerk was seen an emblem of poverty and strife that continue to be two integral parts of Indian politics and its challenges. The clerk is the symbolic rendition of the disillusioned youth who has lost faith in life. The insistence of the clerk's wife on arranging extra money to meet basic household expenses is not unjustified but even the clerk finds himself at a loss trying to figure out how to arrange additional income. Moreover, he is presented as one who does not accept bribes. Ezekiel tidily incorporates the problem of corruption that haunts government offices in India. Ezekiel's poems are marked with an extraordinary sense of realism which indeed was different from the idealism and romanticism that his literary predecessors had.

Ezekiel's works reflect India in all its varied reflection. Having dealt with rural, urban, private and public lives; he next focused on linguistic peculiarities of India, especially the way English language is used. In his poem *A Very Indian Poem in Indian English*, Ezekiel incorporates the progressive tense, to reproduce a variety that is popular in Indian English:

*I am standing for peace and non-violence.*

*Why world is fighting fighting*

*Why all people of world*

*Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,*

*I am simply not understanding.*

*Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct.*

*I should say even 200% correct.*

There is a glaring difference between the content and the words. While the content without any doubt highlights the significance of Gandhian ethos in political consciousness and intellect, the language that is used to engage in this invokes humour and parody, especially if we take into account the English words and odd syntactical constructions that are typical of Indian English. Ezekiel was poet of India who portrayed India in its multifarious vivacity with zest, humour and concern.

Nissim Ezekiel's poetry has recurring themes. Realism is one of the most frequently used themes of his poems. With this theme he is able to add not only the flavour of post-modernism but also the essence post-colonialism in his poetry. His poetry is suffused in the real life experiences rather than societal voids. Most of his poems exhibit real issues which are integral part



of the Indian society and have a direct impact on its culture; “*Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.*” is one such example. Ezekiel, Ramanujan and Das

Indian Identity is another common and challenging theme seen in most of the poems written by Ezekiel. The content of his work has a very Indian touch. Poems like *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.* and *Night of The Scorpion* tackle issues like integral pre-eminence that is connected with usage of English in India and another very serious social issue of superstitious.

Important theme of superstition is dealt extensively by Nissim Ezekiel through his poems. Some aspects of Indian cultural continue to be in practice in rural parts, his poems try to question the relevance of these aspects.

The universal theme of love also features in some of his poems. Like his politically charged themes he has portrayed the theme of love with tremendous openness and candidness. In his poem titled *Emptiness* the theme has been explored to the fullest: And make no rendezvous with love

I would rather suffer when I must

The level of intimacy shown in the poem was a rare occurrence in Indian poetry.

### 9.2.2 Some of the Themes in Ezekiel’s Poetry

Let us now discuss some of the themes of Ezekiel’s poems.

#### A. Modern Life in Ezekiel’s Poems

Modern man seems to be laced with unforeseen troubles and tribulations which test his very justification for survival. From the beginning Ezekiel showed great inclination towards the life of the common man and never got self-involved with the theoretical perception of living. His poet persona says:

*Give me touch of men and give me smell of*

*Fornication, pregnancy and spices.*

*But spare me words as cold as print, insidious*

*Words, dressed in evening clothes for drawing rooms.*

The modern existence struggles at times cannot come up with anything simple. The poet announces his dislike for ‘devious routes’ that one has to undertake to arrive at the destination. In the poem *The Worm*, the poet-persona is highly motivated by the way a tiny creature lives his life and ponders:

*It moved so straight! Oh God! To think that I*

*By such absurd and devious routes should reach*

*My destination.*

But somewhere in the middle of the need to survive in the complex settings of the modern world the poet has a difficult time identifying and following that path to the destination. He agonizes in the following way:

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*Then, in bitterness, I crushed the worm,  
Sadly determined not to honour more  
It's easy mocking victory. So now  
It's dead. Pretty worm, where is your strength?  
The god who made you to be wiser than  
The cunning subtleties within my brain  
Shall know by this the anger of man.  
Only in anger can I emulate  
The worm's directness. I've killed the worm*

Ezekiel had a curious association with city life. Being born and brought up in a city and having exposed to the Western life, he experienced the kind of impact a city setting has on a common man. Author Shaila Mahan in her book *The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel* points out that in Ezekiel's work, 'The modern city has its dehumanizing effect. The place is not necessarily Bombay, but any place where man loses identity. The bleak picture of the city deprived of human sensitivity, seething with poverty, dirt, squalor and noise comes vividly before our eyes by the use of concrete imagery.' Mahan continues suggesting that, '... the images –'slums', 'seasons', 'rains', 'hawkers', 'beggars', 'processions', 'drums', 'purgatorial lanes' are seen allied to the image of city. The use of 'purgatorial lanes' takes us to the great Italian poet Dante. The notions of suffering, doom, punishment signified by 'purgatorial' adds to the horror of the city.' City becomes synonymous with inferno and turns out to be a place where anyone who endures the city for survival is meant to suffer for the sake of existence.

According to Shirish Chindhade, author of *Five English Poetry*, in Ezekiel's poems one can see, '... that the mood is permanently one of self-absorption, inwardness, introspection: all roads lead to the city within, the city of the soul. There is a consistent attempt at self-search and self-definition. The holy grail of the search is hidden within the soul and poetry offers consolation in such a state of mind. It also helps 'to shape one's inner image silently.'

The narration of the urban world is a common theme that frequently appears in the poetry of many poets who belonged to the modern era. Names such as Eliot and Auden come up among many others. Ezekiel centres his works on people who live in the metropolis and undergo similar predicaments and agony. Like the urban dwellers, Ezekiel too represents the rootlessness that is characteristic of a typical urban world. Moreover, the pain and agonies that are experienced by the modern urban civilization are also similar to a large extent. But there is a marked difference in the way Ezekiel perceives the city than his Western counterparts. Ezekiel is more absorbed with the setting that is strictly Indian and is far removed from the continental space.

The ambivalent relationship that Ezekiel shares with the city generates reactions that oscillates between love and hate and builds a sense of unease in his writing that is again vastly different from the other modern Indian English poets. Ezekiel, despite being popularly referred to as a ‘Bombay poet’, longs for an escape from the city. It is so because he feels the city, ‘like a passion, burns’:

*The city like a passion burns.  
He dreams of morning walks, alone,  
And floating on a wave of sand.  
But still his mind its traffic turns  
Away from beach and tree and stone  
To kindred clamour close at hand.*

Note, that the poet is troubled by the dilemma of survival. Furthermore, he cannot stop himself from wondering where his abode is and does he belong to the right place:

*Do I belong, I wonder,  
To the common plain? A bitter thought.  
I know that I would rather  
Suffer somewhere else  
Than be at home  
Among the accepted style.*

Talking about his urban association Shaila Mahan suggests that, ‘Ezekiel has endeavoured to explore the chasm between the city dwellers quest for the cherished ideal of an unfettered and oppression – less existence and his failure to achieve even a partial realization of it. In this poem the dilemma of the modern man who desperately tries to shun and run away from urban life is expressed forcefully and touchingly.’ Further discussing about Ezekiel and his city observations critic John Thieme opines that, ‘His passion is invariably that of an urban Bombayite, but it is a condition from which he frequently seeks release. In ‘Urban’ . . . the city becomes an interior landscape, invading his mind with its traffic, while he longs from a view from the hills and seeks respite from a location where ‘The city like a passion burns.’

Despite his gruesome condition, the poet makes it amply clear that he is far removed from the world of artificiality:

*That I must wait and train myself  
To recognize the real thing  
And in the verse and friends I make  
To have no truck with what is false.*

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In the poem *Theological* the poet says, 'Lord, I am tired of being wrong.' The poor narrator appears to be exhausted of pretence and how he wishes to be freed.

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*Even as myself, my very own  
Incontrovertible, unexceptional  
Self, I feel I am disguised.*

The speaker continues with his dilemmas, and says:

*I am tired  
Of irony and paradox  
Of the bird in the hand  
And the two in the bush  
Of poetry direct and oblique  
Of statement plain or symbolic  
Of doctrine and dogma*

Chindhade observes that, 'Although the modes of traditions and beliefs of old have not been totally rejected by Ezekiel, he can identify himself with modern India with greater authenticity. Most of the poems in *Hymns in Darkness* bear out this observation. The journey is not down the memory lane, though the philosophical reflections of the earlier poetry are no doubt seen in some of the poems in *Hymns in Darkness*.'

The poem, *A Morning Walk* unfolds images of a barbaric city which the poet cannot get away from:

*Barbaric city sick with slums,  
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,  
Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,  
Processions led by frantic drums,  
A million purgatorial lanes,  
And child-like masses, many-tongued,  
Whose wages are in words in crumbs.*

Bombay, in this poem, takes on the shape of a 'barbaric city sick with slums'. But surprisingly it still remains the inescapable centre that dominates the poet's physical experience as well as his creative world. Mahan suggests that, 'As an urban poet, Ezekiel has delved into the heart of Bombay in this poem. 'The city like a passion burns', while the helpless citizen gets conditioned to its vulgar noises. Ezekiel creates a picture of the modern man who desperately tries to shun and run away from the city's turmoil but finds himself in a dilemma.' Mahan suggests that, '. . . the urban man yearns for a quiet habitation away from the turmoil and chaos of the wild city. But his

desire to withdraw remains a daydream against the forceful pull of ‘kindred clamour close at hand.’ Urban reality therefore becomes a crucial part of Ezekiel’s poetic consciousness.

*Ezekiel, Ramanujan and Das*

## **B. Pursuit of the Self in Nissim Ezekiel’s Poems**

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Nissim Ezekiel was a representative poet of the modern era. He spoke about the troubles and dilemmas associated with the existence of modern man. The source of his poetry could be found within the self-questioning soul. Ezekiel was a poet who lived by the thought that, ‘A writer must make life difficult for himself.’ He understood life ‘as a journey where poetry is the source through which he could discover himself. The developing body of his poems expresses his personal quest for a satisfactory way of living in the modern world.’

The pursuit of the self that Nissim Ezekiel can be best exemplified by referring to his poem *Transparently*, where:

*All I want now  
Is the recognition  
Of dilemma  
And the quickest means  
Of resolving it  
Within my limits.*

This verse segment is an acknowledgement of his dilemma as well as the confession of the means through which he is looking to solve it. Ezekiel’s early tryst with the hunt for the real self-reflected in his writings dating back to the 1950s when he wrote a letter from London to his sister Asha Bhende. Ezekiel wrote in his letter:

There was no alternative if I am to live a creative life. There is no other life for me. In a sense, of course, I am beaten, since I cannot organize my life as a whole. Nevertheless, fidelity to the poetry of it is a great saving factor. I do not wish to make excuses nor draw attention to the lives of the poets and their characteristic shortcomings. I want to be practical too and to stand on my own feet.

Ezekiel in the poem *Subconscious* reflects about his divided self:

*Consciously, I ask my sub-conscious  
To supply me with a poem.  
It sends up this harsh message:  
You have not turned to me so long,  
I shall not speak now.*

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Paris-based Indian scholar, Geetha Ganapathy-Dore, analyzes this poem and suggests the poet is analyzing the self-thorough psychoanalysis. She says ‘The self of which Ezekiel here refers to as a modernist is not the old unitary self of psychology but the divided self of psychoanalysis. Naturally he pokes fun at Freud by transposing the id and ego as a married couple living in a two-storied house.’

Especially, explored in the poem, *Family*, from *Songs for Nandu Bhende*:

*Should we take to meditation,  
Transcendental, any other?  
Should we take to Zen?  
We cannot find our roots here,  
Don't know where to go, sir;  
Don't know what to do, sir;  
Need a Guru, need a God.  
All of us are sick, sir.*

As if the dilemmas of survival were not sufficient for a modern man, s/he seems to be haunted by the mechanical existence as expressed in the poem *Encounter*:

*The city pressed upon me; shops, cinemas and  
Business houses  
Spoke in unambiguous accents. Only the people said  
Nothing.  
They bought the evening papers, hurried to a tube  
Station,  
Ceasing to exist.*

Ezekiel's intentions were simple. He did not intend to head for trans-human possibilities. He did not ponder or erode his energy over things that he could not achieve. Continuing this discussion, Indu Saraiya suggests that for Nissim Ezekiel, ‘a “longing” to live life on many frontiers on his own terms with the courage of his own convictions rather than on received wisdom had surfaced quite early in . . . life.’

Though some of Nissim Ezekiel's poetry suggests a kind of desperation, the poet seems unable to hide it. Language, for him, is the best medium to convey a message yet at times the poet cannot but wonder if that is the right approach at all. If we consider his poem, *Speech and Silence*, we realize he is vexed by this conundrum:

*Man is alone and can not tell  
The simplest thing to any friend.  
All speech is to himself, others  
Overhear and miss the meaning.  
And yet to speak is good, a man  
Is purified through speech alone,  
Asserting his identity  
In all that people say and do.*

The poet seeks freedom from the already set pattern of life that seems to be pre-determined by the mind and beliefs (which is conditioned by the society and its structures). He realizes that it is impossible for him to get out of its effects. Without trying to behave like a moralist, he confesses that he is indeed affected by (various forms of) corruption around him. And since there is no concept of surviving alone or in isolation he finds the whole process excruciating, a problem that he announces in the poem *Double Horror*:

*I am corrupted by the world, continually  
Reduced to something less than human by the crowd,  
Newspapers, cinemas, radio features, speeches  
Demanding peace by men with grim warlike faces,  
Posters selling health and happiness in bottles,  
Large returns for small investments, in football pools  
Or self control, six easy lessons for a pound,  
Holidays in Rome for writing praise for toothpastes.*

As if the process of corruption was a chain reaction, the poet goes on to confess in the same poem:

*Corrupted by the world I must infect the world  
With my corruption. This double horror holds me  
Like a nightmare from which I cannot wake, denounced  
Only by myself, to others harmless, hero,  
Sage, poet, conversationalist, connoisseur  
Of coffee, guide to modern Indian Art  
Or Greek antiquities.*

Ezekiel's pursuit of the self-involved a larger analysis of the self in all its varied forms. According to poet and writer Keki N. Daruwalla, 'The contribution of Ezekiel becomes all the more stark in comparison to the ruthless analysis of one's own motives and passions, the reflection on

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Ezekiel, Ramanujan and Das inner turbulence in poetry, doubt and self-doubt and the questioning of the scriptures, all this was new.’

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### Check Your Progress

1. What is Nissim Ezekiel’s contribution to English poetry.
2. List some of the famous works of Ezekiel.

## 9.3 NISSIM EZEKIEL’S *THE COMPANY I KEEP*: SUMMARY AND TEXT

‘*The Company I Keep*’ is a poem written by Nissim Ezekiel. In this poem he speaks about his contemporaries and the kind of poetry which featured during his time. Ezekiel was a prominent poet of post-independence Indian English poetry. His poems were an outcome of his own personal experiences and through them he tried to portray the truths of life. Human aspects of life were a source of constant inspiration to him. This poem also deals with human aspect of moral values. He felt that a poet should maintain the moral, ethics of the age and society. Any poet, who is unable to maintain the expected standard of morality, is sure to be an inferior poet as well. According to him, any poet with inferior talent was cursed. There are many people who enjoy writing poetry and he felt most of them simply mixed up metaphors and general thoughts but they did not realise that writing poetry involves much more and the poet needs to have expressive and profound thinking process.

An authentic Indian flavour is found in his writings in spite of his poems being written in English. He is able to add this flavour because of his usage of Bazar English, as it is commonly referred as. In “*The Company I Keep*”, the poet has upheld the Indian flavour by highlighting the numerous mistakes made by Indians in their usage of English language, the poet has created the flavour by incorporating the desire to be free from colonial rule and finally the poet has described the attitude of the two hostile neighbours.

### 9.3.1 Nissim Ezekiel’s *The Company I Keep*: An Analysis

Through this poem Ezekiel has tried to directly denounce those poets who merely use borrowed statements and metaphors and create poetry which lacks true form. These ill-fated individuals call themselves poets at the expense of exploiting the talent of other genuine poets. He has cursed such selfish people who try to thrive on others talents. In this list, he has included small time publishers and broadcasters. In anger he describes them as seducers of experience. Such people lack imaginative powers. Through his poem he has denounced all those who practice this exploitation and refers to such people as sufferers of their own extemporaneous fraud. Ezekiel questions them as to when was the last time they created something which was genuinely their



own creation. And without waiting for an answer he informs these fake poets that they are already living in hell. All these frauds justify their acts as part of a reviewing exercise. The poet admits that at one time he himself was a part of the fraud group. Ezekiel discovers that all those who resort such acts lack the knowledge of writing and create disastrous poems with the help of borrowed thoughts.

Practicing such kind of poetry writing does not contribute to the world of literature. They are just stealing someone's intelligence, talent and imagination. The form or rhyming pattern of such poems cannot help in justifying the poem. The poet refers to such a scenario as trailing smoke which merely bugs people as it becomes a source of suffocation. Therefore, the poet has issued a warning to such individuals. In a persistent tone of acute self-awareness and with absolute bluntness Ezekiel criticizes all such poetasters.

K. Balachandran has analysed the poem and the poet in great detail in his "The Company Nissim Ezekiel Keeps". He has commented that Ezekiel has spoken about people in wry, ironic, and to some extent sardonic manner. He has shot several teasers at such poets as well.

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### 9.4 *NIGHT OF THE SCORPION: TEXT AND SUMMARY*

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Ezekiel's best known poem, *Night of the Scorpion*, deals with an accident where a scorpion has stung a woman and the public gathered takes remedial measures to save the victim. The narrator in this monologue is the son of the woman.

The poem originates from the speaker's emotions, recollected at leisure in a tranquil state of mind. He recalls that unfortunate incident that took place one night. His mother was stung by a scorpion that had hidden beneath a sack of rice on a rainy night.

As the news of the scorpion bite spread, villagers started assembling in the speaker's house, chanting the name of God; their chanting sounded like the buzzing of bees. People searched for the scorpion in every corner of the house, but in vain. They believed that as the scorpion moved its poison spread in the woman's body. The villagers wished that the lady's sins of her former lives be burnt away by the poisonous venom. They believed she must have committed some sin in her previous life for which she had to pay in this life. The villagers also believed that the punishment will reduce the misfortune of her next life. (She will have to suffer less in her next birth as she had undergone some part of the punishment already.) They said that the poison of the scorpion sting would purify her flesh and diminish her desires and ambitions for material things. The implication is that joy and sorrow

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come to man as a consequences of the virtuous and evil deeds committed during this life or in former lives.

The peasants seated on the floor did not seem too worried or concerned. Each and every face there gave an impression that it was fully aware of the metaphysical facts. The speaker's mother cried, twisting and writhing in pain.

The speaker's father was known to be a sceptic and a rationalist. He did not believe in the villagers' words but he was trying every curse and blessing and every therapeutic measure he was aware of. He applied powder mixed with herbs. He even poured a little paraffin oil on the toe of his wife where the scorpion had stung and lit a match to it. A holy man was also summoned to rid the lady of the misery. She finally got relief in about twenty hours.

Despite the twenty-hour long ordeal, the victim was relieved that her children were safe and that the scorpion had chosen her and not them. This indicates that she would have suffered a lot more if any of her children had been the victim. It also signifies the lady's selfless nature and that she cared for the well-being of her children more than for her own.

The poet in this incident records four kinds of responses—the religious mystical response of the villagers; the rational response of the speaker's father; the ritualistic response of the holy man and; the self-sacrificial response of the mother.

The buzz '*the name of God a hundred times/to paralyze the Evil One.*'

This approach is based on the metaphysics that there exist in the universe two kinds of forces—the force of goodness headed by God and the force of evil headed by Satan. In order to counter the forces of evil we need the help of God and His goodness. The peasants' wishing that the lady's sins of the previous life be burnt away, that her present suffering may decrease her suffering of the next life, that the sum of evil may be diminished by her pain, and the poison may purify her flesh of desire, signifies that according to them the lady had been punished for some misdeed in the present life or in some former life. The father trying various remedies signifies his faith in allopathy. The holy incantation and performance of rites is a ritualistic approach in which one resorts to praying to God to realize the desired end. The mother thanking God for the scorpion picking her and sparing her children is an instinctive self-sacrificial approach as for her it is the welfare of her children that is more important than her own welfare.

This episode proves that all actions, whether taken by religious minded people or by the rationalist father or by the holy man, were exercises in vain as it takes twenty hours for the pain to subside. Twenty hours is a long time for the body to counterbalance the poison injected into it by the scorpion. If any of the measures had been effective, the pain would not have taken such a long time to subside. The persona ridicules even the rationalists, as the father, who is a sceptic and a rationalist, as the poet describes him, tries

‘every curse and blessing’. If he is a rationalist, he should not believe that blessings and curses can bring any relief to a patient stung by a scorpion. *Ezekiel, Ramanujan and Das*

He also laughs at the superstitious belief that the poison spreads in the victim’s blood with every movement of the scorpion:

With every movement that the scorpion made  
his poison moved in Mother’s blood, they said.

May he sit still, they said.

The mocking tone in the poem has rightly been resented by T.V. Reddy who says in his article *Nissim Ezekiel: Dissociation of Sensibility*

The situation is cleverly presented, but at the same time more intelligently the writer has levelled his pungent attack on the illiterate rural folk. The attack is all the more vicious because it is at once contemptuous and brutal without any remote suggestion of sympathy or empathy to the unlettered poor folk. The ignorant ideas and superstitious speculations of the villagers are cleverly but callously transformed into mathematical equations. While the sting of the scorpion loses its power after twenty hours, the sting of the poet’s vitriolic pen gains its savage power.

(T.R. Sharma (ed.), *Essays on Nissim Ezekiel*, Meerut: Shalabh, 1994, pp.143-44)

The poet does not find anything positive in any of the approaches as far as the problem of scorpion-sting is concerned. This may suggest that the poet rejects every alternative explored in the poem without giving his own preference.

The poem has been written in free verse and the lines do not rhyme. However, a large number of lines are octosyllabic interspersed with hexasyllabic lines. For instance, the lines, ‘was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours . . .’ and ‘to crawl beneath a sack of rice’ are octosyllabic, while the lines ‘he risked the rain again. And ‘may the sum of evil . . .’ are hexasyllabic.

### Check Your Progress

3. What is the main theme of *Night of the Scorpion*?
4. Why Ezekiel does not find anything positive in scorpion-sting?

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## 9.5 POET, LOVER, BIRDWATCHER: TEXT AND SUMMARY

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In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, William Shakespeare finds the lover, the lunatic and the poet in a world of imagination. He combines the three by saying ‘The lover, the lunatic and the poet are of imagination all compact.’

## NOTES

## NOTES

Nissim Ezekiel substitutes the lunatic with the birdwatcher and finds the poet, the lover and the birdwatcher to be alike in the poem *Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher*. He feels that all three have to wait in order to gain success; they cannot depend on their being fast. Poetry is not an area where an individual's speed and perseverance bring success. Similarly, courting a beloved and watching birds does not require a person to be swift. One who studies birds does not become successful through swiftness. Similarly, a lover has to wait and cannot attain success by forcing him/herself to be swift and remaining engaged, just as a poet.

In the field of bird-watching, a lot depends on the mood of the bird. Similarly, in the field of love a lot depends on the mood of the beloved, and in the field of writing poetry, much depends on the right word occurring to the poet. This can happen in a second, or it may happen in a few hours. In other words, neither a poet, nor a lover, nor a bird-watcher can get things done at his will: the will of the word, the beloved and the bird too matter. A bird-watcher has to wait patiently in a relaxed mood and watch the timid bird's movements. He cannot make the bird exhibit its ways to him as and when he wants it to. He has to make the bird feel that he is not an intruder as the moment the bird feels disturbed, it will fly away and the bird-watcher will lose the bird.

A lover has to patiently win the heart of the beloved and wait to confirm that he is in love with her. The moment this is confirmed, she will risk surrendering.

A poet too has to wait until his spirit has moved. He can say what he wants to say only if his spirits starts talking. As long as he is using his intellect alone, his worlds will not express exactly what he wants to say. Therefore he should not speak then.

The advice for a bird-watcher to be patient and stealthy implies that in order to watch the rarer birds one has to go to lonely places and to places where nature has not been disturbed by man. Likewise, a lover has to go to the dark inside of the beloved's heart and find out all that she has not expressed. This is not easy to achieve but needs to be done to get the beloved to respond. Once the lover reaches the dark floor of the beloved's heart, he gets her body as well as the whole of her. According to the poet the beloved is a myth of light having darkness at the core. The poet seems to be using the image of a flame which gives light no doubt, but has darkness at the core. If it is so he likens the beloved to a flame here. If he means to say that the beloved is not light but only a myth of light having darkness at the core, he means to say that the lover is disillusioned and realizes that the beloved is not as valuable a person as he believed her to be.

The poem comprises twenty lines clubbed into four stanzas of five lines each. The rhyme scheme in the first stanza is A B B A A, and in the second

stanza it is A B A B B. In the second half of the poem the same pattern recurs: the rhyme scheme in the first stanza is A B B A A, and in the second stanza it is A B A B B. The poem has been written in iambic pentameter and with a few exceptions each line is decasyllabic. The exceptions are the eleventh line, which consists of eleven syllables, and the thirteenth line, which consists of twelve syllables.

## NOTES

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### 9.6 A. K. RAMANUJAN: ABOUT THE POET

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A.K. Ramanujan is considered as one of the most important Indo-Anglican poets. Few critics have associated him to be as famous as Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das. His birth place was Mysore where he spent thirty years of his life. He shifted to Chicago in 1959 and then settled there permanently. He is considered to be a natural poet who has redefined Indian poems in English. He can write poems in Kannada, Tamil and English with the same decree and talent and this has earned him the title of being a trilingual writer. His actual prominence is in the fact that he is able to relate his poetries with his own life experiences which give his work a very realistic feel. The poet has successfully composed and published three volumes of poetry which are based on his past life, his family members and his experiences. The first volume was published in 1966 and was called *The Striders*, the second such work was published in 1971, named *Relations* and in 1976 he presented the *Second Sight*. They all have taken inspiration from the poet's personal life.

#### 9.6.1 Features of Ramanujan's Work

It is observed that 'family' tends to be the recurrent and a central theme of Ramanujan's work as many of his poems are based on his family and relatives. It has been mentioned by few critics that the family is one of the vital similes which make up for a considerable amount of thought process of the poet. In *Of Mothers among Other Things*, the poet has remembered his mother in all phases of her life, from childhood to when she was old. He has described his father through his poem *Obituary*, in this he refers to the condition of his family after his father's death as he has left the family with debts to pay and liabilities in the form of the daughters who have to be settled. *Love Poem for a Wife I* describes the poet's relationship with his spouse. In '*Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House*', there is a detailed description of the family home and the poet's family members specially his cousins. In *History*, he depicts the presence of voracity that exists among the family members. Thus, based on the examples of the above mentioned works it can be said that family does forms the central theme of his poetry.

Another important theme of the poet's work can be denoted as strong presence of 'Hindu heritage'. In *Conventions of Despair*, the poet has specifically mentioned that he is unable to ignore his religious beliefs. He

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is in constant divergence of his traditional values and the Western influence in his life. He has clearly depicted this dilemma which he is facing through his work, he says 'I must seek and will find my particular hell in my Hindu mind'. In '*Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House*', the poet has described the extent of his adherence to Hindu devotion. Though in the same poem he has mentioned the extent of false notions which are present in the religion and has urged not to fall prey to such superstitions. The poet is well aware about the positives and negatives of the religion and its impact on people.

The poet has a deep sense of patriotism which he has reflected in his work. The poet is not only inspired by his family but has shown great interest in the history of India. In spite of settling in Chicago he has always kept the Indian culture alive through his work. The poet has shown more interest in his historical past than his American present.

Ramanujan's poetry portrays realistic emotions. This feature is evident in many of his poems for example *Ecology*, *Love Poem for a Wife I*, *Self Portrait* and *Conventions of Despair*. In *Self-Portrait*, the character has misplaced his individuality and he describes his state with extremely real emotions. This aspect is very visible in his poem through his description of his mother, father, wife, children, family members and his family home. As a result character has a major role to play in his work.

Ramanujan has compiled a few love poems as well; these poems depict very strong feelings which give a very emotional description of love and relationships. They ought to get adequate attention because of their handling of the feeling of love. These comprise of *Love poem For a Wife I*, *Still Life* and *Looking for a Cousin on a Swing*.

He is considered as a very skilled poet amongst all the Indo-Anglican poets because of his strong technique. His stanzas are strongly built and his expressions are unique and appropriate. He has a special knack of using common words. His representation is very evocative. He is often compared to John Keats because of his skilled creations. Satire is another arresting trait of his technique and he incorporates it in a very efficient and subtle manner in most of his poems.

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### 9.7 RAMANUJAN'S *SNAKES*: SUMMARY AND CRITICAL APPRECIATION

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'*Snakes*' is a complex poem dedicated to exploring multiple dimensions of the form, structure and characteristics of a snake. This is not an objective description of the animal though. Through the beast, the poem explores the family as a psycho-social space and the fear of the animal as an index of a child's mental growth. It tries to discover the strange blend of an Indian subjectivity wedded to the objectivity and rationalism of a western mind.



The poem is roughly divided into three sections, although Ramanujan's original work does not suggest this division. Lines 1–21 speak of the snake as it appears to the poet in its various manifestations. Lines 22–39 speak of the snake at home and the memories of the sister it sparks off. Lines 40–55 recount the fateful encounter with a snake one night and the poet's eventual conquering of the dread of the snake. What follows is a running summary cum commentary of the poem without any internal division.

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The opening line anticipates the sense of apprehension and meaning generated by the title. It begins by correcting the usual association between forests and the snake and instead suggests that the poem is about to consider the idea, form and symmetry of the snake at a different level. That is why the poet claims that he is reminded of a snake not while walking through a forest but while walking amidst a collection of quartz objects or the narrow corridor of a library between book stacks.

The reason why the quartz or the row of books remind him of snakes is because of their external form which is in some senses paradoxical – geometry without curves, and a transparency that makes them opaque. If you recall the texture of quartz or the bodies of some snakes they appear transparent even while being opaque. The yellowing books in amber light and the thin streak of gold on the spine of some of them also remind him of snakes. It is obvious that the poet is referring not to the literal visual properties of these objects only but a whole set of associations relating to what they look like and what they mean.

The rising, unfolding motion of the coiled serpent's body as it hisses to attack reminds him of small conical columns of dust around a farmer's feet as the farmer walks through the road on a summer day.

A lorgnette is a pair of spectacles with a handle, used to hold them in place, rather than fitting over the ears. The geometrical pattern etched on the heads of snakes resembles a lorgnette and looked at from a particular angle resemble the face of an old black aunt with a face scaled and tiled which changes its shape and colour with passing time and changing ambient light conditions.

The poet now shifts to memories of real snakes brought into his house by a snake charmer. The reason why they are ritual cobras is because in some parts of India, feeding snakes is an esoteric ritual linked to forms of worship. As the snake is taken out of its confinement and let loose in a limited perimeter, it unfolds its beautiful brown glistening skin with patterns like rings and ripples on its body as it slithers its underbelly through the surface of the floor. The writhing snake's body seems to be writing an alphabet which the terrified poet can only read as an alphabet of panic. The sound that the snake's body makes on the floor is described as sibilance or an articulation of fricative and affricate consonants, made by directing a stream of air with the tongue towards the sharp edge of the teeth.



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As is customary, the poet's mother feeds the snakes with milk. While the snake drinks the milk, its black ornamental body is brought into relief with the brass saucer in the background. The snake man is even ready to show a few tricks with his pets in the hope of getting some extra money from the father. Although the parents are busy with their ritual and entertainment, the poet child is terrified. The child remembers his sister's braids decorated with a tassel whose surface texture and gleam looks more like the scales of a snake's body. Every time he looks at the snake's body it reminds his sister's braids.

The poet now remembers a night when he was returning from a play, immersed in the sad thoughts inspired by the play. A measured, rhythmic and precise pattern of footwork defined the walk, more like the ticking of a clock. The night is quiet enough for one foot to hear the sound of another walking. The heel of his clicking shoes suddenly fall on a snake and the poet can hear the slushing sound that results. The snake immediately recoils and the poet can see the green, white and blue of his belly, blanched like a lotus stalk immersed in water. He is terrified and crushes the snake, the whiteness of his body contrasting against the blackness of the road. From a live and writhing snake it has been turned to a sausage rope that frogs can hop on. The poet's fear of snakes has finally been conquered and he can now walk fearlessly through the woods.

### 9.7.1 Themes of *Snakes*: Indianness with a Difference

A close textual study of Ramanujan's poetry reveals a host of nostalgic memories of South Indian life. Poems like '*Snakes*' present pictures of the Indian life and culture. It throws light on one of the prevalent Hindu customs and rituals – that of offering milk to *nagas* even while it studies the way it affects the minds and memories of children in the family. The poet describes the reverential Hindu attitude of his mother towards 'a basketful of ritual cobras. However there is a particular detachment with which he deals with the Indianness of his experiences. Although Ramanujan writes frequently about his childhood Indian experiences, and thus flavors the poems with images of fig trees, mynahs, snakes, Madurai, a Delhi sundial, he is completely Western in his language, diction, and attitude toward the object.' Nissim Ezekiel in his review of *Relations* points to the detachments with which Ramanujan writes: 'The poet reads his passion as if it is a newspaper report about turmoil in a distant country.' And later in the same essay he says that Ramanujan's poems are 'Indian but untypically so.' Ramanujan's poetry is the expression of a poetic sensibility in which the Indian subjectivity coalesces with western objectivity. In other words, his Indian heritage and experience inspire his poetry which is given speech and forms based on English poetic traditions.

### 9.7.2 Memories in Ramanujan's Poems

Ramanujan is basically a poet of memories. Ramanujan hints that memories are hard to escape. So in '*Extended Family*', he says

‘We think in proverbs’

Ezekiel, Ramanujan and Das

The proverbs are the ones that he remembers from his native language/s loaded with the experiences of his life in India. Of all the memories, ‘the ones that are anchored to his familial, personal past make his poetry very rodent with the characteristic native element or the Indian experience.’ He uses this vast memory of his childhood in South India in a complex manner. This poem deals with the snakes of his south Indian childhood which have of course been layered with a number of other associations. The snake which was a matter of childhood terror for him has etched in his mind its colour shape, form and unique movement so deeply that he goes on to interpret many aspects of the world in terms of them. So he can discern aspects of the snake even in the library and in quartz museums apart from framing an indelible link between the animal and his sister’s braids.

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### 9.7.3 The Snake as a Metaphor

The snake in this poem is not only an animal but a metaphor for other potent issues and facts in the poet’s life. In fact, it seems to become an empty signifier and triggers associations, memories and ideas just because they have a visual similarity to the snake. The paradoxical structure and transparency of the snake becomes a metaphor for him in terms of which he can experience and describe other things which register in a paradoxical way and do not get resolved by rational thought. The terror of the snake is clearly a metaphor for the fears of a child who is circumscribed not only by his own young age but also his religion that prevents him from addressing that fear. The killing of the snake is thus an act of coming to age for the poet. He has learnt to manage his terrors and if that means negotiating with his religious beliefs he is willing to do so.

#### Check Your Progress

5. Why is Ramanujan’s *Snakes* considered as a complex poem?
6. What are the elements of Indian life and culture present in *Snakes*.

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## 9.8 RAMANUJAN’S *A RIVER*: SUMMARY

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*A River* is considered as one of Ramanujam’s supreme poems which forms a part of his collection *The Striders* and was published in 1966. The Vaigai river of Madurai has been depicted in the poem. The city of Madurai is considered as the hub of Tamil traditions and culture since ancient times. The river is the medium used in the poem. The poet considers the river to be useful but at the same time considers it to have immense scope of destruction. During the ancient period the city witnessed many scholars who proudly wrote about

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the rich heritage. The river was a feature of most of these writings. Every aspect of the river was mentioned by these scholars. The river was described even when it was dry and the bridge which was made of iron bars needed to be repaired. The partially wet stones appeared to be like sleeping crocodiles and the dry rocks which were big in size seemed to resemble buffaloes.

Ramanujan was very surprised with this kind of description of the river by these poets. He has mentioned in the poem that the sound of the river water has always led to poets to create poetry and most of the poems are based on the flowing water of the river. He feels that the river is not only about flowing water, and depicts the scene which he has witnessed and says that the water with continuous rain starts to rise and results in floods because of which three houses of the village were destroyed. The flood swept away a cow and a pregnant woman. Ramanujan feels that this kind of realistic description is never a part of poetry which was written by most poets in the ancient and present time. He feels that this destructive aspect of the river should also feature in the poets verses. He asserted that a cautious, artistic thought which describes river from a different angle should be attempted as well. According to Ramanujan, it is a shame that none of the poets gave any consideration about the unborn infants in the womb of the pregnant mother who had been washed away in the floods.

### 9.8.1 Ramanujan's *A River*: An Analysis

In *A River* the poet highlights the aspects of the certainty of the current and the earlier period. According to him, the poets from the earlier period were only keen on describing the cities, temples, rivers and streams but they were not concerned with the state of people and animals. They did not realize that floods denote devastation and bring miseries in people's lives. The poets in recent times give reference of poets of the past without giving significance to life. Lines from the poem which exemplify this observation are as follows:

'The new poets still quoted the old poets, but no one spoke in verse of the pregnant woman –drowned, with perhaps twins in her, kicking at the blank walls even before birth.'

The representation of 'pregnant woman' entails a good illustration of two generations, the current and the future. The Tamil poet and critic R. Parthasarathy has very aptly asserted that 'The relative attitudes of the old and new Tamil poets, both of whom are exposed for their callousness to suffering, when it is so obvious as a result of the flood'. This assertion is, further supported by K. Sumana in an articulate style, he says, 'The poet narrates the poem through the mouth of a visitor to make it objective. The greatness of the poem lies in the fact that the traditional praise for river has been contrasted with what is actually experienced by the people during the floods. Apart from presenting the grim realities of a river in spate, Ramanujan hints at the sterility of new Tamil poets who still quoted the old poets.'

Through *A River* and *Epitaph on a Street Dog*, the poet has incongruously presented the similar truth. The celestial image of India in *A River* and *Epitaph on a Street Dog* is very different from the *Love Poem for a Wife I*. Ramanujan endeavours to accompany the past and future in an interesting manner. The lover in the poem cannot remember the face or the expressions of his dearly loved partner, though he has not elaborated as to why he has no memory of his lover. *Love Poem for a Wife I* is a striking commentary on how a restricted upbringing purges a loving duo and *Still Life* is described as an evaluation of love. These love poems are obvious for their closeness, magnificence and profound feeling.

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The poem *A River* is a pragmatic portrayal of a river which flows all the way through the city of Madurai. The poem, in a much unreserved manner, tries to highlight how many poets have written poems on rivers and have failed to depict the naturalness of the river and given it a very unrealistic and unnatural description. Though many critics have felt that in the end, the poem itself seems to violate the realism which was preached initially in the poem. The initial lines of the poem mention the chief objective set up of the poem by describing the city of 'Madurai'. Towards the end, though, the significance of the poem will surpass its significance to this particular place. The speaker has mentioned the specific place as Madurai in his description so that he is able to give specific details instead of just some random description. By the end of the poem, though, it will be clear that the implication of his poetry go beyond their connotation for any precise city. This is eventually a poem which is based on realistic factors and the poet is not keen to make a very imaginary description.

The poet has described Madurai as a 'city of temples and poets', giving it an image of immense religious consequence and connected it with creativeness and splendour. Though this feature is often a part of many poets' works as on many occasions the writer mentions places of prominence but the speaker confuses the reader with his description of drying up of the river and many other depressing aspects are highlighted about the river which is powerful and full of vitality. This is shown through the following lines:

'straw and women's hair clogging the water gates at the rusty bars under the bridges with patches of repair all over them....'

One component of the poem is to disclose sections which are mostly not described by the majority of poets; an attempt has been made to deal with every aspect of the river. The poet openly illustrates facet of Madurai that clashes with the basic, idealistic descriptions which have been mentioned in the beginning of the poem. The speaker of the poem is keen to highlight all details about Madurai, while few poets have aimed to mention only the attractive, numinous facet of the place. It is not that the speaker of the poem has described only the unpleasant aspects of the river or of Madurai; it means that he has not hesitated in mentioning all the features, both positive as well

as negative. Consequently he mentions: ‘the wet stones glistening like sleepy crocodiles, the dry ones shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun....’

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Through his poem, Ramanujan has evaluated and distinguished the approach of the old poets with the new poets in relation to individual anguish. He has concluded through his poem that most poets are not really concerned with individual sadness and their miseries. The poet has not only mentioned the beauty of the river Vaigai but also the harshness of the river and how it affects the people. The river is closely related with the people of Madurai and depicts their life and traditions. In the poem *A River*, the river has been described from two aspects or seasons. The river is dry in summer and appears to be empty and the river bed is visible. The river has been described during the rainy season as well. The flood in the river causes the river to swell and results in a lot of damage to the village; cattle are swept away and the flow has led to the drowning of a pregnant woman. In the poem, the poet mentioned the drowning of the two cows named Brinda and Gopi. By giving these minute details, the poet is trying to explain that earlier poets have described the floods but they have completely failed in showing compassion towards the loss of life and property due to floods. The poets have not mentioned the pain which the pregnant woman would have gone through or the condition of her unborn twins has completely been overlooked in the poems of earlier poets. The poets are completely apathetic according to Ramanujan. This sort of approach results in poetry which is not touching or appealing. The creation seems very dull and heartless.

### 9.8.2 Tone and Theme of the Poem

The tenor of the poem is supported on cynicism and satire. The poem is presented in single sentences which are spaced out in paragraphs. The poem has four long stanza paragraphs and begins with a short paragraph. It consists of only two solo one-off lines. This type of formational structure is formed to create irony. It also enables to highlight the chief aspects. The language used in the poem is very simple and can be deciphered very easily.

The lines in the poem try to mock and demystify the conventional romantic view of the river Vaigai in Madurai, by the early poets. The poet is sarcastic towards the new poets who have no intelligence and unknowingly replicate the work of their precursors. Humour is offered by describing the cows with names and twins are recognised by the colour of their diapers. This is a very subtle assault on the prevailing attitude of Hinduism. Although cows are addressed with names, nobody is concerned about the identity of the pregnant woman who lost her life in the flood. The poet has tried to highlight the existence of malicious and conventional customs prevalent in Tamil society. This is an extraordinary poem with several level of implications and is an interpretation on the apathy of the previous and contemporary poets to the wreckage caused by the river in flood and the pain and suffering caused to people.

**Check Your Progress**

7. Why is Ramanujan's *A River* a supreme poem?
8. How has the poet described Madurai in *A River*?

**NOTES****9.9 KAMALA DAS: ABOUT THE POET**

Kamala Das, also known as Kamala Suraiyya, was born on 31 March 1934. A sophisticated Indian poetess, she is a distinguished Indian writer who composes in English as well as Malayalam, her native language. Much of Kamala Das's writing in Malayalam are published in the pen name 'Madhavikkutty'. Her mother was a Malayalam short story writer. She also embarked on her literary career as writer by writing Malayalam short stories. But after the publication of her Indian English verse collection *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), she gained a wider recognition as an author and creative writer. The success of this collection paved her way to the publication of two other poem collections: *The Descendants* (1967) and *The Old Play House and Other Poems* (1973).

Kamala Das's work celebrates the spirit of the Indian women of contemporary times and chronicles their agony of being bereft of love and longing for emotional fulfillment. The nature of her poetry is confessional. Her poems express her inner-most desires in their existing sentiments stripped of any superfluous veil of emotions. Her poetry reflects the desires of the physical body and a quest for the beautiful and the serene that is not within her reach. This Indian poetess was also fond of writing about memories of childhood, family relations, and the family's great house.

Love and marriage are ever-permeating themes in Das's poetry. These themes are mostly always rooted in her Nair heritage, her own home situated in Kerala and her grandmother's place. Her poems like '*Summer in Calcutta*', '*In Love*', '*Composition*', '*The Suicide*', '*An Intensity*' reflects the intensity of her feelings with an underlined feeling of protest.

Das released six volumes of verse between 1965 and 1985. Drawing upon devout and household symbolisms to investigate a sense of individuality, Das notifies of intensely individual knowledge, encompassing her development into womanhood, her failed quest for love within and outside the ceremony of wedding, and her existence in a matriarchal dominated world within the rural confines of southern India especially after inheriting the home that belonged to her forefathers.

After the publication of *Summer in Calcutta*, Das has been courted with controversy. She soon became renowned for her use of odd imagery and outspokenness in her poems. For example in her poems '*The Dance of the Eunuchs*' and '*The Freaks*', Das sketches the exotic to talk about her



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sexuality and her journey to fulfill her need. In 'An Introduction', Das takes the problems of women to a universal level and address openly those topics which were hitherto conventionally considered as personal knowledge, proposing that women's individual sentiments of yearning and parting are part of the collective know-how of woman's life. In next collection of poems *The Descendants* (1967), "The Maggots" interlinks the agony of lost love with existing Hindu myths, while "The Looking-Glass" explains the idea that women are expected to carry out in love and passion, those very things that humanity usually marks as unclean. Yet, these are things the women are presumed to deliver when in love. The verse suggests that an unexpressed love is equal to no love experience; only a total engrossment in the emotion of love can provide fairness to this experience. In *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1975), poems like "Substitute", "Gino", and "The Suicide" analyze the malfunction of corporal love to achieve fulfillment, to help oneself release from his/her ownself, or to invoke the past, while in works like "The Inheritance" looks into the integrity of the creative self in the light of devout fanaticism. In *Tonight, This Savage Rite: The Love Poems of Kamala Das and Pritish Nandy* (1979), Das remembers Krishna in her investigation of the stress between personal love and religious transcendence. *The Anamalai Poems* (1985), is a sequence of short verses which was written after Das lost the parliamentary elections in the year 1984. Some poems like "Delhi 1984" and "Smoke in Colombo" remind the readers the massacre of the Sikhs in India and the civil war that rocked Sri Lanka. Under the pseudonym Madhavikutty, Das has released numerous publications in the Malayalam language.

Das's autobiography *My Story* was published in 1976. She wrote two novels, *Manas* (1975) and *Alphabet of Lust* (1976). She was honored with Sahitya Akademi Award in 1985 for her literary contributions.

The Canadian writer Merrily Weisbord was good friend of Das who knew each other for a long time. Their friendship is celebrated in Merrily Weisbord's memoir, *The Love Queen of Malabar*, published in 2010.

### 9.9.1 Exhibit Memorial for Kamala by K. Kunhikrishnan

It was a long awaited moment. On December 21, 2011, work began for a memorial for Kamala Surayya Das on the land she donated to the Kerala Sahitya Akademi, at Punnayurkulam in Thrissur.

Kamala Surayya Das (Madhavikkutty 1934–2009) was an iconoclast and an incomparable literary genius, fluent both in English and Malayalam, and at home in poetry and fiction. In May 2006, she donated 17 cents of ancestral property in Punnayurkulam in Thrissur district to the Kerala Sahitya Akademi terming the land and trees as her "kingdom of emotions" that inspired her writings, and could "bring a bit of fragrance" to Malayalam literature. Her ancestral home, Nalappattu, had produced several writers



including mother poetess Balamani Amma and great uncle, poet Nalappattu Narayana Menon. It was a rendezvous of literary debates and movements of celebrated writers, making the family with the richest Malayalam literary heritage. Kamala's books continue to be best sellers. Her home, wherever she lived was crowded with old and new writers.

It was during March 2009, two months before her death that the formal taking over was done by the Akademi at Pune as Kamala Das had left Kerala. Controversies plagued the noble gesture, because of a serpent grove and Kerala Sahitya Akademi did not have wherewithal for a memorial. After possession of the land, it was felt that a mere building won't do. K.B. Sukumaran, who had purchased the original property from Kamala Das and sister Sulochana Unnikrishnan, donated 10.25 cents to the Akademi. The Akademi estimated that a memorial complex would cost ` 18 million.

The Government of Kerala provided Rs. 10.2 million and the first installment of Rs. 20 lakhs was sanctioned; the Akademi handed over the amount to the Kerala Public Works Department for starting the construction.

#### Check Your Progress

9. How do Kamala Das's work celebrate the spirit of the Indian women?
10. List Kamala Das' work in novel and autobiography.

### 9.10 KAMALA DAS' *THE OLD PLAYHOUSE*: TEXT AND SUMMARY

*You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her  
In the long summer of your love so that she would forget  
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but  
Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless  
Pathways of the sky. It was not to gather knowledge  
Of yet another man that I came to you but to learn  
What I was, and by learning, to learn to grow, but every  
Lesson you gave was about yourself. You were pleased  
With my body's response, its weather, its usual shallow  
Convulsions. You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured  
Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed  
My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices. You called me wife,  
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and*

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*To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering  
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and  
Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your  
Questions I mumbled incoherent replies. The summer  
Begins to pall. I remember the rudder breezes  
Of the fall and the smoke from the burning leaves. Your room is  
Always lit by artificial lights, your windows always  
Shut. Even the air-conditioner helps so little,  
All pervasive is the male scent of your breath. The cut flowers  
In the vases have begun to smell of human sweat. There is  
No more singing, no more dance, my mind is an old  
Playhouse with all its lights put out. The strong man's technique is  
Always the same, he serves his love in lethal doses,  
For, love is Narcissus at the water's edge, haunted  
By its own lonely face, and yet it must seek at last  
An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors  
To shatter and the kind night to erase the water.*

The flowers cut off from the branches are displayed in the vase. However, flowers in the vase do not tantalize with their fragrance. Rather, for the poet, they seem to be filled with the stench of human sweat. She goes on to narrate her joyless life by saying:

*'...There is  
No more singing, no more dance, my mind an old  
Playhouse with all its lights put out.*

The ideal love which the poet has been looking for everywhere finds an exact description in her poem. When the poetess speaks of 'love' in particular, she ascertains that it is unconditional and selfless. She says:

*'...Love is Narcissus at the waters' edge, haunted  
By its own lovely face, and yet it must seek at last  
An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors  
To shatter and the kind night to erase the waters.*

In this phrase which is swallowed with narcissism, the lovers/couples are incapable of moving beyond their petty egos which lead to a definite constrain making it impossible for the lovers to get totally submerged within each other. They are over indulgent in their love for their own self. There is no scope and space for the other. But soon they manage to get 'total freedom' from this phase and move on to the next level of love. It is this level of

passion that the lovers seem to have moved beyond their ordinariness to a greater plane where they are freed from their ego and get complete freedom to understand and enjoy the transcendental love. This kind of love which was exemplified by Radha and Krishna as depicted in various myths and religious scriptures entices Das. She tries to imagine herself as Radha who is in search of her Krishna. Radha and Krishna are always considered as the ideal lovers despite their being married to different partners. Regardless of her invocation of Radha and Krishna figure, the element of ‘*bhakti*’ is not found in her works because she simultaneously oscillates between two worlds of—the physical world where love is superficial and the transcendental world where love is more intense.

As Das explains, the body and the soul are entrapped within the confines of the regime to ‘tame’. The wildness is preferred over domestication and a definite wish to detach the narrator from her previous life, her identities associated with it along with her passion and dreams. Instead of teaching the narrator to ‘to learn to grow’, the lessons imparted were more restricting and regressive as they told only about the partner. The existence of the learner soon got lost in the process.

As a wife, the narrator was converted into a more robot-like existence where she is expected to fill in her husband’s said and unsaid demands, and this turned the narrator into a ‘dwarf’. In presence of the ‘monstrous ego’ of the husband, the wife identified herself as a dwarf. In this poem, the poetess shows the desire to demolish the concept of male domination and his egoistical superiority over her. Her voice was just reduced to some mumbling and incoherent words. Put under the surveillance of his question, the wife was just a mere existence who has lost the ‘will and reason’ to live. As you remember, this context of voicelessness also appears in Indian novelist Sashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence*.

The narrator laments that the freshness which the change of seasons invoke is also missing from their lives because it is sheltered under ‘artificial lights’ and ‘air conditioners’. Their life is a painful routine exercise which just goes on. Moreover, one cannot expect any change to take place because any scope of change is distance through the narrator’s mental association with her ‘old Playhouse with all lights put out’.

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## 9.11 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF *THE OLD PLAYHOUSE*

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*The Old Playhouse* throws light on the plight of a woman and her doubly subjugated position in society. She does not only exist in a society where men are preferred in the hierarchical social domain but even in the confines of the private space, the role of a woman is relegated to satisfying her husband. The colonization which is so permeating is shocking. When the narrator says, ‘You

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called me a wife', she is drawing the readers' attention to the unequal status that a man and woman share in a marital life. Women are expected to live and function in a certain way, a way of life that is determined and executed by the male-dominated world. By adopting this way of life, a woman not only loses her voice, but in the process of trying to fit herself into the sanctioned mould, she also loses her dignity, self-respect and rational perception.

But in this journey of colonization, there is also a sense of realization. A realization that affects her conscious and sub-conscious mind, and which realizes that the self is now 'cowering beneath' the husband's 'monstrous ego'. The poem depicts the female journey from victimization to consciousness. Das raises her voice against this system which does not view the people of two genders as equal; rather they are always visualized as sharing a hierarchical position. This role performance has led many women to submerge their selves into the egos of men. The narrator condemns the gender division created by the male-dominated society and pities the lot of women because there have been the losses in the war of the sexes. In the male-governed society, it is impossible for a woman to rebel against the male's overwhelming sense of superiority because she was made to understand that a male was no less than God.

#### Check Your Progress

11. Why does the narrator lament in *The Old Playhouse*?
12. How does *The Old Playhouse* throw light on the plight of a woman?

## 9.12 KAMALA DAS' *THE FREAKS*: TEXT, SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

In the poem, "The Freaks" written by Kamala Das, the freaks are lovers. They are portrayed as the narrator and her husband who are undergoing "emotional vacuity". The poet says that the lover is probably incapable of understanding anything beyond "skin's lazy hunger". A heart devoid of love, lust overtakes love. "The Freaks" underlines a woman's unwilling participation in a sexual act and the prominent gap between desire and fulfillment.

The phrase 'freak' in the poem can be used to understand:

1. A thing or incident that is markedly odd or irregular
2. An abnormally-formed organism, particularly an individual or animal considered as a curiosity or monstrosity.
3. A rapid capricious turn of mind; a whim.

Here, the first meaning signifies the unnatural sexual act in the verse. It is unnatural because the act is not originating out of passion. The next meaning

can be used to highlight the poetess herself, a person who is emotionally extreme. The third meaning connotes to the germination of the verse itself as a whole, a rapid fancy that leads to the outcome of the poem in the form of poetess' inspiration.

The man, we are getting acquainted with, is recounted in through his not so pleasant features: his sun-burnt cheek, his dark mouth, the uneven teeth that gleam (highlighting that the individual is not fair) etc. The poetess starts the verse with "He talks" as he is the ultimate administration as in "And God said ". The accomplishment of love, furthermore, has implications of the patriarchal influence. His mouth takes the shape of a dark cavern which is concealed with egoistic secrets. The cavern is furthermore, a route for the poetess to come to her love's heart. Yet, she falls short to achieve that feat of reaching her man's heart. The teeth suspending from the top covering of his mouth emerge as unsmooth as stalactites. The phrase "stalactites" implies the need of warmth.

As they endeavored and chased to achieve the aim of love, they undertake a journey over puddles of desire. It is to be remembered that this is not by misfortune, as Kamala Das uses the phrase "Idly". The poetess tries to repeat that if the individual actually desired to love her, he would have succeeded. That is, if he was not troubled by lethargy.

He feels her through his fingertips; he feels her outwardly without an iota of affection. It cannot be explained as anything more than corporal cravings. The poetess rhetorically puts across a query as to who might have assisted those lovers who walked in the route of love for long enough and yet could not manage to ignite love.

The heart is recounted as an "empty cistern". A cistern is intended for retaining some liquid. Here the cistern is empty and hence is incapable of retaining love. Moreover, as traditional belief says, to glimpse an empty cistern forecasts despairing change from joyfulness to sorrow.

The narrator realizes that the relationship can survive only if a sense of understanding is established between her and her husband. No persons existing outside this relationship can rescue her troubled life and the compassion between a husband and a wife is exclusively confined within their private life. Thus, she says:

"Who can  
 Help us who have lived so long  
 A have and have failed in love..."

The obvious answer to this rhetorical question is in negative. No person can save their failed marriage. The emotions of the woman held within her heart, suddenly becomes void and empty. Ironically, this movement of emptiness fills up her heart with "coiling sneak of silence..."

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A snake which coils in silence will harm at the earliest opportunity exists just like the poison of the snake, the way the venom of a loveless life soon enough destroys a marital relationship. The imagery of the snake used in this poem also refers to the archetypal representation of the serpent as a symbol of sex. Hence, the lovelessness of the relationship with excessive lust manifests itself in the form of the snake. The narrator's inability to access love in any form results in her following desperate words:

“I am a freak.

It's only

To save my face, I flaunt, at

Times, a grand, flamboyant lust.”

“*The Freaks*” is a poem where passion translates into lust. The female protagonist in the poem laments about the man with whom she shares an emotional and a physical relation. But unfortunately, this relationship is devoid of love and it hinges upon the moments of love that is shared. The tenderness of emotion and love beyond corporal pleasure that the woman is looking for is painfully absent in the relationship and the husband is indifferent/unaware of her longings.

### Check Your Progress

13. What do you understand by the word freak in the poem, *The Freaks*?
14. Who are freaks in Kamala Das' poem, *The Freaks*?

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## 9.13 ANSWERS TO ‘CHECK YOUR PROGRESS’ QUESTIONS

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1. Ezekiel is considered to be one of most well-known names among Indian poets writing in English. His Jewish Parsi background allowed him to emerge as a personality that could not be subjected to simple analysis. His poetry reflects a kind of deep rumination of predicaments that are central to an Indian sensibility.

Ezekiel can be compared to the likes of A.K. Ramanujan and R. Parthasarathy. On a professional level he served as a Professor of English in Bombay University and proved himself to be a man of great intellect. He was a philosopher as well as a poet. Given his Jewish-Parsi upbringing and cultural roots, his affinity for writing in English as an Indian, was truly remarkable.

2. Ezekiel's poetry compilation includes *Time to Change* (1952), *Sixty Poems* (1953), *The Discovery of India* (1956), *The Third* (1959), *The*



*Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965), *Snakeskin and Other Poems* (translations of the Marathi poet Indira Sant, 1974), *Hymns in Darkness* (1976), *Latter-Day Psalms* (1982) and *Collected Poems 1952-88* (1989). His plays are collected in the book *The Three Plays* (1969). Some of Ezekiel's popular poems include *Night of the Scorpion*, *Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher*, *The Railway Clerk*, *Latter-day Psalms*, *In the Theatre*, *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.*, and *The Professor*.

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3. Ezekiel's best known poem, *Night of the Scorpion*, deals with an accident where a scorpion has stung a woman and the public gathered takes remedial measures to save the victim. The narrator in this monologue is the son of the woman. The poem originates from the speaker's emotions, recollected at leisure in a tranquil state of mind. He recalls that unfortunate incident that took place one night. His mother was stung by a scorpion that had hidden beneath a sack of rice on a rainy night.
4. The poet does not find anything positive in any of the approaches as far as the problem of scorpion-sting is concerned. This may suggest that the poet rejects every alternative explored in the poem without giving his own preference.
5. *Snakes'* is a complex poem dedicated to exploring multiple dimensions of the form, structure and characteristics of a snake. This is not an objective description of the animal though. Through the beast, the poem explores the family as a psycho-social space and the fear of the animal as an index of a child's mental growth.
6. A close textual study of Ramanujan's poetry reveals a host of nostalgic memories of South Indian life. Poems like '*Snakes*' present pictures of the Indian life and culture. It throws light on one of the prevalent Hindu customs and rituals – that of offering milk to *nagas* even while it studies the way it affects the minds and memories of children in the family.
7. *A River* is considered as one of Ramanujan's supreme poems which forms a part of his collection *The Striders* and was published in 1966. The Vaigai river of Madurai has been depicted in the poem. The city of Madurai is considered as the hub of Tamil traditions and culture since ancient times. The river is the medium used in the poem. The poet considers the river to be useful but at the same time considers it to have immense scope of destruction.
8. The poet has described Madurai as a 'city of temples and poets', giving it an image of immense religious consequence and connected it with creativeness and splendour. The poet openly illustrates facet of Madurai that clashes with the basic, idealistic descriptions which have been mentioned in the beginning of the poem. The speaker of the poem

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is keen to highlight all details about Madurai, while few poets have aimed to mention only the attractive, numinous facet of the place.

9. Kamala Das's work celebrates the spirit of the Indian women of contemporary times and chronicles their agony of being bereft of love and longing for emotional fulfillment. The nature of her poetry is confessional. Her poems express her inner-most desires in their existing sentiments stripped of any superfluous veil of emotions. Her poetry reflects the desires of the physical body and a quest for the beautiful and the serene that is not within her reach. This Indian poetess was also fond of writing about memories of childhood, family relations, and the family's great house.
10. Das's autobiography *My Story* was published in 1976. She wrote two novels, *Manas* (1975) and *Alphabet of Lust* (1976). She was honored with Sahitya Akademi Award in 1985 for her literary contributions.
11. The narrator laments that the freshness which the change of seasons invoke is also missing from their lives because it is sheltered under 'artificial lights' and 'air conditioners'. Their life is a painful routine exercise which just goes on. Moreover, one cannot expect any change to take place because any scope of change is distance through the narrator's mental association with her 'old Playhouse with all lights put out'.
12. *The Old Playhouse* throws light on the plight of a woman and her doubly subjugated position in society. She does not only exist in a society where men are preferred in the hierarchical social domain but even in the confines of the private space, the role of a woman is relegated to satisfying her husband. The colonization which is so permeating is shocking. When the narrator says, 'You called me a wife', she is drawing the readers' attention to the unequal status that a man and woman share in a marital life.
13. The phrase 'freak' in the poem can be used to understand:
  - (i) A thing or incident that is markedly odd or irregular
  - (ii) An abnormally-formed organism, particularly an individual or animal considered as a curiousness or monstrosity.
  - (iii) A rapid capricious turn of mind; a whim.
14. In the poem, "*The Freaks*" written by Kamala Das, the freaks are lovers. They are portrayed as the narrator and her husband who are undergoing "emotional vacuity". The poet says that the lover is probably incapable of understanding anything beyond "skin's lazy hunger". A heart devoid of love, lust overtakes love. "*The Freaks*" underlines a woman's unwilling participation in a sexual act and the prominent gap between desire and fulfillment.

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## 9.14 SUMMARY

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- Indian Identity is another common and challenging theme seen in most of the poems written by Ezekiel. The content of his work has a very Indian touch. Poems like *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.* and *Night of The Scorpion* tackle issues like integral pre-eminence that is connected with usage of English in India and another very serious social issue of superstitious.
- A.K. Ramanujan is considered as one of the most important Indo-Anglican poets. Few critics have associated him to be as famous as Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das. His birth place was Mysore where he spent thirty years of his life. .
- Another important theme of the poet's work can be denoted as strong presence of 'Hindu heritage'. In *Conventions of Despair*, the poet has specifically mentioned that he is unable to ignore his religious beliefs.
- '*Snakes*' is a complex poem dedicated to exploring multiple dimensions of the form, structure and characteristics of a snake. This is not an objective description of the animal though.
- The snake in this poem is not only an animal but a metaphor for other potent issues and facts in the poet's life. In fact, it seems to become an empty signifier and triggers associations, memories and ideas just because they have a visual similarity to the snake.
- Through his poem, Ramanujan has evaluated and distinguished the approach of the old poets with the new poets in relation to individual anguish. He has concluded through his poem that most poets are not really concerned with individual sadness and their miseries. The poet has not only mentioned the beauty of the river Vaigai but also the harshness of the river and how it affects the people.
- *The Old Playhouse* throws light on the plight of a woman and her doubly subjugated position in society. She does not only exist in a society where men are preferred in the hierarchical social domain but even in the confines of the private space, the role of a woman is relegated to satisfying her husband.
- *The Freaks* is a poem where passion translates into lust. The female protagonist in the poem laments about the man with whom she shares an emotional and a physical relation. But unfortunately, this relationship is devoid of love and it hinges upon the moments of love that is shared. The tenderness of emotion and love beyond corporal pleasure that the woman is looking for is painfully absent in the relationship and the husband is indifferent/unaware of her longings.

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## 9.15 KEY WORDS

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- **Indo-Anglian poets:** Indo-Anglian is actually a term used by K.R.S.Iyengar. It is frequently referred to as Indo-Anglian literature. Indo-Anglian is a specific term in the sole context of writing that should not be confused with Anglo-Indian.
- **Iconoclast:** A person who attacks or criticizes cherished beliefs or institutions. Iconoclasm is the social belief in the importance of the destruction of icons and other images or monuments, most frequently for religious or political reasons.
- **Narcissism:** Simply speaking, this means an excessive interest in or admiration of oneself and one's physical appearance. From psychoanalytic point of view, it indicates self-centredness arising from failure to distinguish the self from external objects, either in very young babies or as a feature of mental disorder.

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## 9.16 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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### Short Answer Questions

1. Mention the life and works of Nissim Ezekiel.
2. What is the main purpose of the poem *The Company I Keep*?
3. State the issues raised by Ezekiel in *Night of the Scorpion*.
4. Write a brief note on the poet's advice to bird-watcher in his *Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher*.
5. What are the ideas put forward by A.K.Ramanujan in *Snakes*?
6. Mention the views of Kamala Das as expressed by her in the poem, *The Old Playhouse*.
7. Enumerate the poet's purpose in the poem *The Freaks*.

### Long Answer Questions

1. Discuss Nissim Ezekiel's contribution to Indian English poetry.
2. Critically analyze the purpose for writing the poem, *Night of the Scorpion*.
3. Write a comprehensive note on salient features of A.K.Ramanuja's works.
4. "Ramanujan's *Snakes* is a complex poem." Discuss this with relevant analysis.

5. Present a critical analysis of Ramanujan's *A River*:

*Ezekiel, Ramanujan and Das*

6. "The Old Playhouse throws light on the plight of a woman." Elucidate this statement.

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## 9.17 FURTHER READINGS

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Souza, Eunice De. 1997. *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Bhatnagar, Manmohan Krishna. 2002. *The Poetry of A.K. Ramanujan*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors Pvt Ltd.

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## UNIT 10 MAHAPATRA AND DARUWALLA

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### NOTES

#### Structure

- 10.0 Introduction
- 10.1 Objectives
- 10.2 Jayanta Mahapatra: An Introduction
  - 10.2.1 Qualities of Mahapatra's Poetry
  - 10.2.2 *The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of a Republic: 1975* Analysis
  - 10.2.3 *Waiting*: Analysis
- 10.3 Keki N. Daruwalla: An Introduction
  - 10.3.1 An Introduction to Daruwalla's Poetry
  - 10.3.2 *On the Contrariness of Dreams*: Analysis
- 10.4 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 10.5 Summary
- 10.6 Key Words
- 10.7 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 10.8 Further Readings

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### 10.0 INTRODUCTION

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This unit will discuss the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra and Keki N. Daruwalla. Mahapatra is an internationally renowned poet who writes in both English and Oriya. Some of his outstanding works include poetry volumes *Shadow Space*, *Bare Face* and *Random Descent*. Keki Nasserwanji Daruwalla is regarded as one of those writers of English poetry who have worked towards the growth and development of modern creative poetry. Keki Daruwalla is one among the Parsi quartet of Adil Jussawalla, K. D. Katrak and Gieve Patel. Daruwalla's poems leave an imprint of his own individuality and calibre. Daruwalla observes everything with his hawkish imagery and landscape of delving. Violence, pestilence, epidemic, drought, famine, bloodshed, riot, murder, suicide, enmity, vengeance, wrath, anger, animality and curfew are the specific words of the poet.

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### 10.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Evaluate the quality of Mahapatra's poetry
- Analyze the themes of Mahapatra's poems *The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Republic: 1975* and *Waiting*
- Describe the poetry style of Keki Daruwalla
- Examine Daruwalla's poem *On the Contrariness of Dreams*



## 10.2 JAYANTA MAHAPATRA: AN INTRODUCTION

Mahapatra writes in English and in Oriya. However, he is internationally recognized as a writer of English. Initially starting his literary career as a short story writer, he began writing poetry quite late. Well-anthologized and heavily published in distinguished periodicals both at home and abroad, he has to date published seven volumes of verse, which are as follows:

- *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* (Dialogue Publications, 1971)
- *Svayamvara and Other Poems* (Writers Workshop, 1971)
- *A Rain of Rites* (University of Georgia Press, 1976)
- *A Father's Hours* (United Writers, 1976)
- *Waiting* (Samkaleen Prakashan, 1979)
- *The False Start* (Clearing House, 1980)
- *Relationship* (Greenfield Review Press, 1980)

Both in quantity and quality, his poetry is amazingly impressive, almost startling.

Mahapatra's poetry is steeped in an authentic individuality of perception, expression and tone. His is a distinctively unsentimental voice, now conversational, now dramatic, now lyrical, now prosaic, now questioning, now searching, but always strikingly unpretentious and powerful. What makes that voice additionally original is its origin in a scientific imagination. Another element of Mahapatra's originality is the rigour and tenacity with which he is an Oriya poet inside out. By virtue of his birth and upbringing Mahapatra is firmly rooted in the landscape of his native land Orissa. The important places of his state, Cuttack, Puri, Bhubaneswar, Balasore, Konark, the Chilika Lake, its legends, history and myths, its tradition and culture, its past, present and future, have been integrated into his mental landscape from where he culls materials for his poems. These places in Orissa are not only politically or commercially important, but they are important also in terms of the rich heritage of the people. It is from this rich heritage of people, places and culture that have fostered him like mother figures that his poetry originates.

Yet, it is not simple—a love of the land that holds Mahapatra to Odisha and writing. A much deeper link between the poet and his journey towards self-discovery is hinted in excerpts like the one quoted below. And given the fact that this arduous journey of self-discovery had to be undertaken through poetry, what other theme than Oriya heritage, people and culture, something embedded in the genes of this poet, could be used. It is almost like saying that if Mahapatra was to write in the mode of self-exploration and discovery, Oriya was the only ethos he could write from.

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Although Mahapatra with more exposure to the West in his later years speaks increasingly of himself and his themes as Indian, his motivation to write is neither a part of a state or national politics. When asked why he started writing poetry, Mahapatra responded with a complex individual response so reminiscent from his poetry:

### 10.2.1 Qualities of Mahapatra's Poetry

Mahapatra's themes are varied, ranging from sex to nature, from the religious to the superstitious, from the metaphysical to the mythical, from the personal to the impersonal. But whatever his theme, there is a profound brooding, meditative quality in his poetry, that holds the reader hypnotized. Above all, his sensibility, absolutely uncontaminated, always remains authentically Indian, thanks to his umbilical cord always remaining unsevered from his motherland. Consequently, his poetry is rooted deeply in Indian socio-cultural heritage. In fact, he enjoys the distinction of being the only poet who proudly interprets the glorious past of India and sincerely voices our uniquely rich and complex cultural heritage in a uniquely individualistic way.

Mahapatra's poems reveal in action a dialogue and a process of self-discovery. He writes driven by a quest for his inner self, or for a definition of what his inner self is? The assumption that works behind his writings is that he is profoundly unsure about himself until interaction with an external entity elicits responses from him that help him surmise something about himself.

Perhaps, in Mahapatra we have a tragic self that discovers the world as a tragic space. And like all tragedians, what drives the self in its journey of self and external discovery is a profound humanism seeking a kind of life for man that can realize the humanistic ideals of fulfilment, harmony, wholeness and happiness in each human life. It is not only Mahapatra's writing but also his poetic vision is painful, sombre and tilts towards tragedy. K. Ayyappa Paniker, in his essay, 'Peacocks among Patriarchs,' observes:

'There is a remarkable poise about the way he organizes things: The dominant concern is the vision of grief, loss, dejection, rejection. The tragic consciousness does not seem to operate in the work of any other Indian poet in English as disturbingly as in that of Jayanta Mahapatra.'

This poem is a sombre piece that encapsulates the tragic vision of the poet. In it he, while questioning the meaning of history, sadly broods over the tragedy of 'the dying young'. The poem appears to be a continuous narration of the isolation, loneliness, solitude, alienation of the self from external realities in a world that appears to have no apparent or at best only a hostile purpose. This is the existential dilemma of most modern literature. While Mahapatra's world is filled with personal pain, remorse and desire what could actually lead to an alleviation of these conditions is not clear.

Perhaps, in Mahapatra we have a tragic self that discovers the world as a tragic space. And like all tragedians, what drives the self in its journey of

self and external discovery is a profound humanism seeking a kind of life for man that can realize the humanistic ideals of fulfilment, harmony, wholeness and happiness in each human life.

### 10.2.2 *The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of a Republic: 1975 Analysis*

The tone of melancholy features in many of Mahapatra's poems. Jayanta Mahapatra was troubled with modern day conditions of India. He used his poems to deal with the everyday issues faced by the common man. He had raised issues of contemporary India in his poem titled *The Lost Children of America*. In the long titled poem *The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of a Republic: 1975*, he has expressed his strong disappointment with the prevailing issues of present Indian society. The poem is an ironic illustration of the condition of women in the present day. The poet felt that the world was dominated by sex.

*"The prostitutes are younger this year... / And the older women careful enough / not to show their years"*.

The keen eyes of the poet are able to pierce the human nature and he offers the real picture of the craftiness and hypocrisy of the people. Mahapatra is a poet of the needy, the hungry and the oppressed. He feels sorry for them and guilty because he is not able to help them. The celebrations of twenty five year-old republic are meant to entertain everyone. The ceremonial parade takes place but the poet is only able to think about the needy and feel guilty about their state. The poem reflects the frustration of the poet and he has even asked the rhetorical question:

*What is wrong with my country? The jungles have become gentle, the woman restless. And history reposes between the college girl's breasts: The exploits of warrior-queens, the pride pieced together From a god's tainted armours... Mina, my pretty neighbour, flashes round and Round the gilded stage Hiding jungles in her purse, holding on to her divorce, And a lonely Ph.D.*

In the poem, the poet is very upset with the uncultured conduct and lack of morals among the women in India. He feels that Indians are very quick in adopting the negative aspects of western culture and ignore the positives present in their own culture. The female population of this country is very happy and proud to wear western outfits as they are able to attract male attention but feel disgrace and inferiority in wearing traditional Indian garments.

In the poem, he has compared dishonest politicians with whores. Mahapatra suggests in a very ironical manner about the way the government machinery and police administration functions. He feels that poverty is the basic reason for women to be pushed into the profession of prostitution and the only way from saving them from this profession is to end poverty, the government needs to implement programs so that the women can be

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rehabilitated. Government should provide free education and food to the children of women in this profession. They women should be given an opportunity to pursue decent jobs so that they can get away. The poet comments that the government on one hand is attempting to rehabilitate them, but at the same, it also issues license to women to promote this profession. To the poet this seems to increase their agony. The police take steps against all those prostitutes who do not possess the license. The ones who are caught make flimsy excuses that of a small boy trying to save himself from his parent's anger after misbehaving. Anyhow a prostitute's only means of earning a livelihood is by indulging in the flesh trade. The women in this profession are fully aware of their age being against their profession hence they constantly try to cosmetically enhance their looks and hide their age. The fear of losing customers is always bothering them.

*The prostitutes are younger this year: At the police station they're careless to give reasons/For being what they are/ And the older women careful enough not to show their years*

In the poem, the poet has depicted both the client and prostitutes in a professional and commercial manner. On one hand, the prostitute is in a big rush to attend to the customer, but at the same time, she is fed up of performing emotionless sex. She is in a hurry to attend more number of customers as this will fetch her more money, though a part of the earnings she will have to give to the touts. She is bored of her monotonous job and wants to get over with it quickly. On the other hand is the client who comes to the prostitute in order to get away from his work related stress and sometimes domestic stress; he is in no hurry for the act to get over.

### Analysis of the Poem

Indian culture and tradition have been relying on timeworn myths and fallacies. For centuries, women have been dominated by men. Men have outlined a set of dos and don'ts for the women-folk. They have made these rules in order to upkeep their comfort and lifestyle. While doing so they are not perturbed about exploiting or torturing the women. Through his poem the poet is trying to liberate the women of India from such rules and regulations.

Like most of his poems, *The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Republic: 1975* is also packed with numerous images of wives, much-loved, whores, seductresses, village women, city women and adolescent girls; each has deep and essential metaphoric aura and highlights his catastrophic image of life. He has demonstrated his essential poetic strategy and given dimension to his profound humanitarian outlook along with exhibiting his dominant thematic obsessions. Mahapatra has shown his extreme respect and adoration for women. Mahapatra is a sensible spectator of society's traditions, customs, and of shifting human behaviour in a disjointed world. In the poem, he has projected the impact of globalisation, consumerism, science

and philosophy on the values of Indian society. The poem carries a note of irony and melancholy. Mahapatra has portrayed the reality which prevails in his hometown as well as rest of the country. He has used various images and symbols for the purpose of expressing the intricacies of his emotions, personal feelings of lonesomeness, isolation, struggles, expectations and desires, remembrances and imaginations.

The poem provides the readers with Mahapatra's dark view about the way government machinery functions in his hometown. The poet incongruously asks whether the country which turned into a 'republic' twenty-five years ago is functioning properly. In the poem, he mocks the way the country's administration functions and whether it has been able to achieve any success at all. He states that the forests are no longer dangerous as the wild animals have been hunted down in an illegal manner. The female population refuses to be meek and humble any longer. In present time they are dreadfully arrogant and have a mind of their own. They have no hang-ups about using their feminine attributes. The stories about legendary and brave queens are no longer remembered. Through his poem Mahapatra wants to reform the society, he hopes that it can be reconstructed on the groundwork laid down by the ancestors who believed in socialism, universal brotherhood and had a committed attitude. But at the same time he also expresses his doubts about the chances of achieving such an ideal set up.

### 10.2.3 *Waiting*: Analysis

The poem *Waiting* by Jayanta Mahapatra is a matured and forward-looking creation; it is a brilliant illustration and exploration of the poet's personal as well as social and cultural surroundings. He had published the poem in 1979. It was part of a volume which consisted of forty-six poems. The culture and history of Orissa played a prominent role in shaping the poet's personality. The volume clearly reflects his deep concern for the people of Orissa. In his poem Mahapatra has expressed his amazement and worry regarding the shameful degradation and deterioration of values which were once a part of a civilised society. The poet strongly believed that the two pillars of any civilised society are art and religion and they reflect the cultural soundness of a society.

The glorious culture of India is secured in its temples, monuments and literature and rich heritage. The poem tries to encompass all aspects about the past of Orissa. Mahapatra strongly believed the past is fundamental in shaping the present. Sadly the present day man has not been able to secure the values and glories of the past.

### Summary of the Poem

In the poem *Waiting* Mahapatra stresses that history is a part of every individual's life and it is bound to have an impact on everyday life of the

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individuals. The poem is a part of the collection entitled *A Whiteness of Bones*. Along with *Waiting* the poet has included nine poems in this collection which are based on the theme of history. *Waiting* is regarded as one of the most beautiful poems of the collection. In the poem, the poet has spoken about two worlds; one is the world of children while the other is world of adults. The poet states that in the adult world everyone is hopelessly waiting for something since the beginning of mankind. On the other hand, in the world of children they forget the fair-tale and move on to the next thing. According to him the adults are obsessed about waiting; they wait for both good as well as bad things to happen. The poet is distressful about the constant waiting and asks whether this never-ending wait can change the sufferings and hurt of the past. He advises his readers that waiting to be free from past is a wasteful exercise as the past is a part of each individual and nobody can avoid without being a part of history as there is no escaping. An individual's life is a depository of the past and there is no way to get rid of it. He states with strong conviction:

*I can easily tell the sound  
Of someone being hit with an iron pipe,  
The sound of a body falling  
Or being burnt after doused in petrol,  
the sound of someone seducing my woman—  
these are like the sun and air  
on my face now.*

In these lines, the poet is agonizingly aware that competition has become fierce in the modern industrialised economy and each one is trying their best to survive. This scenario triggers sympathy in the heart of the poet for the sun and the earth as he feels that in this race they also need to secure their place. The poet feels that people lack courage and are not able to get away from the gloomy past. He very sadly states, *friends what is valuable today/ is the luxury of speaking in a whisper*. The poet uses the phrase, *speaking in a whisper* in order to highlight the prevailing selfishness and treachery in the modern times. In these lines the poet is figuratively trying to convey the futility of 'waiting' in today's time as it completely lacks enthusiasm and yearning. The present day man is so mechanical and dependent on means of communication that he has lost touch with his emotions. People are not open to newness in their routine and do not like unfamiliarity and precipitousness. The poet has attributed their attitude to crapulence of knowledge. He condemns their blindly following the race of progress. He has expressed his despair in following lines of the poem:

*Now, when I take your hand,  
I cannot move any closer.  
To wait for purpose is to be devoid of meaning.*



There are many critics who refer to Mahapatra's poetry as a backward journey as he feels that no matter how much progress is achieved in the present, one cannot let go of the past. For him, the past is an eye-opener for the future. It is an undeniable truth which should be a source of constant joy and it helps in shaping the future. In today's thankless cut-throat world, the past is like the consolation prize which provides endurance to bear the present and be prepared for the future.

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### Check Your Progress

1. List one aspect of originality seen in Mahapatra's poetry.
2. When was the poem *Waiting* published?

## 10.3 KEKI N. DARUWALLA: AN INTRODUCTION

Daruwala is a leading figure in Indian poetry in English today. Born in Lahore, his family moved over to the Indian side of undivided India after the partition. As a part of his cultural memory, he therefore carries images of an undivided India and what politics can do to human beings, civilizations and cultures. Most of his education was completed in India with Daruwalla holding a Masters degree from Punjab University, Chandigarh. He joined the Indian Police Service in 1958, and served the force continuously until his retirement even while continuing to write poetry. The recurrent theme of violence in his poetry has frequently, and somewhat reductively, been attributed to his choice of profession. He is retired and lives in Delhi.

With the publication of his very first book, *Under Orion* in 1970, Daruwalla established himself as a name to reckon with in Indian poetry. Senior Indian poet and critic Nissim Ezekiel applauded his work as 'impressive evidence not only of mature poetic talent but of literary stamina, intellectual strength and social awareness.'

Daruwala is the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award (1984) for his poetry collection *The Keeper of the Dead* and the Commonwealth Poetry Prize (1987) for Asia. Recently, he was awarded Padma Shri, the fourth highest civilian award in India, in 2014. He is the president of The Poetry Society of India, and is presently based in Delhi.

### 10.3.1 An Introduction to Daruwalla's Poetry

Daruwala has published over nine books in more than three decades and through this long period his poetry has journeyed a long way both formally and thematically. However, it retains certain strong distinguishing characteristics: an ironic stance, an evocation of the multi-layered contradictory realities of Indian life, a preoccupation with diverse cultural, historic and mythic

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landscapes, a terse, vigorous and tensile style, supple imagism, sustained narrative drive, an ability to segue between metrical patterns and free verse, and a capacity to combine an epic canvas with a miniaturist's eye for detail. Many of these features are evident in the two poems 'Wolf' and 'Hawk' that we will discuss.

Daruwala is known for his bitter, satiric tone and as one who writes from his experience of violence, (of the brutal nature of man encountered in the police department), he shows a preoccupation with some of the darker sides of existence particularly with death and destruction. He believes, like many other poets writing in recent years, that poetry should derive its inner strength from a social awareness and sense of commitment to human and humane values.

The Indianness of Daruwalla's poetry derives not so much from his portrayal of Indian life as he has seen and experienced as a police officer on duty, nor from a conscious effort to make his writing Indian but from the rural Indian landscape which has inspired it. According to the poet's own admission his poems are rooted in the rural landscape and his poetry is earthy which means that he has avoided that sophistication which 'while adding gloss, takes away from the power of verse.' Notice that the landscape in the two poems you will read are rural and urbanity enters only indirectly and through implications.

Also, the strength of his poetry derives equally from his use of symbols, images and metaphors as also from a craftsmanship which is said to be creative and flexible. The poems in *Under Orion* show, in the words of Nissim Ezekiel, 'a fine blend of freedom and discipline, metrical rhythms and the word order of prose, compact, harsh alliterative phrasing and relaxed movement.' This description is true of almost all his other poems.

While his early poems, especially those written from his experience as a police officer, show an acuteness of observation and sharpness of expression, the later poems show an intensification of social awareness, of a deep consciousness of the environment in which a poem is set. But the real significance and power of his poetry 'emerge from the interaction between his subjective responses and the larger context that includes both myth and actuality.' (Hari Mohan Prasad and N P Singh).

A remarkable feature of Daruwalla's poetry is its ability to vividly materialize its abstractions, to strike a creative tension between image and statement. His poetry has the narrative energy and sweep to paint, for instance, a vast portrait of post-Independence India as 'a landscape of meaninglessness'. But it can also offer a fine-tuned vision of the particular, evident in his evocation of the rumbling innards of a miserable multitude listening to the speech of a corpulent political leader.

### 10.3.2 *On the Contrariness of Dreams: Analysis*

Keki. N. Daruwalla is fairly efficacious in being able to capture the mood of Indian society after independence and definitely the postmodern period. He skilfully blended his profound knowledge and professional experiences with the scenery of modern society. He was able to incorporate the social as well as cultural aspects of society. There are times when his work reflects sardonicism, cynicism, death, poverty and deplors the condition of women in Indian society, but at the same time, he has written beautiful poems about nature, love, human compassion and poems with a vision of enhanced social order. If one was to see his work for its postmodern features, then it can be confidently stated that his work provided all the requisites of postmodernism. *On The Contrariness of Dreams* is one of the poems from the collection titled as *The Shadow of the Imambara*. This volume consists of poems which are based on themes of Muslim community and their life. The other poems in the volume are – *Matam, Sixth Moharram, Lucknow, Apothecary, and the Mazars of Amroha*.

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#### Summary of the Poem

Daruwalla has written several poems which display the Indian family and the condition of Indian women, modern socio-cultural conditions like violence and poverty. In such poems, he emerges as a poet of the state. Each aspect is shown with a touch of Indigenesness. In spite of features Indian-ness, such poems appeal universally. The global appeal with Indian-ness at the crux labels him as a postmodern poet.

Daruwalla is deeply concerned about the state of women in Indian households; he feels that women are ill-treated. Domestic violence is a feature of many Indian homes within and out of India. *On the Contrariness Dreams* is one such poem that is based on marital discord. In the poem, the poet illustrates the feelings of a girl and her parents. The girl is returning to her new home and is full of aspirations, while her parents are fearful of the dowry demands that is a feature of Indian society.

*Our daughter is returning to her in- laws now the way we return to our lord each day with our morning prayer accepting and accepted. They had squabbled over some small trinkets perhaps and it is over*

In these lines the poet describes the worrying parents and how their daughter could be ill-treated if the demand for the dowry is not fulfilled. The in-laws and the husband have been referred to as 'lords'. And the girl, their daughter, is completely at their mercy. The poem also reflects upon the treatment meted out to women folk in Muslim households. The poet has shown the extent of male domination in their society.

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The poet has presented the ideology of men. According to Daruwalla, the male population is full of chauvinist behaviour that thrive on their dominance over women. For men of such societies, women are made to be treated as objects of their amusement, domination, enjoyment. In addition, women are subjected to 'pardha', that is, they are forbidden to appear in front of strange men without covering their face and head. In their homes, they are also allotted separate quarters in the inner part of the house.

*Women must be confined to the zenana like quail in a wicker basket.*

Daruwalla wants the readers to be completely aware about the socio-cultural conditions prevailing in the society. Like most postmodern poets of his time, he wants to reflect through his poetry the social ills and spread awareness among the readers. The pro-feminist quality of the poet wants the system to get rid of the medieval mentality and wants to liberate women from such subjugation.

### Check Your Progress

3. When did Keki Daruwala receive the Sahitya Akademi Award?
4. What is the name of the poetry collection from which *On The Contrariness of Dreams* is taken?

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## 10.4 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

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1. Another element of Mahapatra's originality is the rigour and tenacity with which he is an Oriya poet inside out. By virtue of his birth and upbringing Mahapatra is firmly rooted in the landscape of his native land Orissa.
2. The poem *Waiting* by Jayanta Mahapatra was published in 1979.
3. Daruwalla is the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award (1984) for his poetry collection *The Keeper of the Dead*.
4. *On The Contrariness of Dreams* is one of the poems from the collection titled as *The Shadow of the Imambara*.

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## 10.5 SUMMARY

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- Mahapatra writes in English and in Oriya. However, he is internationally recognized as a writer of English.
- Mahapatra's poetry is steeped in an authentic individuality of perception, expression and tone. His is a distinctively unsentimental

voice, now conversational, now dramatic, now lyrical, now prosaic, now questioning, now searching, but always strikingly unpretentious and powerful.

- Mahapatra's themes are varied, ranging from sex to nature, from the religious to the superstitious, from the metaphysical to the mythical, from the personal to the impersonal.
- In the long titled poem *The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of a Republic: 1975*, he has expressed his strong disappointment with the prevailing issues of present Indian society.
- The poem *Waiting* by Jayanta Mahapatra is a matured and forward-looking creation; it is a brilliant illustration and exploration of the poet's personal as well as social and cultural surroundings.
- Keki Nasserwanji Daruwalla is regarded as one of those writers of English poetry who have worked towards the growth and development of modern creative poetry.
- A remarkable feature of Daruwalla's poetry is its ability to vividly materialize its abstractions, to strike a creative tension between image and statement. His poetry has the narrative energy and sweep to paint, for instance, a vast portrait of post-Independence India as 'a landscape of meaninglessness.'
- Keki. N. Daruwalla is fairly efficacious in being able to capture the mood of Indian society after independence and definitely the postmodern period.
- Daruwalla is deeply concerned about the state of women in Indian households; he feels that women are ill-treated. Domestic violence is a feature of many Indian homes within and out of India. *On the Contrariness Dreams* is one such poem that is based on marital discord.

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### 10.6 KEY WORDS

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- **Globalization:** It is a situation in which available goods and services, or social and cultural influences, gradually become similar in all parts of the world
- **Dowry:** It refers to the amount of property or money brought by a bride to her husband on their marriage.
- **Republic:** It is a state in which supreme power is held by the people and their elected representatives, and which has an elected or nominated president rather than a monarch.
- **Metaphysical:** It means something that transcends physical matter or the laws of nature.

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## 10.7 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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#### Short Answer Questions

1. Write a short-note on the life and works of Jayanta Mahapatra.
2. What is the significance of the past in Mahapatra's poem *Waiting?*
3. How is Daruwalla a post-modern poet?

#### Long Answer Questions

1. Examine the qualities seen in Mahapatra's poetry.
2. Discuss the themes in Mahapatra's poem *The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Republic: 1975*
3. Describe the themes seen in Keki Daruwalla's poetry.

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## 10.8 FURTHER READINGS

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# UNIT 11 SMITH, ONDAATJE AND HOPE

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### Structure

- 11.0 Introduction
- 11.1 Objectives
- 11.2 A.J.M. Smith: An Introduction
  - 11.2.1 *A Hyacinth for Edith*: Summary and Critical Appreciation
  - 11.2.2 *The Lonely Land*: Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 11.3 Michael Ondaatje: An Introduction
  - 11.3.1 *The Time around Scars*: Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 11.4 A.D. Hope: An Introduction
  - 11.4.1 *Australia (1939)*: Summary and Critical Appreciation
  - 11.4.2 *Moschus Moschiferus (A Song for St. Cecilia's Day)*: Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 11.5 Answers to 'Check Your Progress' Questions
- 11.6 Summary
- 11.7 Key Words
- 11.8 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 11.9 Further Readings

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## 11.0 INTRODUCTION

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In this unit, you will be introduced to the selected poems of Arthur James Marshall Smith, Michael Ondaatje and Alec Derwent Hope.

Arthur James Marshall Smith is a famous poet, critic, and anthologist. He played an indispensable role in what became known as the 'Montreal Group'. It is the most noteworthy avant-garde Canadian literary movement of its day. His anthologies include *The Book of Canadian Poetry: A Critical and Historical Anthology* (1943), *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English and French* (1960), *Modern Canadian Verse* (1967), and two collections of criticism, *Masks of Fiction* (1961) and *Masks of Poetry* (1962).

Michael Ondaatje is a famous Sri Lankan writer. He began to write poetry, making his debut with *The Dainty Monsters* and *The Man With Seven Toes*, and then found "this curious desire to write prose". Ondaatje's poetry became an important part of his writing style, allowing him to experiment with fragmented consciousness, juxtaposition of unlike images, and experimental rhythm.

Alec Derwent Hope was born in the snowy mountains area of southern New South Wales, on 21 July 1907 at Cooma, where his father was a Presbyterian minister. He was educated at home and at schools in Tasmania and New South Wales as the family moved around to different parishes. From

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Sydney University, he graduated Bachelor of Arts with majors in English and Philosophy in 1928 and won a scholarship to University College, Oxford. His Oxford career, however, was not a distinguished one; disappointed with his third-class degree, he returned to Sydney in 1932 where he began his training as a teacher. Hope married Penelope Robinson in 1937, with whom he had three children. He was appointed as a lecturer in education at the Sydney Teachers' College in 1937, later from 1938-44 he continued to be a lecturer in English there. Hope took part in the Australian Broadcasting Commission's Children's Session during the 1940s as 'Anthony Inkwell' conducting the literary section of the Argonaut's Club. He moved to the University of Melbourne in 1945 and in 1951 was appointed Professor of English at Canberra University College (later the Australian National University) where he taught until his retirement in 1968.

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### 11.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Prepare a brief biographical sketch of Arthur James Marshall Smith
- Examine the use of symbols in *A Hyacinth for Edith*
- Critically analyse *The Lonely Land*
- List the major works of Michael Ondaatje
- Evaluate the poem *The Time around Scars*
- Discuss the life and works of Alec Derwent Hope
- Critical analysis of the poem *Australia*
- State the significance of the subtitle of Moschus Moschiferus

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### 11.2 A.J.M. SMITH: AN INTRODUCTION

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The prominent Canadian poet and anthologist Arthur James Marshall Smith was born in Montreal on 8 November 1902, he belonged to a middle class family. He spent his early childhood in Montreal and in 1918 he shifted to England in order to appear for the Cambridge Local Examinations. He could clear his exams only in English and History. While he was in England he became conscious of modern poetry due to his frequent visits to Harold Monroe's bookshop which was considered sanctuary of Georgian poetry. He was very impressed with the Imagists poems which he came across at the bookshop. He began to read the work of numerous war poets. In 1921 he returned back to Montreal and joined the McGill University. Even as a student at the University in 1924 he began to contribute his work to McGill Daily Literary Supplement and began to co-edit the written material; he graduated in 1925 and he founded the McGill Fortnightly Review with his friend F. R.

Scott which considered itself as a self-sufficient academic journal of arts and literature. The journal also managed to edit and publish the work of many undergraduate students at the university. The Review was Canada's pioneer academic journal which published modernist poetry and critically analysed it as well. Due to its work the journal was able to attract many budding writers like A. M. Klein, Leo Kennedy, and Leon Edel. All of them including Scott were very inspired by Smith and learnt a lot from his style. All of them together with Smith soon formed a group of poets called the Montreal Group; the members of the group began to be recognized because they tried to initiate their style of modernism in a poetry culture whose foundation was rooted in the strong Victorian style of poetry.

The group gained popularity and honour when Smith's poetry was selected by the Dail who was famous for printing important and great works like the Waste Land by T.S Eliot. In 1931 Smith obtained his doctorate from the University of Edinburgh. While performing his varied editorial responsibilities, Smith extensively added value by helping other poets work and encouraging them to adapt newer styles. With other members of his group he was able to modernist poems published by under the title "New Provinces in 1936. Smith had strongly criticised the conventional Canadian poetry in his prologue of the book, this was not liked by the publisher and rejected. The rejected prologue was revived in 1964, and was highlighted as a significant element in the next edition of New Provinces when it was published again in 1976. In 1936 Smith was appointed as a lecturer at Michigan State College, he continued to teach there till 1972 and after that he retired. During his years as a professor he continued to write poetry, he was popular as a poet as well as an intellectual of poem who taught and improved work of many poets. Smith is the only writer who has been known to revise his published work. He has improved and republished many of his poem collections. In 1939, Smith submitted an application for a Guggenheim Fellowship in order to conduct a study on compilation of Canadian poetry. In 1943 his first compilation was made public and was titled as *The Book of Canadian Poetry*, in which he claimed that there was a strong Canadian characteristic. The book was appreciated immensely and was claimed as a milestone in Canadian Literature by critic Northrop Frye. According The Encyclopaedia of Britannica the book helped in elating the standards of Canadian Literature.

The poet received recognition for his work in form of many awards. Smith won the 1943 Governor General's Award for English-language poetry and drama for 'News of the Phoenix' and Other Poems. In 1966 he was awarded the Lorne Pierce Medal by the Royal Society of Canada for his contribution to poetry. As a result of his contribution during his tenure as a lecture in Michigan State University, the A.J.M. Smith Award was announced by the authorities and was to be awarded annually to a Canadian poet for his remarkable poetry.

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## Features of A.J.M Smith's Work

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Smith was dedicated towards improving and enhancing the existing literary standards in poetry as well as criticism. Through his work he has been able to contribute immensely towards creating a unique culture in Canadian Literature. The contributions have made his work to receive very little critic attention and not much of serious analysis has been done about his poems or prose. He has been often described as a craftsman who is a specialist in whatever he creates. Smith had always encouraged developing work which could be termed as perfect, in fact this could be one reason that he never got tired of revising his own work so that he could develop it to artistic perfection. The analysis of his work reveals the fact that he was most concerned about technical correctness of all the work which came to his notice.

His poetry is considered to be rational and sophisticated; the topics deal with general nature rather than a provincial theme. The poetry is not very objective or personal hence reveals very little about the personality or mental of the poet. Though if one was to make a general analysis of Smith's work it would be realised that the poet has a very keen and concerned sensibility of what is happening around him and thus influences the nature of his poems. The themes of his poem are varied and probably that is the reason that he has greatly contributed to the literary culture of Canada.

The poetry by Smith is cultured and intellectual but because Smith has not compiled it in any specific order it is difficult to trace its evolution. Most of his work till very recently was not available for any serious examination as it has been scattered in various journals and magazines.

The true nature of Smith's poetry is mainly hidden in the stanzas of his poems. Smith was known to be a very private person and there is not much information available about his background. He is known because of his work as a bizarre versifier, the craftsman and the epigrammatic. Smith's usual refutation of the self gave the sensitivity to his work and was the cause of lack of it as well. He has explained the theme and features of his poems very aptly in "A Self-Review" which was written by him in 1963. According to this review he has claimed that his work is not based on autobiographies and it is neither prejudiced, or too personal or artificial. Not any of his poems is trance, declaration of guilt or straight idiom. The poems are purely based on fiction, dramatics and are occasionally spoofs or parody, and sometimes polite travesty. The poems sometimes explore the attitudes of individuals, on few occasions the topics are based on nature and its elements. The poems have an element of sadness, death that project tragedy and sometimes they have comical protagonist based on the pantomime.

A.J.M. Smith was self-effacing, modest and little impatient on few occasions but mostly he was happy to take life as it came. The poet was not very ambitious by the time he was twenty five years old he had written most of

his best poems and latter instead of working on new creations he worked in revising and improving the already written poems. He wrote his first book in 1943 which was titled as *News of the Phoenix*. His work was greatly influenced by his exposure to British poetry. The poet inspired by the work of T.S Eliot, Conrad Aiken, Sitwell and Wallance Stevens. Smith has been called as the architect of the contemporary poetry by Germaine Warkentin and has been referred as poet of the century by English poet Roy Fuller. In between all the praise he has been criticised for his work by Lionel Kearns, he felt that Smith's work is overly academic and according to him (as commented by Kearns):the poetry written by Smith, " seems to typify what can happen to an art form when it is dominated by an historically oriented academic discipline".

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### 11.2.1 *A Hyacinth for Edith: Summary and Critical Appreciation*

Let us discuss the summary and critical appreciation of the poem.

#### Summary of the Poem

The initial version of this poem featured in McGill Fortnightly Review in 1927. Again the poem was republished in 1930 and was included in 'News of Phoenix'. The latter version had clear influence of renowned modern poets like Edith Sitwell and T.S Eliot. In the poem, the poet has described the revival of nature's facets in spite of the harsh sunlight during the spring time. The poem presents a sequence of contrary images and the inability of the protagonist to be able to differentiate between events which are recuperative from those which are likely to cause only destruction.

The poem begins with the mention of regular images which occur during the month of April "*Now that the ashen rain of gummy April / Clacks like a weedy and stain'd mill*". The poet has constructed the poem around the myth of hyacinth which he has borrowed from *The Waste Land*. Simultaneously, he has contemplated about a wooden hyacinth - the artefact of the mind – that helps in restoring the futile land of the trifling present:

*And in its creaking naked glaze,  
And in the varnish of its blaze,  
The bird of ecstasy shall sing again,  
The bearded sun shall spring again-*

The pointless, modern world, simply a "*tinsel paradise / Of trams and cinemas and manufactured ice,*" is left to move forward so that it can be replaced by the image of innocents day of childhood:

*Till I am grown again my own lost ghost  
Of joy, long lost, long given up for lost,  
And walk again the wild and sweet wildwood  
Of our lost innocence, our ghostly childhood.*

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However, even with the nostalgic vowels, it will not be right to match the poem with the persona of Edith Sitwell. The mention of a “tinsel paradise” leads to a logical understanding that it is all fake and just an outcome of the poet’s imagination, thus, is an infiltration of Smith’s poetic imagination. This is a recurring theme and is visible throughout his work during the thirties and forties and it is also incorporated within the superior poems about death during the 1950s. In another poem, *Ode: The Eumenides* written in 1942, the poet has mentioned a similar yearning about returning to the innocent world of childhood. This thought has arisen in his mind after witnessing the suffering and misery of people during the Second World War. The poet wants to get away and become a child again.

### Critical Analysis of the Poem

The poet had penned down the poem as a tribute to Edith Sitwell whose work was a source of inspiration for Smith. The poem carries a theme which may be described as ‘Eliotic’— T.S Eliot being another major source of influence for Smith. It will not be wrong to say that the poem is an amalgamation of both the influences. Smith has used Eliot’s theme embedded with imaginative verbal agilities which feature in the work of Sitwell. The featuring of pronoun ‘I’, in the poem makes the readers realize that *A Hyacinth for Edith* is about poetry and Smith’s hunt for satiating the expression. The expression in the poem, “A candy sleek wooden hyacinth” resembles more to a description of a lollipop rather than an illustration about a strong scented flower during the spring.

Therefore, this makes the poet’s search of such a flower very ironical. The break occurs in the poem with the following lines,

*The bird of ecstasy shall sing again,  
The bearded sun shall spring again,  
—A new ripe fruit upon the sky’s high tree,  
A flowery island in the sky’s wide sea—*

The poet returns his thoughts back to the real world and recognizes the emotionless, hurting realities about the glittery paradise and cinemas and manufactured ice. These are meant to imply the modern life which tempts the poet to return to his childhood. The irony in the lines of the poem tries to hide a strong personal desire of the poet to be an innocent child again and let his imagination to run freely.

### 11.2.2 *The Lonely Land*: Summary and Critical Appreciation

An inspection of Smith’s collection of “imagistic” poems is bound to unfold intricacy of his ingenious reaction to imagist notions and the significance of such a poem as *The Lonely Land*, which gives an enlightening illustration of the version of an important poetic significance of the Canadian countryside.



While researching the work of Canadian poets for his book *Ten Canadian Poets*, Desmond Pacey's the pioneer Canadian literary critic had assembled all the versions of *The Lonely Land*. A qualified inspection of all the versions of the poem, the 1926 McGill *Fornightly Review* where it was published for the first time, the *Canadian Forum* in 1927 and in 1929 it appeared in the *Dial* divulges that *The Lonely Land* progressively adapted a dual structure which is stressed in *Collected Poems*, *Poems, New and Collected*, and *The Classic Shade*. Smith has demarked the layout of the poem by the placing of the first, extra candid segment on the left-hand page and the next, more imaginary segment on the right. The poem is demarked in such a creative manner that there is a clear specification linking presentation and observations that it highlights all the contradictions which exist in the heart of all literary works such as body and soul, classical and romantic, mirror and lamp. The poet had the dual duty of establishing reality which exists in Canada and what role is played by the individual in this reality. There is evidence that the poet has altered the 1926-27 version of the poem to suit the current situation. The poet has redone the first segment of the poem; the final version has phrases such as "smooth, flat stones" in place of "Hark and "monstrous Plaint". The poet substituted the theoretical with the real matter, for instance the "accusing barbs" were replaced with "sharp barbs" in the last version, and emancipating his verses from conservative style and demarcation to enact the contours of its subject-matter. As a result of this revision, Smith had been able to satisfy writers such as W.W.E. Ross and George Woodcock as he had provided an appropriate partnership between theme and style.

The lines of the first two stanzas of Smith's poem according to Sandra Djwa are inspired from H.D's poem *Oread as they are similar to "pointed pines" and "rocks"*. *There is a strong possibility of imitation and this is used to stress the fact that contrasting to the American poem in which speaker is mentioning the mountain sprite but at the same time the speaker of the Canadian poem is not keen to be inspired by the destruction of the countryside which causes fear for the people living in the area. The Lonely Land on one side highlights those features of the landscape that are hostile and harsh as they can harm the life of the people and contrasting to these features are the inclusion of lively features like the Cedar, fir and pine trees or the mention of the wild duck with her mate, the poet possibly desires to believe in an milieu that encourages an overwhelming sagacity of unknown. Though Smith soon adds the f course, the call of the duck, skilfully presented by Smith as a series of dying falls, prepares the way for the humanistic affirmation that comprises the poem's second section. The reference to "Oread" in the first segment of The Lonely Land indicates that the nature of Smith's poem is cataloguist as compared to H.D.'s short lyric, which itemises important aspects in a collective way which is visible in his other work as well. The poem gives an apt description of the vast and extending landscapes of Canadian country-*

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side. The description is in keeping with poem's purpose to ascertain human character in the North, the poem includes ocular illustrations which help the reader to recollect the paintings of Tom Thomson of the pine trees and at the same time make the realization of the presence of charming resemblance to the in the scenic surroundings. The initial segment of the poem *The Lonely Land* is mostly constant with description of the striking scenery and the different textures and scenes of background. Edel has described *The Lonely Land* and other poems of Smith which he has written on Canada in the following manner: "the poet takes . . . symbols of Canadian nature, but gives . . . a feeling that behind his framed picture he is looking, as in a montage, at a much tamer landscape . . . the senses of the poet turn nature's rudeness into a beautiful composition. . . [that is] perhaps classical-modern, say Constable with a touch of the early Cezanne...." Many poets agree with Edel's description of Smith's work for the way he has described the landscape. The description takes into account the picturesque and theatrical reunion which illustrate the positive and the negative aspects in an orderly manner.

Smith modified the initial stanzas of *The Lonely Land* to communicate nous of liveliness of the Northern wasteland he also extended and detailed the second segment of the poem in order to maintain balance in the presentation of the poem. The final version of the poem is free from detailed nationalistic feeling and confidently asserts the artistic aspects and incorporates divine feelings into the poem.

*This is a beauty of dissonance,  
this resonance  
of stony strand  
this smoky cry  
curled over a black pine  
like a broken  
and wind-battered branch  
when the wind  
bends the tops of the pines  
and curdles the sky  
from the north.  
This is the beauty  
of strength  
broken by strength  
and still strong.*

The purpose of the "*This ... still strong*" which is used by the poet freely in the second segment is fundamental and multifarious as it validates and holds the liveliness which was established in the first section of the poem. The

rationale of the second segment of *The Lonely Land* is therefore to enlighten the reader about the true features and the strength of the Canadian countryside. *The Lonely Land* should not only be categorized as a contemporary poem but at the same time been understood because of its effort to explain the European rituals and the Canadian connection.

Though many writers felt that since Smith had never even visited some of the sites like the Lake Superior then, how can he be inspired by such natural elements of the landscapes? People like F.R Scott did not agree with these writers and stresses on the fact that the poem is able to successfully create a very lively and artistic understanding of the North and is inspired by many factors such as imagist poems, Group of Seven paintings, and metaphysical poetry. The poet has been able to create something very unique with all these inspirations.

*Open your narrow throat convolvulus, and cry  
Let your paeon of being ring like a great shout  
distinguished in the diapason of the yellow sun  
and a million green shoots  
—in the communion of summer  
and the morning's glory.*

Through the symbolic and spiritual features of this stanza the poet has tried to convey that the flower of convolvulus because of its shape resembles a church bell and is making a pleasant trumpet sound. The reader is feeling happy as the poet is conveying the well-being and magnificence of all elements of nature and he has used the name of the flower morning glory which also belongs to the family of convolvulus flower.

### **Tone and Theme of the Poem**

*The Lonely Land* was stimulated by Imagist poetry and the Canadian landscape painters known as the Group of Seven. The poem is as respected and recognized as Jack Pine painting has in the art world. In 1978 the poem was turned into a musical by Violet Archer.

The poet started the poem on a very grim note. There is a very different portrayal landscape projected by the poet as it does not resemble the Romantic and Victorian style of that time. The poem is not presented in the conventional form rather works in open rhyme. The poet has not tried to make the landscape appear beautiful or idealistic, the way it is done in most poetry. In the grim setting also the poet has managed to establish the natural glory of Canadian countryside. Smith has tried to replicate the landscape as projected in the painting.

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### 11.3 MICHAEL ONDAATJE: AN INTRODUCTION

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Michael Ondaatje is often regarded as one of the most original and liberated writers of his time. He is a world renowned writer who has travelled extensively. He was born in 1943 and his birth place is Ceylon in Sri Lanka and he spent his years of education in England, and now he is settled in Canada. He has a very distinctive style of writing and believes in writing about a variety of subjects. In keeping with his style, he once remarked that '*every book has to find a new form*', and he refuses to bow down to the traditional ways of writing. As a result, he has created a rich variety of work which includes not only poetry but also wide range of prose and drama. His work is available in more than 40 languages. He won the Booker Prize for his novels *The English Patient* and *The Cat's Table*.

His poems are based on reality. The fundamental and essential nature of his poems is to examine and describe the experiences of life in a poetic manner. The complete thrust of his poetic vision is focused on getting the reader to perceive reality; he wants them to be able to accept a scarce outlook through which reality seems to be dreamlike, incongruous, lively and, most essentially indefinite. His world of poetry is full of wrathful or hopeless herons, one-eyed allegorical dogs, tormented individuals, hoodlums, dragon like creatures and crashing stars. Inclusion of such astonishing images helps in providing the metaphorical help which in turn gets the readers to be confused and explore the limits of their imagination. On few occasions his poems create chaos in the minds of the readers as they are not able to perceive the varied alternatives used for projecting reality. The readers are not used to be presented with reality in such a magnitude-full manner. They expect reality to be presented in a precise and meaningful manner. Wallace Stevens has aptly described Ondaatje, "connoisseur of chaos".

Nonetheless some of his most important poems not just redefine the reader's understanding of reality but also help in creating extreme levels of consciousness that the readers are able to decipher distorted description of reality as well. Ondaatje while writing poems realizes that there is tension between mind and chaos but with his imagery and deliberate diction he tries to overcome this tension. In his foremost collection, *The Dainty Monsters*, most of the poems basically echo the supposition that a lyric can reconstruct any feature of reality or rebuild any experience as chosen by the poet. It is in the poems such as *Four Eyes*, *The Martinique*, and *Eventually the Poem for Keewaydin* the questions about the validity of such a claim have been asked. Assuming that it is correct to assume then what are the issues which come up while transforming life into poems. There are several poems which describe life in a dual manner— one involving dialectic of surreal world and the other emphasizing on the daylight one. In his poem, *The Republic*

he has shown surreal world coexisting with the daylight one, in *Gorillas* he has shown the surreal world as being somewhat threatened by the daylight one. And in *Dragon* he has shown that the former is being squashed by the latter. In most of his works, Ondaatje is mainly focusing on the relationship between types of reality or types of being.

On the whole, his work may be described as an effort to make the readers aware about different aspects of reality which he has categorized as - surreal, oneiric, dynamic, and chaotic, these aspects are generally not seen by the readers or they do not make enough effort to see it. Sheila Watson has stated that Ondaatje “is as intelligent as Auden but less afraid of what living means.” In order to be fearless in life one has to have the readiness to challenge and, if one is a true artist, he/she should be able to describe reality in all its complexity. It can be easily said that Ondaatje is a true artist as he has been able to impress his readers by confronting the complexities of life as well as art through his poems.

### 11.3.1 *The Time around Scars: Summary and Critical Appreciation*

In the poem, *The Time around Scars* by Michael Ondaatje the poet is suggesting that scars always do not imply pain and suggest occurrence of a mishap. In the poem, the speaker or the poet explains that the scars on the wrist of the girl do not mean anything to both of them but the scars which are visible on his wife’s hands and other parts of the body mean something to both of them. By his wife’s scars he is implying the experiences of life which they have shared as husband and wife. The scar on the girl’s wrist does not have the same implications for the poet though at the same time he is concerned as a friend about her well-being. The poet tries to establish that all scars should not be viewed as a negative feature and one should not try to interpret the story behind them.

#### Summary of the Poem

*The Time around Scars* reflects upon on memory and associations which reinforce the poet’s commitment towards aesthetics of effectiveness of highest level that has been witnessed in his entire collection of poems in *The Dainty Monsters*. The poem is touching and full of positivity. The poet feels that every scar need not carry a sad story behind it.

The narrator is remembering how he had accidentally cut a girl’s wrist several years ago with a pen knife. He is wondering about the scar which was not deep and as long as a leech. The scar had occurred by accident as the girl had turned suddenly and as the narrator was standing just behind her hand had got cut because of the pen knife in the hands of the narrator.

In the second stanza, the narrator talks about the scars on his wife’s hands and knees. He says that her scars mean something to him as they remind him of the past experiences they both have shared together. He does

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not feel that having scars makes his wife less attractive to him; in fact, he has compared her beauty with that of a nymph who lives in a bottle.

In the third stanza, the narrator feels that people sometimes attach too much value to meaningless scars. He feels that scars do not always remind him of a sad memory. People sometimes relate scars to negative feels and lose friends in the process. He remembers the look on the face of the girl whose wrist he had cut accidentally when she had turned as she was taken by surprise when he had shouted her name.

In the fourth stanza, he tries to recollect whether the scar has stayed on the wrist of the girl or not. Does she hide the scar under an expensive watch and has she told her husband or boyfriend as to how she got the scar in the first place. The narrator tells the readers that even though he is thinking about the girl and her scar there are no emotional feelings in his thoughts.

In the last stanza, the narrator wishes to meet the girl again and feels that it would be nice if the scar would affect him emotionally as the scars on his wife's hand do. He feels emotional about his wife's scars because of the love he shares with her. In the concluding lines, he wishes to meet the girl and hopes that the scar he had given to her would evoke the feelings of love which were not there when he had caused the scar.

### Critical Analysis of the Poem

The poem has been written in first person as the narrator is the poet himself. And through the poem the poet wants the readers to stop attaching meaningless stories to scars. Like all this poems, *The Time around Scars* also tries to deal with realities about scars and how they are often misinterpreted.

The poet has used several literary devices in the poem to effectively convey his thoughts.

- a. The poet has used the literary device of flashback in the introductory lines of the poem. In the first stanza, the narrator talks about the girl whom had scared accidentally.
- b.. The poet uses 'Leech' as a symbol to specify the length and the width of the scar. The nymph has been used as a symbol of beauty with reference to the narrator's wife. The parentheses signify the frame of the picture.
- c. The use of simile is seen in the lines "My wife has scars like spread raindrops". The poet is explaining the trickling down of blood with raindrops falling on the window pane and then following down the glass.
- d. In the fourth stanza when the poet says "conceal or flaunt it", an oxymoron has been used as the poet is not sure whether the girl is going to hide her scar or exhibit it to her husband.



- e. The scar has been compared to “a medallion of no emotion”. The poet is referring to his emotions for the girl’s scar metaphorically as a medal inside a box with no value.

Smith, Ondaatje and Hope

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## 11.4 A.D. HOPE: AN INTRODUCTION

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Although he had been writing for many years, Hope did not publish any of his poems until the 1930s. *The Wandering Islands*, his first collection, did not appear until 1955, by which time he had built a reputation as a poet because of publications in various periodicals. He was praised for his skillful use of traditional verse forms and critique of contemporary values and he also received the Grace Leven Poetry Prize for it. His second collection, *Poems* (1960), was published in London, Hope was the best-known Australian poet internationally for many years, appearing in many anthologies and receiving many awards like, in 1965 the Arts Council of Great Britain Poetry Award, in 1968 the Levinson Prize for Poetry (Chicago) and in 1969 the Ingram Merrill Award for Literature (New York).

A small volume of selected poems, *A. D. Hope (1963) in Angus and Robertson’s Australian Poets series*, was soon followed by *Collected Poems 1930-1965 (1966)*. Then his collections of new poems appeared at regular intervals, interspersed by new editions of *Selected Poems in 1972, 1986 and 1992*, for the latter edition sharing the *Australian Capital Territory Book of the Year Award for 1993*. For *A Late Picking: Poems 1965-1974 (1975)* he received *The Age Book of the Year Award*, also, *Imaginative Writing Prize for 1976*. The note of satire being so strong in much of Hope’s earlier work, and as especially seen in his mock-heroic *Dunciad Minor (1970)*, a contemporary version of Alexander Pope’s *The Dunciad (English eighteenth-century poet)*, is less evident in his late poems. In the title of his final collection *Orpheus (1991)*, his interest in mythology can be noticed.

Hope was a widely published critic, reviewer and editor, in addition to his many volumes of poetry. *The Cave and the Spring: Essays on Poetry (1965)* won both the *1965 Britannica-Australia Literary Award* and the *Volkswagon Award for 1966*. Hope died on 13 July 2000 after some years in a Canberra nursing home. In 1981, he had been made a *Companion of the Order of Australia* for his services to literature.

### 11.4.1 *Australia (1939): Summary and Critical Appreciation*

The renowned Australian poet, satirist and essayist, Alec Derwent Hope’s poem, *Australia (1939)* was first published in *Collected Poems, 1930-1965 (1966)*. It is a mild satire with keen critical observation of Hope about his motherland, Australia. The imagery is sombre and is deeply painted with erudite phraseology. The poem is divided into seven stanzas each of which looks penetratingly into the topography, history, spiritualism and society of

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Australia. He feels the country has lost her goodness, charm and culture. It is a modern pondering of contrasting images and ruminations of a scholarly mind like Hope who was an educator, critic and academician. This land of once natural beauty is full of warfare activities and deployment of armies. The country had a high historical repute. The onslaught of colonialism left her brimming over with population from foreign lands bleeding at her past treasure. The native tribes were subjected to slavery thus. They have, in that sense, survived with endurance the difficult years of service to other nations. Being crushed by rulers from abroad either fled the native aborigines from their motherland or let them sustain in a very poor state of existence somewhere dwarfed as a page. At the end, Hope adopts a positive note to express that there might be a miraculous shift in the destiny of the aborigines which might restore them to their right to equality and freedom one day.

Australia, as Hope sees, is a nation with her own recognition in the chronicle of the world. But somehow, the way she is steered, plundered and ravaged by colonisers and foreign culture, which affected and stunted native growth, the poet is unhappy, harshly critical and thoughtful about it. To begin with, he says that in history, Australia was a nation known for her natural beauty. The metaphor 'trees' may mean naturalness, sweet gaiety and simplicity of Nature. Or, it might have the opposite meaning that this land has only mass of natural growth which is nothing but mere existence. As Hope's *Australia* is somewhat similar to

*'Unreal City*

*Under the brown fog of a winter noon...'*

*(III. The Fire Sermon, The Waste Land)*

In 'A Nation' capital 'N' suggests prominence in existence; and 'trees' probably, a country that contained verdure, pasture, health, survival, innocence, simplicity, closeness to nature, oxygen, life-giving energy, shelter, life, etc. Nature covered a large area of Australia's land. In short, *Australia* which has become 'drab green' and 'desolate grey' because she has been a war-torn land full of soldiers, military camps, arms, ammunition, was famous for its historical monuments once upon a time. A reader is reminded of Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach* (1867) and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) while he muses at the images Hope has used into *Australia*. Like Hope, Eliot spoke of England 'Trams and dusty trees'. The land which was full of hills and trees is subject to artillery and warfare. Her hills are covered with darkness: dark because the poet does not assign to her any healthy prospect and future looking at the current situation. The cultural symbols like 'outstretched paws of Sphinx' and 'stone lion' are 'worn away.' Some other culture has made its mark on her soil by instilling its behavioural 'uniform' as its current cloth, and that is a soldier's dress. The peace, fame, history, health and prosperity of a fertile land are lost into oblivion. What the present reaps and reeks is a desolate and bleak atmosphere that can grow

only heinous bloodshed and wars. Australian topography contains desert and long stretch of uncultivated land also. The poet, as has been judged about his negative esteem for Australia, is not someone who is mocking at his own motherland, and her dispirited present, but someone who wants to draw attention to what needs amendment and correction. The true end of satire is amendment, hence Hope does not scrape off prosperity to a dull mutability. Rather, he criticises to bring attention to reform. He banks on what Eliot said ‘the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career.’ A conscious observer would see the bright side of adopted culture that Australia gained during the British reign; similarly, Hope brings his countrymen’s attention to the facts that they have no knowledge because they take it to be a newly emerged, immature nation.

Hope, in the second stanza, asserts on this view that his nation is not a recently surfaced one as ‘they’ believe. Australia has a sound historical background. ‘But they lie’— alludes to the poet’s knowledge, research and concept of tradition about his nation. Whether these ‘they’ are the foreigners who ruled Australia or the denizens who did not know about their past, he castigates and censures all in one statement. When he mentions Sphinx in the first stanza, he meant how long a history of civilisation his country possesses. Sphinx existed from the beginning of the human society as their existence is linked with Egypt. The poet is describing the chaotic present in which people have negative remarks and perception about Australia. According to common belief, Australia is the youngest of nations. She has nothing to offer, hence she is called the ‘emptiest.’ The metaphor ‘emptiest’ also symbolises that the nation has been terribly vanquished, looted and her native culture is submerged into a future that will never have a rebirth or restoration. He compares his country to a woman whose life will never be introduced to any change further. The image of ‘woman’ is used because a nation is fertile and it has power to feed, nurture and protect its progeny. Thus Hope’s Australia is a woman with soft breast which still retains the capacity to feed her baby but she has lost her strength to give birth to any as such. She has a ‘dry’ womb. ‘Dry’ is referred to, by Eliot, in his *The Waste Land* in his ‘The Burial of the Dead’ as— ‘And the dry stone no sound of water.’ Somewhere even Hope suggests to similar effect of dryness. There is a breast that is tender, there is a womb too, yet the woman has yielded to dryness instead of being fertile. The dry womb symbolises no sign of future productivity as this woman is ‘beyond her change of life.’ She is like an old woman, or a woman who is strong but forcibly made to lie in the dark present of passivity and namelessness. She has lost her spirit of womanhood. She can beget and be productive but she no longer feels about her power of motherhood. The second and the third stanzas use colon to end their first sentence which shows that they are putting forth some examples, explanations, or further platform to offer ideas which add meaning to the first statement.

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Comparing the present with the past, as Hope describes, Australia has an ancient geographical value. She also had a high claim to belonging to the ancient of civilisations but her present is politically wrecked by colonisation. It has pushed back their good old past to a negative history which does not create a correct picture of their existence. ‘Without songs, architecture, history:’— is the ushering idea of the third stanza. The poem oozes out negative criticism on Australia and Hope is often accused of nursing cynically satirical vision about his motherland but if considered through its other facet, one may see that the poet wishes to alarm his fellowmen to rise and stand against the deadening present to further it to a better future because he is aware about his motherland’s historical importance ‘and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the vastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.’ It is not a fact that Australia always did not have culturally sound background, developed art and civic society, and past. This beginning shows that they have lost every mark of the glorious past which once was their very own. Now what they possess is insipidity, dullness, dreariness, adopted culture, foreign rule, ransacked present and empty void as future. She breathes the emotions and superstitions of a newly formed culture: this shows their wavering and unsure characteristics. Australia has no past to refer to. She is a newly born, insignificant, yet-to-have-any-discipline-for-life kind of existence. She is not only exhibiting the frame of an inexperienced land, but also ‘her rivers of water drown among island sands.’ And this is called ‘The river of her immense stupidity’ by Hope which draws a parallel to

*The river sweats*

*Oil and tar*

*The barges drift*

*With the turning tide*

*Red sails*

*Wide*

*To leeward, swing on the heavy spar.*

*The barges wash*

*Drifting logs*

*Down Greenwich reach*

*Past the Isle of Dogs.*

*(III. The Fire Sermon, The Waste Land)*

The poet symbolizes their cultural past which belonged to the aborigines and past of the aborigines do not sing a glorious history. The source of geographical fertility, the river, is termed ‘stupid’ by Hope. This censure and

direct attack on the cultural void that has been a matter for Whitman or Derek Walcott's ruminations as aborigine stories do not weave a monumental past. It has the social flaw of aspiring for recognition, or live unrecognized. The fact, that there has been no consideration of their existence because they were tribes untaught and uncivilized but potent because such races basked in familiarity with nature. This virility finds its way into the image of 'river' but ironically, this natural resource is watering a culture, a political system which it cannot seal as its own. Her resources are used in nurturing people or citizens who have grown up under the influence of foreigners. What Australia's aping by imitating foreign culture and life is criticized by Hope here.

The fourth and fifth stanzas, comment on 'cultural apes' and their attainments in the shape of civilization. The poet does not rejoice and feel high about his land's connection with the colonising White British people. He takes it an insult to his nation and its originality. The Australians to him are 'monotonous tribes' who inhabit throughout the country. The natives were so impressionable that the 'ultimate men' coloured them in their own habits and style. Hope satirically comments on the Whites who spoilt and ruined the native culture of his rich land and sowed their seeds of superiority, brainwashing what the race previously preserved as its treasured past. The boasting Whites are 'A type who will inhabit the dying earth.' It was their gift to the aborigine tribes of Australia's that their five most modern and world-class cities, namely Melbourne, Sidney, Canberra, Perth and Adelaide are 'five teeming sores.' The inculcated culture works as such a virus that each of these five cities destroy her land's goodness each proceeding day. Her life is mechanical now and the citizens are rebellious. Hope is bluntly sarcastic about his nation's pride upon her acquirements and possessions related to the British colonialism. People have not been able to develop their own consciousness towards living by forming a sound social system. They rather fight and rob. On whose masterly touch on their lives are the natives rejoicing? The poet answers 'second-hand Europeans.' They populate mostly the coastal areas. The coastal areas suggest the commerce and trade of their economy. Hope's use of 'alien shores' reminds of Arnold's

*Listen! you hear the grating roar  
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
At their return, up the high strand,  
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
The eternal note of sadness in.  
(Dover Beach)*

The encircling sea has brought misery to the land as the greedy race of the British washed their culture and taught them their English ways to

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life and fallen values. The poet calls them 'second-hand' questioning their credibility, integrity and connection with their place of origin Europe.

In the final two stanzas of the poem, he mentions how some intellectuals like him take refuge in their family to shun his scholarly and philosophical queries based on life. On the other hand, it also stands for Hope's visit to England and from there, his return to Australia. Hope has twice presented the image of Arab culture here: first, when he says 'outstretched paws of Sphinx;' and, the second, in the sixth stanza when he poses a philosophical comparison 'The Arabian desert of the human mind.' The metaphor 'desert' stands for cultural void and lack of originality of creative purpose. As in the waterless land of Arabia once gave birth to their Prophet who established a new religion, culture and created history, a miracle of that power may save them and restore to their originality. In the closing stanza, Hope sounds more of Yeats about his fancied messiah who would be 'Such savage and scarlet' that nothing could hinder its path

*When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?  
(The Second Coming, W. B. Yeats)*

All its stanzas rhyme in abba pattern. The entire poem critically observes the vacant present and obliterated past of Australia which has no culture to claim as her own. The poet repents at the loss of their art, literature, architecture, history and the characteristic traits of his race which is blindly aping the uncultured kind of Europeans. Having lost all thus, this cultural desert may one day give birth to its own literature and aborigine qualities which would be so strong that no attraction from the outside world would be able to affect its existence. And this emergence of new capability or their own substance would outlive 'the learned doubt' and cultural attacks. On this positive note, Hope ends his poem. In his own words, Professor Hope's own statement would be the greatest theme to his respect for his country as according to him, the poets 'can justify its existence.'



### 11.4.2 *Moschus Moschiferus* (A Song for St. Cecilia's Day): Summary and Critical Appreciation

Smith, Ondaatje and Hope

The modern man fails to understand the strength of music and in his ignorance he lands up abusing it. In fact, power of music helps in strengthening the man. In his poem, *Moschus Moschiferus* A.D. Hope has deplored the abuse of music for slaughter of animals. The poet claimed that he has dedicated his poem to St Cecilia who happens to be the patron saint of music. The poem is also subtitled as 'A song for St. Cecilia's Day'.

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#### Summary of the Poem

In Latin *Moschus Moschiferus* refers to musk deer. In the Eastern parts of the world, it is called Kastura or Kabarga. They were mostly found in the densely forested mountains of Assam and Tibet. With the passage of time, the population of the deer began to reduce at an alarming rate and they are on verge of extinction. The reason for their depleting population is that humans began to hunt them in large numbers for their musk. Through his poem, A.D Hope is attempting to evoke the conscious of the greedy men who for their personal gain are ruthlessly killing the animal. In order to save them, he is praying to St. Cecilia so that her blessings can save the endangered species.

In the first stanza, the poet has described the beauty of the surroundings which are the home of the deer. The beauty of the kastura deer has been elaborated in these lines, it has been called a beautiful and graceful creature. The poet is saddened with the way herds of them are hunted down by men; he says that in their ruthless greed they are not awed by their beauty as they slaughter them so that the pod of musk in their abdomen can be extracted. They are being slaughtered in such large numbers that the archaic variety which is the oldest species of the deer is now an endangered species. Earlier the hunters used to spread nets and drive them towards the net; in this way, they are able to trap many of them in one single attempt.

In the next two stanzas, the poet elaborates the methods used by the hunters to kill the musk deer in present time when their number has considerably depleted and the nets are no longer used to trap them. The hunters form small groups of two to three and spread into the forest with their bow and a sleek flute. The hunters have to go very deep into the forest to find the deer. One hunter hides on a tree and patiently waits while the other hunter squats at the bottom of the tree with the flute. Then one hunter sits on top of the tree with the bow aimed towards the forest while the other begins to play the flute.

In the fourth and the fifth stanzas, the poet describes the beautiful music played by the hunter to allure the deer. He goes on to say that the melodious music fills the stillness of the forest and with its effect it is bound to arise ecstatic for all. The poet has compared the musical sound with that

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of pleasant pattering of rain drops. In the poem, rain is not used to symbolize life but rather it is a prelude to the death of the deer. The flute is being played continuously and its melodious music gets the deer to come out of his hiding place by the afternoon. When the deer comes out his eyes are bright as he was hiding in a dark place, his ears attracted towards the sound of music. The delighted and bold musk deer falls into the metaphorical net of the hunters symbolized by the music of the flute.

In the sixth stanza, the poet is disturbed by the way the hunters misused the magic of music to lure and kill the deer. The hunter on the tree gets ready with his poisoned arrow to aim at the deer the moment he appears.

The seventh stanza has the description about the struggling deer. As the notes of music reach their ultimate height the deer breathes his last breath.

The poet in the eighth stanza tells how after the deer dies the hunters come down from their hiding place and take count of the number they have hunted and then they slaughter the deer. to get the gland out of his body which holds the musk, they then heartlessly leave the remains of the deer to decay in the forest.

In the last two stanzas, the poet is worried about the way humans treat the deer for their benefit. In their greed, they are rapidly killing the deer without being worried about the species getting extinct. In the concluding lines, the grief and the emotional state of the poet is evident and he feels that man is misusing the power of music to get hold of the deer and ultimately causing extinction of the animal species. He feels that true admirers of music would have never imagined that it could be misused like this and he feels helpless and prays to St. Cecilia to whom he has dedicated his poem.

### Critical Analysis of the Poem

The readers of *Moschus Moschiferus* after reading the poem must have a glance at the poem written by John Dryden in 1687 titled as *A Song for Saint Cecilia's Day*. The poet had written the poem in order to honour the birth anniversary of the martyr and patron saint of music. In the poem, Dryden has written about the power of music. The first stanza of the poem describes the harmonious power of music and how it has been used to bring peace and end chaos. The sound of drums and trumpets helped in encouraging the soldiers. Music was a source of motivation and encouraged the soldiers to fight their enemies in the battle field. A. D. Hope also wrote his poem as homage to St. Cecilia; however, the perception of both the poems is different. Dryden in the conclusion of his poem identifies the power of music as a source bringing order to the world whereas Hope's poem ironically describes the misuse of power of music by man in order to quench his materialistic greed. The music becomes the cause of death for the musk deer as it is used to lure him to fall into the trap laid by the hunters, "drift soaking through the gloom of

*the forest, spreading enticing tentacles into its depth till the deer, forgetting fear and with soul acquires with the melody, steps into clearing where the predators wait with infinite patience.”*

Smith, Ondaatje and Hope

The poet is saddened by the behaviour of man and through the poem he is trying to save the future of mankind. He brings out the extent of greediness in humans as they do not stop to think that by their actions they are causing the extinction of the animal species from this earth. Hope’s poem induces a sense of disgust in the readers towards the wrongdoers. His effortless way of writing and ability to spread awareness among his readers makes him one of the most talented poets of all times.

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### Check Your Progress

1. What were the major influences on the poem *The Lonely Land*?
2. Suggest the alterations done in the 1926-27 version of the poem *The Lonely Land*?
3. When and where was Michael Ondaatje born?
4. What is the imagery in the poem *Australia*?
5. Why is the poet unhappy and critical about his homeland?

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## 11.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

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1. The Lonely Land was stimulated by Imagist poetry and the Canadian landscape painters known as the Group of Seven.
2. The poet has altered the 1926-27 version of the poem *The Lonely Land* to suit the current situation. The poet has redone the first segment of the poem; the final version has phrases such as ‘smooth, flat stones’ in place of ‘Har’ and ‘monstrous Plaint’. The poet substituted the theoretical with the real matter, for instance the ‘*accusing barbs*’ were replaced with ‘*sharp barbs*’ in the last version, and emancipating his verses from conservative style and demarcation to enact the contours of its subject-matter.
3. Michael Ondaatje was born in 1943 and his birth place is Ceylon in Sri Lanka.
4. The imagery is sombre and is deeply painted with erudite phraseology.
5. Australia, as Hope sees, is a nation with her own recognition in the chronicle of the world. But somehow, the way she is steered, plundered and ravaged by colonisers and foreign culture, which affected and stunted native growth, the poet is unhappy, harshly critical and thoughtful about it.

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## 11.6 SUMMARY

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- The prominent Canadian poet and anthologist Arthur James Marshall Smith was born in Montreal on 8 November 1902, he belonged to a middle class family.
- Smith recognition for his work in form of many awards. Smith won the 1943 Governor General's Award for English-language poetry and drama for 'News of the Phoenix' and Other Poems.
- Smith was dedicated towards improving and enhancing the existing literary standards in poetry as well as criticism.
- The poetry by Smith is cultured and intellectual but because Smith has not compiled it in any specific order it is difficult to trace its evolution.
- A.J.M. Smith was self-effacing, modest and little impatient on few occasions but mostly he was happy to take life as it came.
- The initial version of this poem featured in McGill Fortnightly Review in 1927. Again the poem was republished in 1930 and was included in 'News of Phoenix'.
- An inspection of Smith's collection of "imagistic" poems is bond to unfold intricacy of his ingenious reaction to imagist notions and the significance of such a poem as *The Lonely Land*, which gives an enlightening illustration of the version of an import poetic significance of the Canadian countryside.
- Smith modified the initial stanzas of *The Lonely Land* to communicate nous of liveliness of the Northern wasteland he also extended and detailed the second segment of the poem in order to maintain balance in the presentation of the poem.
- Michael Ondaatje is often regarded as one of the most original and liberated writers of his time. He is a world renowned writer who has travelled extensively.
- In the poem, *The Time around Scars* by Michael Ondaatje the poet is suggesting that scars always do not imply pain and suggest occurrence of a mishap.
- Hope was praised for his skillful use of traditional verse forms and critique of contemporary values and he also received the Grace Leven Poetry Prize for it.
- The renowned Australian poet, satirist and essayist, Alec Derwent Hope's poem, *Australia* (1939) was first published in *Collected Poems, 1930-1965* (1966).

- Australia, as Hope sees, is a nation with her own recognition in the chronicle of the world.
- In his poem, *Moschus Moschiferus* A.D. Hope has deplored the abuse of music for slaughter of animals.
- In Latin *Moschus Moschiferus* refers to musk deer. In the Eastern parts of the world, it is called Kastura or Kabarga.

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### 11.7 KEY WORDS

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- **Dissonance:** It refers to a lack of accord.
- **Resonance:** It refers to a projection of deep sound quality.
- **Paean:** It is a song of praise.
- **Diapason:** It is the flow of melodious sound.
- **Phoenix:** A unique bird (in classical mythology) that lived for five or six centuries in the Arabian desert, after this time burning itself on a funeral pyre and rising from the ashes with renewed youth to live through another cycle; a person or thing regarded as uniquely remarkable in some respect.

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### 11.8 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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#### Short Answer Questions

1. Prepare a brief biographical sketch of Arthur James Marshall Smith.
2. List the major works of Michael Ondaatje
3. Write a short note on the life and works of Alec Derwent Hope.

#### Long Answer Questions

1. Summarize the poem *A Hyacinth for Edith*.
2. Critically analyse the poem *The Lonely Land*.
3. Discuss the use of literary devices in *The Time around Scars*.
4. Critically analyse the poem *Australia* with reference to the context.
5. Evaluate the imagery used in the poem *Australia*.
6. Compare *Moschus Moschiferus* with Dryden's poem *A Song for Saint Cecilia's Day*.

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## 11.9 FURTHER READINGS

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### NOTES

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McCulloch, A. M. 2008. *A. D. Hope, the Life and Art: Let It Rip*. Britain: Southerly.

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**BLOCK - IV**  
**POETRY XII - XIV**

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Walcott and Sullivan

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## UNIT 12 WALCOTT AND SULLIVAN

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### NOTES

#### Structure

- 12.0 Introduction
- 12.1 Objectives
- 12.2 Derek Walcott: An Introduction
  - 12.2.1 *Ruins of a Great House*: Summary and Critical Appreciation
  - 12.2.2 *A Sea Chantey*: Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 12.3 Vincent O'Sullivan: An Introduction
  - 12.3.1 *Elegy for a Schoolmate*: Summary and Critical Appreciation
  - 12.3.2 *Children of Wrath*: Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 12.4 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 12.5 Summary
- 12.6 Key Words
- 12.7 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 12.8 Further Readings

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### 12.0 INTRODUCTION

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This unit will introduce you to the selected poems of Derek Walcott and Vincent O'Sullivan along with a biographical sketch of these authors.

Derek Walcott is one of the prominent poets of the twenty first century. He has received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992. He has several poems and plays to his credit. His epic poem, *Omeros* (1990), which indirectly refers to characters from *The Iliad*, has been critically applauded as Walcott's major literary achievement.

Vincent O'Sullivan lives in Dunedin and is a novelist, short story writer, biographer, playwright, and poet. He was the Poet Laureate of New Zealand from 2013 to 2015. He is acclaimed for his poems and short stories, along with the novels *Let the River Stand* and *Believers to the Bright Coast*.

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### 12.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the life and works of Derek Walcott
- Evaluate the poem *Ruins of a Great House*
- List the features of the poems written by Vincent O'Sullivan
- Evaluate the poem *Elegy for a Schoolmate*
- Analyse the title of the poem *Children of Wrath*

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## 12.2 DEREK WALCOTT: AN INTRODUCTION

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Derek Walcott was born in Saint Lucia, an island in the West Indies, on 23 January 1930. He started his career as a writer at the age of 14, when his first poem was printed in the local newspaper. He took training to be a painter but by the age of 18, he realized his passion was writing. In 1948, he got his first collection of poems, which consisted of 25 poems, published and sold them on the streets himself. Walcott's main stepping forward in the field of writing came in 1962 with the compilation of his poems in a collection titled, *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960*, a book which venerates the colonial past of the Caribbean and how it affected the time after the colonization. During an extensive and illustrious career, Walcott has been loyal to the same premises of speech, influence, and position. His compilations consist of *Tiepolo's Hound* which was published in 2000. In 2004, *The Prodigal*, a dazzling collection of poems was published followed by *White Egrets* published in 2010, which also received the T.S. Eliot Prize. Walcott has won many awards for his work as a poet and as a prominent playwright. In 1971, he won the Obie Award for his play *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. In 1992, Walcott received the Nobel Prize for his contribution in Literature. The Nobel committee described his effort as 'a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment.' MacArthur Foundation awarded Walcott the 'genius' award; he also received Royal Society of Literature Award, the Queen's Medal for Poetry and the inaugural OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature. In 2015, he was honoured with the Griffin Trust for Excellence in Poetry Lifetime Recognition Award. In 2010, he was appointed as a professor of Poetry at the University of Essex and continued on this post till 2013. The critics have considered him to be an influential and significant poet because of the Homeric epic poem *Omeros* which was published in 1990. *Omeros* is considered as one of Walcott's chief accomplishment by many critics.

### Features of Derek Walcott's Works

Over the years, Walcott spent much of his time in Boston, New York, and Saint Lucia. As a consequence of which, his work echoes with Western norms and Island influences, the tone of his work on few occasions' witnesses a shift between the Caribbean dialect and English, and his English also has an impact of his West Indian heritage. The language of the poet has been commented by Arthur Vogelsang in *Los Angeles Times* Book Review in the following words, 'These continuing polarities shoot an electricity to each other which is questioning and beautiful and which helps form a vision altogether Caribbean and international, personal (him to you, you to him), independent, and essential for readers of contemporary literature on all the

continents'. Walcott is recognized for his practical, direct, sophistication, and great illustrations. A leading critic and poet, Sean O'Brien has described the work of Walcott in following words, 'One of the handful of poets currently at work in English who are capable of making a convincing attempt to write an epic...His work is conceived on an oceanic scale and one of its fundamental concerns is to give an account of the simultaneous unity and division created by the ocean and by human dealings with it'. O'Brien has described Omeros as a poetry which matches the standards of *ars poetica*, O'Brien opined that it is artistic creation which has its own meaning and nature. In an attempt to analyse Walcott's '*Selected Poems*', a renowned poet, Glyn Maxwell has opined that a powerful effect of Walcott's poem is created as all his poems deal with a strong theme. Maxwell has expressed his views in following words: 'The verse is constantly trembling with a sense of the body in time, the self-slung across metre, whether metre is steps, or nights, or breath, whether lines are days, or years, or tides'.

Walcott is a famous playwright, in his famous play, *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, he has been described by The New Yorker as 'a poem in dramatic form'. Walcott's plays often deal with factors of the West Indian practice, which frequently focuses on the socio-political consequences and understanding of post-colonialism. He has also portrayed different types of issues which deal with myths, metaphoric, traditions and ethical plays. In order to encourage plays and theatre, he along with his twin brother had established the Trinidad Theatre Workshop in 1950, and in 1981, he had also set up the Boston Playwrights' Theatre.

### 12.2.1 *Ruins of a Great House: Summary and Critical Appreciation*

Derek Walcott's *Ruins of a Great House* is perfectly named. The poem begins with words which describe the remnants of a regal stately home. The description includes the ruined state of the stones, the grime of the fine-looking girls who lived and worked in the great house, the crumbling figurine of angels and the relics of partially buried coach and animal droppings. The poet mentions that the crows flap in the sky to settle on the old trees which no longer exist and finally settle on eucalyptus branches. The mention of dead limes and leprosy by the poet is to stress on the theme of demise and perish. A mocking citation from an idyllic poem stresses on the paradox of the manor's perish. The marble of the perished house makes the speaker think of Greece and ancient South of United States where he has witnessed similar ruins of marble structures. The poet has mentioned that the ancient house which is now in ruins had existence of a very harsh system of slavery and the grounds of the house if searched properly will show traces of that system. The people who lived in the house, they maintained lawns with lime trees which no longer exist but the river which used to flow during that time still flows and flows with a very relaxing sound.

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The speaker pictures the view from top of a huge metal wall and conveys that this wall not only provided privacy but helped the people of the house to shield their inner voice which would have condemned them for their acts of slavery. The poet has explained that even the metal wall could not be saved from the decay which happened due to the attack of rats and insects.

A breeze propelling through the few remaining lime trees makes the speaker remember the work of English writer Rudyard Kipling who had justified the colonial rule by the British and had sustained his writings by quoting words from the Bible. The scenery of the estate reminded the speaker of British travellers and poets who were the initially part of British colonial force and their talent as writers who justified colonialism particularly illogical. The ruins of the big house act as a symbol of slave system and the ruins and rotting of things projects an image of the harshness of such systems. Speaker is very sad when he recalls the work of the famous English writer John Donne. The speaker experiences tremendous annoyance when he thinks about the slaves who would be decaying in the lake which is visible from the house, the speaker realizes that England which was earlier known as Albion was also a Roman colony and had thus, suffered. He recollects the words of Donne, 'No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main'. The poem's concluding sentences imply that the speaker towards the end realizes the feeling of empathy, rather than any kind of annoyance, when he glances at the perished manor and remembers all the people who lost their lives whether they were the masters or slaves it did not matter as loss of life is always painful.

*All in compassion ends*

*So differently from what the heart arranged:*

*'as well as if a manor of thy friend's...*

### **Tone and Theme of the Poem**

Derek Walcott's poem, *Ruins of a Great House* is based on two central themes, death and decay. Theme is visible in the lines quoted by Walcott of Sir Thomas Browne before Walcott starts the actual poem; the sentences are extracted from Sir Thomas Browne's book fully titled *Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial*, or a *Brief Discourse of the Sepulchral Urns*. Death and decay are mentioned in the initial two lines of the poem through the use of the following words 'disjecta members', which is a Latin word and refers to scattered members, of 'this Great House' and the 'moth-like girls'. The mention of death and decay is also visible in the images which are projected by the poet, for instance, 'dead leaves' and 'rotting lime'.

The poem has made suggestions of colonial slavery. The earliest suggestion of slavery is obvious in the mention to the 'Great House', which is obviously a mansion and had vast lime orchards. The lawns had to be maintained by many workers who were slaves. 'Ablaze with rage I thought,

/ some slave is rotting in this manorial lake'. These lines clearly refer to the existence of slaves in the great house who have died and lay on the bed of the lake.

It is essential to realize that the poem concludes with a reference to John Donne's poem, *No Man is An Island* which believes that all kinds of sadness can be overcome, if there is unity among the people. The poem stresses on the fact that that all individuals are united when they die. Thus, the theme of the poem is not only highlighting subjects like death and decay but also stress on evilness of slavery and unity of mankind.

The poet has started the poem in a very interesting way and the message which the poet wants to convey has been established in the very beginning only. The mention of 'dead limes' and the leprosy of the Empire in the second verse refer to the collapse of the British Empire. The poet has expressed his anger in the poem against the system of slavery and is very sympathetic towards the plight of the African slaves and annoyed with the colonial rule. The poet has quoted great writers like John Donne and Blake and their inspiring work. He has been bold enough to condemn writers like Hawkins, Walter Raleigh, and Drake who favoured the British colonialism. The way poet has boldly commented about these writers in his poem, it is obvious that he knows the era to which these authors belonged.

The descriptions that Walcott applies all through the poem are rather fascinating as he has used such powerful metaphors in a distinctive manner. For instance, in the final verse he writes 'But still the coal of my compassion fought'. Through these words, Walcott is expressing that the coal was his fuel and his empathy was uncontrolled by presenting an illustration of a strong burning fire that cannot be put out. Also in second verse, when Walcott says, 'Farewell, green fields, Farewell ye happy groves!' There is a change in the image, which the poet had maintained till now, however, he does not want to portray the beauty of the nature. The poet implies the beginning of decay and gloom with these lines.

Throughout the poem, Walcott uses a distinctive tone and tempo to communicate his point and a number of interpretations were offered in the poem. The language structure is not common and is one of the prominent features of his poems. Walcott incorporates various terms that refer to decaying or dead things, 'moth-like', 'leprosy', and 'exiled craftsmen' and 'dead ash'. The outline of the poem appears relatively gloomy and distressing, which is in accordance to the theme that the poet is trying to establish. Walcott has not followed the conventional form of a poem as he begins two of the verses in the centre and they seem as the titles of the poem. The poet has followed this structure as he wants to highlight these statements. The tempo followed in the poem is not similar to other poems as there is no rhyming in the words used in the poem. This aspect poses a problem for the reader as there is no natural flow in the poem and the reader has to understand each

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verse before he can move to the next verse. The tone of the poem is serious and the absence of punctuation marks in the poem is clear indication that the poet would have been severe while penning down the poem.

The poem has been very aptly named *Ruins of a Great House* as on the whole the theme of the poem was ruins. Walcott employs many metaphors and indications to project the decaying of the Caribbean slave house and the British Empire. It is obvious that Walcott has emotions which are full of wrath and antipathy against the system of slavery which prevailed during 1800 in this region. The poet has written the poem with ample metaphors of deterioration that his emotions are clear to an educated reader.

### 12.2.2 *A Sea Chantey*: Summary and Critical Appreciation

Most of the poems written by Walcott have the common feature about reproducing his roots. He always maintained a connection with his birthplace and its people. According to him, the primary duty of each individual should be to serve the place and people of their birth. He never wanted to lose connection with his homeland. The West Indies to him was the complete archipelago of islands and it was enriched with varied cultures. For him it did not matter from where the ancestors came from, but if an individual was born and bought up in West India it was his hometown. He was not concerned with personal or racial identity; it was the birthplace which mattered. Several of his poems reflect the greatly rich, multifaceted and wide-ranging experiences in his island home St. Lucia. His poem *A Sea Chantey* is one such poem as it reflects the unity that prevails amid the various multifaceted cultures of the islands. In *A Sea Chantey*, Walcott articulates about the deified splendour of the Caribbean landscape.

#### Summary of the Poem

*A Sea Chantey* was published in his first volume of poems *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960* which came out in 1962. The book consists of his initial work which was mostly based on the natural beauty of the Caribbean. *A Sea Chantey*, an exquisite prayer like poem takes the readers into the centre of the seascape of the Caribbean and diverts them from the familiar Eastern European past and politics.

Walcott's *A Sea Chantey* is a poem about his island and the people living there. The poet has made the poem appear like a celebration. The poem unwraps with an epigraph. The epigraph has been derived from "L'invitation en Voyage" (translated as, "Invitation to the Voyage") a work of Charles Baudelaire in 1857. It was a romanticized revelation of a trip taken by a lover to a paradise in the Old World. The poet lists islands in the West Indies: Anguilla, Adina, Antigua, Cannelles and Andreuille. The names of the islands quiver like needles of anchored escort vessels of the navy. The yachts in the sea have a calming effect like the lilies; the bendable, the sailing ship's



ebony body along with the masts with their needles which help in threading the archipelagos deflect like a embroidery in 'intense waters'.

The poet has described the people living on these islands. He says that people have to frequently face natural calamities like hurricanes, erupting volcanos, rainstorms at sea and the bizarre sea creatures. For centuries, the people of the islands have been earning a livelihood by dealing in sponges, salt, fruit and vegetables. The poet has compared the movement of the ships in between the islands like the way needle is threaded through its eye. The image created by these ships resembles that of embroidery and the people of the island are knitted into this needlework. He further remarks that the people living on these islands are not afraid of anything as they are there for each other.

In the following stanza, the poet provides the image of a working islander washing his face after a day's work in the sea water. In between the Sabbath the fish breaks out of the water and takes a leap. The whole atmosphere is very religious with a young sailor playing a holy tune on the mouth organ which his grandfather has taught him. The air is filled music. The poet talks about the bonding between the young and the old generation on the island.

The poet's land is like a constant celebration and liveliness. The islanders turn it into a land of prayers with all of them closely knit together. The West Indies becomes 'a litany of islands' and a 'Rosary of archipelagos'. At this point, the poet realizes that just like this his home land was also full of sound. It had music as the people of the island played flutes and drums and it was blessed with beautiful natural beauty.

### **Critical Analysis of the Poem**

The mystical feature of the poem is further enhanced with its preface which is a chorus take from Bauletaire's 'L'Invitation au voyage' (Les Fleurs du Mal published in 1857) and the repeated features of Christian motifs like Sabbath, church bells and so forth. Odysseus turns into synonym for boats, islands and seafaring. The beauty of the poem is further enhanced with the use of phrases, transferred epithets and similes. The poet has started the poem with an aestheticized image of the Antilles: where there is music ("all the l's"), embroidery, mythology and religion. These inclusions make the description more real rather than presenting the readers with a tourist image of the island. The poet has been able to deliver a radical artistic work by giving a very abstract pattern to the poem which may be considered as a song or a chantey.

"And now the apprentice washes his cheeks / With salt water and sunlight", states Walcott in a two-line section which separates the poem into two parts. The term "apprentice" carries an intertextual and autobiographical implication, since it is with reference to the poet figure of another poem written

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by him titled as *Another Life* published in 1973. In a broader view, the image could be understood as an allegory of the artist who is the creator of the Caribbean identity. The only things at the disposal of the apprentice are salt water and sunlight; the remaining aspects are at his disposal for creation. For this reason, the second part of the poem takes form of the discovered images, almost the rest is waiting to be created, named, described, and the second part of the poem turns into a catalogue of discovered, nearly epiphany images:

*The soft vowels of inlets,*  
*The christening of vessels,*  
*The titles of portages,*  
*The colours of sea grapes,*  
*The tartness of sea-almonds,*  
*The alphabet of church bells,*  
*The peace of white horses,*  
*The pasture of ports,*  
*The litany of islands,*  
*The rosary of archipelagoes*

The poem is mostly a celebration of imaginative semblance rather than a sense of the nuisance of mimicry. The mimicry has not been used in the negative sense or out of lack of imagination but it is for indirect creativity, an opportunity for the under-trainee artist to explore his creation. Great European literature allows the artist to articulate names, create his fresh world out of the disorder of reality which is not defined.

The closing lines with their repetitions echo the religious implications in “amen” along with the respectful tone controlling the lines; make it seem more like a prayer than a spell and with the poet’s reference of Sabbath and the chiming church bells definitely imply the poem as reading of a prayer.

Water is, certainly, implanted deep into the poem *A Sea Chantey*. Walcott fulfils his pledge to include the Caribbean waters in his poetry.

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### 12.3 VINCENT O’SULLIVAN: AN INTRODUCTION

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Vincent O’Sullivan was born in 1937 in Wellington, Auckland. In his writing career besides creating poetry he has been a novelist, playwright, educator and a short story writer. He has compiled anthologies of New Zealand poetry and short fiction, along with being a co-editor with Margaret Scott for editing collected letters of Katherine Mansfield. He pursued his education in various universities of New Zealand and Oxford. From 1963 to 1966 he was working as an English lecturer at Victoria University, Wellington. Subsequently, he joined the English Department at the University of Waikato and continued to work there for the next ten years. He decided to leave his job of a lecturer

and pursue full-time writing in the late 1970s. He worked as literary editor of the *New Zealand Listener* for one year in 1979. He was a literary fellow at a number of universities of Australia from 1981 to 1987. He began to once again work as a professor at the Victoria University in 1988 and ever since 1997 he has been director of the Stout Research Centre. He published *Long Journey to the Border*, a biography of John Mulgan in 2003.

### General Features of his Poems

His poetry may be defined as scholarly due to its detailed reference to varied Western cultures and traditions as seen in some of his prominent works such as *Blame Vermeer*, *In times of thanks and praise*, *Talking of Stone* or *1919*, and at the same time it can be defined as work which is comprehensively acquainted with and cuttingly attentive about his native land, as confirmed in *July, July*, *River Road*, *Due South* or *Late Praise for Nurse Smythe*. His poems open in a structured, realistic and descriptive manner but by the middle of the poem he adds a thought or an image which provides depth and helps in conclusion of the poem, such qualities are clearly visible in his *Small Talk* or *Blond Ink*.

He does not necessarily adopt a specific form in his poetry; he is not particular about the length of the stanzas or the rhyming pattern. Some of his poems have a four-line stanzas, which are mostly rhymed, or stanzas with two lines with a balanced rhythm and an extra free line. Such conceptually extended and properly structured images and perspective frequently strengthened by using flip sides help in portraying the moral standpoint of the poet. However, he tends to end some of his poems with a cautionary statement like in *Blame Vermeer* his poems conclude with, “It will happen next” and in ‘No time for portents’ there is a statement saying: “The moon is gone and the axe grows bigger and bigger”. The readers of O’ Sullivan’s poems have to be attentive otherwise they would overlook the crucial element of his poem. Poems like *The Monastic Life* are full of witty statements because of the allegoric anti-climax. He freely employs epithets and similes in poems like *Check-Up* or *The Grieving Process*. His poems carry a powerful masculine voice with consistent sound, tone and tempo. They help in emphasizing the theme of the poem and invite the readers to carefully follow the narrative of the lines and understand the basic structure and superiority of the form. The attentiveness of the readers is essential to keep track of the suddenly appearing images along with the swift changes in the tone and phrases. The poet’s strong personality is not just reflected in his physical appearance but also through his work which has a distinctive and unique voice.

#### 12.3.1 *Elegy for a Schoolmate*: Summary and Critical Appreciation

*Elegy for a Schoolmate* is a well-written composition of the poet. The poem is a reflection of his strong style of writing. The narrator of the poem is telling

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the readers about the death of his ex-schoolmate who died by putting her head in an oven.

### Summary of the Poem

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*Elegy for a Schoolmate* is a well written poem with a powerful narration which continues throughout the poem. In the opening lines of the poem the narrator informs the readers about the death of an old schoolmate. The schoolmate died while putting her head into the oven. As the poem progresses, the narrator recollects how the girl looked and behaved while they were in school. He also remembers that most of the other schoolmates constantly bullied her but he never bullied or troubled her.

The narrator remembers that she had a shabby appearance. She was never dressed in clean clothes. He recollects her as irresponsible and stupid. Seeing her behaviour he feels that like other students he should have thrown stones at her or taken away her cigarettes so she could not smoke. The poet after hearing about her death feels that he should have done all this so that he could have gotten rid of his pent-up feelings and not continued to remember her, "Then I could feel pent-up for a day / And forget her."

By the end of the poem, the narrator comes to terms with her death and says that since now she is dead she has joined the immortals. She would no longer be seen wearing dirty clothes and all his anger is subdued and he wants that she should rest in peace:

*But she takes her place among immortal things,  
With the potter's wheel at the bottom of a dry pit,  
With the hands of Egyptian ladies held like thin,  
brown leaves,  
Their collars of beaten gold, and a basalt dog.*

### Critical Analysis of the Poem

O'Sullivan always manages to create a metaphoric world, and positions his real subject in a similarly real but altered dimension, making little essential adjustments. *Elegy for a Schoolmate* maintains O'Sullivan's all-time practice of using his acquaintances in the poems, the poem also shows his habit of closely thinking about them and trying to analyse their behaviour from a broader perspective. It is a modest poem presenting an elegy to a schoolmate whom the poet did not remember so well. O'Sullivan displays his own strengths through his poem: the unstinting warm analysis of fellow-humans and the mature opinion that we should accept the good and bad features of an individual and should not judge or categorize them as good or evil.

### 12.3.2 *Children of Wrath*: Summary and Critical Appreciation

In 1896, his volume of verse titled *Poems* was published by Elkin Matthews. The poems of this collection were reasonably conservative. He made use

of religious imagery on a few occasions even though he has not produced a single poem on religion. The collection has poems about knights and wives of a pirate. Poem like *Brain Fever* and *Papillons du Pave* were included in the collection. After this collection, Sullivan realized that verses should have some features of sin for them to be effective. In 1897, he delivered a fresh volume of verse published by Leonard Smithers, and the change resulted in a positive impact on his writing. Smithers brought out the devil or evil in him which got reflected in his writings. As a result, the new collection titled *Houses of Sin* was published. The volume included poems like *Malaria* and *Drug*. In the latter poem, the poet indulged in nail-biting flights of diablerie. In *A Dancer at the Opera*, O'Sullivan crafted a short drama by showing the demise of a heartless femme fatale. Whereas in *Children of Wrath*, a poem which should be made known to more readers the poet spoke on behaviour of the devil and aimed at discomforting the self-righteous.

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### Summary of the Poem

The poem reflects the views of the poet himself; he has put words in the mouth of the devil so that he is able to embarrass the self-righteous people in the society. The poem *Children of Wrath* opens with an epigraph. The epigraph helps the readers to realize that the narrator of the poem has gone to visit the devil. He has been compelled to go to the devil because he is unable to bear the agony of those who hold a secret which has to be told.

In the first stanza, the poet describes the state in which the narrator finds the devil. The devil is sitting alone on two stones on a deserted land and there are no people around him. The narrator hears the sound of lightning and wolves howling in the night. He goes close to the devil so that he is able to hear him above all this noise.

He begins to speak to the devil; he says that how come you are all alone on this deserted land. The speaker further asks where are all the sick people who are your followers and chant your name.

The devil looks at the narrator and sneers that he is free to look around and search thoroughly as he is sure that the narrator will not find a single soul. The narrator informs the devil that he is able to see one person; the narrator is himself that soul, the one who wishes to tell him all the bad things which he has locked up in his heart and he hopes that he will earn praise from the devil.

The devil is willing to take him as his protégée but he tells the narrator that nobody should come to know that he is devil's follower and he should commit sin only in the night and that too quietly. The rest of the time he should behave like a saint and pretend to be a true follower of god. The devil tells the narrator that he is very fond of people who are able to tell lies and practice deceit and he is always going to support such people. In the poem, the poet is criticizing the two faced people and becomes the devil so that he can embarrass them.

“To them I ever murmur: ‘You do well;  
The Holy Spirit in your soul doth dwell!’  
For them I keep alight the fire of Hell.”

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The poet ends the poem by once again summoning his pet façade the somnolent, shattered man as he pleads, “spare the people scorched and seared”.

O’Sullivan evolved with every poem he composed; he manifested himself as a poet in *Being Here*. He adopted a balanced tempo by managing to publish a fresh book once in three years. In his writing career he learnt the art of closely scrutinizing his personal life and minds of several writers, painters and composers so that he could write on a variety of subjects. He has written on animals, children, takes cues from his personal life and many of his fellow-beings. He has found good humour in the ills of the world and turned the good into celebration through his poems. Clearly his life has been fulfilling as a writer, he is one writer who speaks about his work only if he is directly questioned about it. He has never got down to pen down his autobiography. These qualities reflect him as a rare creature with modesty, and his arduous capability to preserve high standards of solemnity with which he has enriched the minds of his readers.

### Check Your Progress

1. Name the two central themes of the poem *Ruins of a Great House*.
2. Mention the phrases which refer to dead and decaying terms in the poem *Ruins of a Great House*.
3. Where and when was Vincent O’Sullivan born?

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## 12.4 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

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1. Derek Walcott’s poem, *Ruins of a Great House* is based on two central themes of death and decay.
2. Walcott incorporates various terms that refer to decaying or dead things, ‘moth-like’, ‘leprosy’, ‘exiled craftsmen’ and ‘dead ash’.
3. Vincent O’Sullivan was born in 1937 in Wellington, Auckland.

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## 12.5 SUMMARY

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- Derek Walcott was born in Saint Lucia, an island in the West Indies, on 23 January 1930. He started his career as a writer at the age of 14, when his first poem was printed in the local newspaper.



- During an extensive and illustrious career, Walcott has been loyal to the same premises of speech, influence, and position.
- In 1992, Walcott received the Nobel Prize for his contribution in Literature. The Nobel committee described his effort as ‘a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment.’
- Walcott is a famous playwright, in his famous play, *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, he has been described by The New Yorker as ‘a poem in dramatic form’.
- Derek Walcott’s *Ruins of a Great House* is perfectly named. The poem begins with words which describe the remnants of a regal stately home.
- Derek Walcott’s poem, *Ruins of a Great House* is based on two central themes, death and decay.
- Most of the poems written by Walcott have the common feature about reproducing his roots. He always maintained a connection with his birthplace and its people.
- *A Sea Chantey* was published in his first volume of poems *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960* which came out in 1962.
- Vincent O’Sullivan was born in 1937 in Wellington, Auckland. In his writing career besides creating poetry he has been a novelist, playwright, educator and a short story writer.
- *Elegy for a Schoolmate* is a well-written composition of the poet. The poem is a reflection of his strong style of writing. The narrator of the poem is telling the readers about the death of his ex-schoolmate who died by putting her head in an oven.
- The poem *Children of Wrath* opens with an epigraph. The epigraph helps the readers to realize that the narrator of the poem has gone to visit the devil.

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### 12.6 KEY WORDS

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- **Elegy:** It is a sad poem, usually written to commemorate the death of an individual.
- **Protégé:** It refers to a person who is guided and supported by an older and more experienced or influential person.
- **Epigraph:** It is a saying or a part of a poem, play, or book placed at the beginning of a piece of literary writing to give the reader some idea of what the piece is about.
- **Façade:** It is an outward appearance which is deliberately false and gives you a wrong impression about someone or something.

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## 12.7 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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#### Short Answer Questions

1. Prepare a brief biographical sketch of Derek Walcott.
2. List the main features of the works of Derek Walcott.
3. Write a short biographical sketch of Vincent O’Sullivan.
4. Write a short summary of the poem *Elegy for a Schoolmate*.

#### Long Answer Questions

1. What is the poet trying to convey in the poem *Ruins of Great House*?
2. What is the theme of the poem *Ruins of Great House*?
3. ‘In *A Sea Chantey*, Walcott articulates about the deified splendour of the Caribbean landscape.’ Explain the statement.
4. Evaluate the title of the poem *Children of Wrath*.

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## 12.8 FURTHER READINGS

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- Brown, Stewart (Ed). 1991. *The Art of Derek Walcott*. Wales, Australia: Seren Books.
- Hamner, Robert D.(Ed). 1997. *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*. London: Lynne Reine Publishers.
- Hammer, Robert D. 1997. *Epic of the Dispossessed: Derek Walcott’s Omeros*. USA: University of Missouri Press.
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- O’Sullivan, Vincent. 2003. *Long Journey to the Border: A Life of John Mulgan*. New Zealand: Penguin Books.

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## UNIT 13 WOLE SOYINKA

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### Structure

- 13.0 Introduction
- 13.1 Objectives
- 13.2 Wole Soyinka: An Introduction
  - 13.2.1 *Telephone Conversation*: Summary and Critical Appreciation
  - 13.2.2 *Dedication*: Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 13.3 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 13.4 Summary
- 13.5 Key Words
- 13.6 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 13.7 Further Readings

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### 13.0 INTRODUCTION

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This unit will introduce you to the selected poems of Wole Soyinka along with a biographical sketch of the poet. Soyinka has published about twenty works – drama, novels and poetry. He writes in English and his literary language is marked by great scope and richness of words.

Written in the first person narrative point of view, the poem *Telephone Conversation* by Wole Soyinka is a poetic satire against the widely-spread racism in the modern Western society. The poem is about a telephone conversation in England between the poetic persona seeking to rent a house and an English landlady who completely changes her attitude towards him after he reveals his identity as a black African. The motif of a microcosmic telephone conversation, therefore, is employed by the poet to apply to a much broader, macrocosmic level where racial bigotry is ridiculed in a contest of human intelligence, showcasing the poet's witticism as well as his ingenious sense of humour.

*Dedication* is a poem about the Yoruba tradition called isomoloruko which is a naming ceremony. Eight days after a baby is born the family gathers together and holds a ceremony/celebration where the child's name is officially announced. Soyinka has written this poem to tell his daughter about the nature of life and earth.

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### 13.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the life of Wole Soyinka
- List the prominent works of Wole Soyinka

- Evaluate the title of the poem *Telephone Conversation*
- Analyse the poem *Dedication*

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**13.2 WOLE SOYINKA: AN INTRODUCTION**

Nigerian poet Wole Soyinka was born on 13 July 1934 in western Nigeria. He was a member of the Yoruba tribe; during his childhood he was taught the tales about the tribal gods and folktale by his grandfather, who was a respected member of the tribe. Soyinka's parents also had a strong influence on his childhood. His father was headmaster of the local school which followed the British model and his mother was a converted Christian. After being brought up in such a setting it is not surprising that from a very young age he was exposed to the tense colonial environment prevailing in Africa during the initial years of the twentieth century. There were violent interactions among the people of the tribe and their colonizers.

Soyinka began writing at a very young age and many of his poems and short stories were regularly published in *Black Orpheus*, the Nigerian literary magazine. He left for further studies to England to join the University of Leeds. He returned back in 1960. It was also the year Nigeria got freedom from colonization. Soyinka was a creative writer and got recognition for his politically motivated works such as *The Swamp Dwellers* published in 1958, *The Lion and the Jewel* published in 1959, and *A Dance of the Forests* published in 1960.

In 1963, his renowned poem *Telephone Conversation* was published in the collection titled *Modern Poetry from Africa*. In 1965 he was arrested for supposedly compelling a radio anchor to report wrong election results. He was freed after three months once the international writers group PEN publically announced that there was no evidence found to prove him guilty. He got arrested once more in 1967 when he raised his voice against the civil war which was becoming a threat to the unity of the country's tribal population. He spent two years in jail because he had been accused of supporting Biafran fighters to acquire military jets, though there was no formal charge against him. While he was in jail he was confined alone in the cell. He spent all his time of solitary confinement writing in his diary. In 1972 his writings from the diary were published as *The Man Died: Prison Notes* of Wole Soyinka. He has also written a non-fiction trilogy that portrays the journey of his family. The first trilogy appeared in 1980, titled as *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, the second appeared in 1989 titled *Isara: A Voyage around Essay*, and finally the third titled *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years—A Memoir, 1946-1965* and it was published in 1994.

He was a part of a pro-democratic group and was accused of treachery for his condemnation of General Sani Abacha's military regime. He was given the death sentence for his activities in Nigeria. The following years were spent giving lectures in different parts of Europe and the United States. He even spent time in Yale and Cornell University, where he worked as the Goldwin Smith professor for African Studies and Theatre Arts from 1988 to 1991. It was during his exiled years he wrote two works of prose, the first was titled as *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature* and the second was *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis*. In 1999, his focus was back on his country and he wrote *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*.

Some of the significant collections of Wole Soyinka as a poet, dramatist and essayist are *Idanre and Other Poems* (1967), *Ogun Abibiman* (1976), *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems* (1988), and *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* (2002).

His work was recognized all over the world. He was not only known as a writer but also as an advocate of democracy and civil rights of his people. During his literary career, he has been presented with several awards for his impressive contribution in the field of literature and has been honoured on several occasions for his fight against oppression. In 1966, he was awarded the John Whiting Drama Prize. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, and in the same year he received the Enrico Mattei Award for Humanities. While travelling all over the world, Soyinka continues to speak on behalf of the oppressed and the poor for their rights.

The poems written by Wole Soyinka reflect the paradoxes inherent in his culture. The African traditions have influenced his cultural upbringing. He believed in tribal gods, particularly, the Yoruba pantheon of gods and Christianity. He has always opposed the influence of the Western world and the drive towards modernization. In his poems he has not put forward a romanticized image of Africa though he has celebrated the intricacies that are part of his native land. His poems elaborate the beauty of the land and highlight the traditions and customs of the African culture. Simultaneously, he has spoken against the level of economic and political corruption prevailing in Africa. The range of his poetry is vast. He has composed many lyrical and sarcastic poems; his poems are sometimes sad and sometimes full of humour. He is a poet of English language and is popular for his intricate sentence structure and peculiar choice of words. The key elements of his poetry are inspired by T. S. Eliot's usage of allusions from mythology and history. There are many critics who feel that poems written by Soyinka are complex making it difficult for the readers to interpret them easily. Nevertheless, the subject matter of his poems is not just limited to the people of Africa and

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their culture. He has presented a broad perspective about the condition of man, of victory and misery, about brutality and empathy.

### 13.2.1 *Telephone Conversation*: Summary and Critical Appreciation

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The poem talks of a telephone conversation between a black man and a white woman that reveals racial prejudices. The title of the poem itself is benign and non-threatening. The motif of a microcosmic telephone conversation, therefore, is employed by the poet to apply to a much broader, macrocosmic level where racial bigotry is ridiculed in a contest of human intelligence, showcasing the poet's witticism as well as his ingenious sense of humour. In the poem, a black man is looking for a place to stay. He likes the location of the lady's home: it is in a neutral territory; so neutral that no racial incidents have occurred there. At the same time, the house would provide him privacy since the landlady herself does not reside there. He likes the house, but based on his previous experiences tells the landlady that he is black. He wants her to clearly enunciate if she has any problems over this, since if she does then he need not take the journey which would merely be a waste of time. The landlady, who till the time she was informed of the man being black, had no problems at the arrangement. Now, she clearly does not want to give her house to a black man, but she does not know how to refuse since she has tacitly agreed to rent it to him. She had just assumed that her caller was a white man. The information that he is not unsettles her. She astounds him by asking how dark he is. The man is taken aback since he was not anticipating this question. He asks her to repeat her query thinking that he has misheard her. He has not and he feels further insulted because he has been objectified, almost like the telephone he holds in his hand. He is dumbfounded and confused. This is apparent from the fact that he has been asked to press 'Button A. Button B'. He is angered by this attempt to turn him into an automaton. He is brought back to his senses by the stench in the phone booth but nevertheless struggles to regain his mental equilibrium. In his anger, he describes himself as a West African Sepia as it says in his passport. When he uses this colour to describe himself he reacts against the lady's racism and forces her into submission with his superior vocabulary. The lady is intrigued and asks him to describe the colour; he responds that it is similar to brunette. She rejects him by saying that this colour is too dark.

The limited choice of words as well as the simple object of comparison that the poet uses to describe the landlady suggests her to be a linguistically impoverished character despite her affluent economic status. Furthermore, her tone was cold and bordering on aggressiveness, as is established by the persona's interpretation accurately brought forth with clarity and specificity – 'Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light / Impersonality.' This angers him further and he responds by saying that his hands and the soles of his feet are white. It does not matter and the woman slams the phone down leaving



the black man with no avenues of expressing his rage. Ironically even though he is angry he feels the need to beg her to reconsider her decision simply because he needs a place to stay. Through this, the poet is trying to suggest that as long as the black man tries to create his identity along western models he will never achieve self hood. To do this he has to reject western notions and create a parameter of judgement based on what he feels is important. For example, the man does not feel inferior at his description in the passport; he is perturbed only when it is translated into a system the white woman can understand.

Colour plays a crucial role in the poem. The most important colour is that of his skin which is black. Red is also an important colour in the poem: it refers to the rage he feels at being objectified. Interestingly the colour does not stand alone – it is projected through objects that are red: the omnibus, the pillar box and the booth. The colour black hints not just at racial discrimination but also prejudice. The landlady has no idea what the colour sepia means and feels no need to know more. As far as she is concerned, her colour white is most important and all others are irrelevant. The man, however, does not accept defeat. He describes himself in a plethora of colours: his face is black, his soles and hands are peroxide blonde, his bottom raven. By doing so, not only does he regain some of his identity, but also puts the woman in her place by using a quasi-polite tone even as he insults her and makes her look at his bottom. Thus, ironically he tries to suggest that the lady sees the world only as black or white without any other shades. This also underlines the fact that for all its liberalism and humanism, Western society still looks at itself and the world around it in terms of colour where racial discrimination is deeply entrenched and unquestioned. The fact that the locale of the conversation is London, a city embodying the ideals of the western world makes it only more damning.

The image of the woman's lipstick coated lips holding a gold cigarette holder implies that he sees her as a social superior. This image is further bolstered with the image of the reed bus crushing the black tar. The basis of the woman rejecting to lease her house to the man is because of the prejudiced notion that African Americans are a savage and wild lot. The idea is that the white community suppresses the blacks. Irony also plays an important role: the black man feels the need to confess that he is black. At some level he feels disadvantaged by his colour and seems to have faith in the belief that black is inferior to white. The poem then can also be seen as an attempt to proclaim a personal space. Thus, the poem becomes an experiment in the organic revolution Soyinka talks about. The irony is at work in the poem when the lady is described in polite, civilized terms even when she proves herself to be racist and prejudicial. The difference in the diction of the two characters only sharpens the irony: the savage has better command on the alien language than the owner of the language. Words like 'pipped,' 'rancid,'

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and ‘spectroscopic’ are not words that a savage brute would have in his vocabulary (lines 9, 12, 23). The speaker’s intelligence is further shown through his use of sarcasm and wit in response to the landlady’s questions. Although he pretends politeness through the entire conversation, he includes subtle meanings in his speech. The fact that a black man could outwit and make a white woman seem foolish shows the irony in judging people based on their skin colour.

### 13.2.2 *Dedication*: Summary and Critical Appreciation

In the poem *Dedication* the poet has displayed an attitude of hope and guidance. He is urging the people of Nigeria that they should be optimistic for the future of their country’s newly attained independence and at the same time should also preserve the cultural heritage of the land. The factual image of the dung floor preventing the fall of the lizard implies that the earth is the protector of humans. It also implicates that humans must reciprocate this and let no harm come to the earth.

The poet is hoping that future of Nigeria will be secure as he is looking forward for good times for the sake of his daughter; he guides her to protect the earth for existence.

#### Summary of the Poem

*Dedication* is a poem which highlights the ceremony of *isomoloruku*. In the Yoruba tradition, it is a ceremony which takes place on the eighth day of the baby’s birth. It is the naming ceremony and on this day the family and friends gather and the baby’s name is officially announced. The poem’s title has two implications, the first being that it was actually the naming/dedication ceremony of the poet’s daughter who was named as Moremi, and secondly, the poem symbolizes the dedication which Moremi will require to preserve life on earth. The poet is not only guiding his daughter about the importance of nurturing the motherland but at the same time he is giving the message to all the natives of Nigeria about preserving not only the newly acquired independence but also to preserve and nurture its natural beauty. The poem is meant to make the readers realize that the principle of circle of life is based on give and take.

In the first part of the poem, the poet is telling his daughter how the earth protects the man and all living beings on the earth. He talks about the way in which different elements of nature— the sun, rain, water, wind and so forth constantly provide shelter and protect the living beings on this earth. In the concluding stanzas of the poem, the poet guides his daughter about her role in preserving the earth.

### Analysis of the Poem

The poet has brought out the connection between nature and man through the poem. He has employed beautiful imagery to send his message to the readers of the poem. The poem elaborates on the natural beauty of Africa. The poet manages to connect with his readers through his guiding tone and optimistic note. He has used the poem to stress upon the cycle of life. The poem opens with the birth of a child which further reinforces the central idea of the poem. The title of the poem is completely apt as it focuses on how earth is dedicated to living beings in order to protect them and expects the same dedication from them so that no harm comes to nature.

### Literary Devices in the Poem

The poem has been composed using several devices. The poet has used metaphors and imagery throughout the poem. For example, a powerful metaphor has been used in the lines where the poet states, “your tongue arch/ to scorpion tail. . .” This powerful metaphor relays the tongue of a crying baby at the time of birth to the tail of a scorpion, the way it reacts when it feels threatened. The readers understand that the child is born with a poisonous tongue which becomes a source of trouble for the parents. Simultaneously, it also denotes the understanding that the baby’s wavelike movement of the tongue is due to the passage of air through the lungs and all babies cry at the time of the birth.

The poem has many illustrations of imagery, such as the line in which the poet states, “Earth’s honeyed milk, wine of the only rib/ Now role your tongue in honey till your cheeks are/ Swarming honeycombs- your world needs sweetening child. . .” This imagery is so strong that the readers are able to literally taste, feel and comprehend. They are able to taste the sweetness of the nectar which is life and it is meant only for the new born. The poet here is alluding to the mother’s milk which is solely for the baby who rolls out his tongue while suckling on to his mother’s chest. The cheeks of the contented baby look as if they are filled with honeycombs. The poet has incorporated the images very sensibly and has produced a very intense poem. The extraordinary factual images attack the senses of the readers and help in generating the emotions desired by the poet.

The tone in the poem is of delight and admiration as the poem opens with a child’s birth and subsequently turns into a spiritual journey which is full of hope and guidance. The poet has purposely used a gentle tone while it is talking about the various elements of nature. He has used many positive and feel-good words to maintain the gentle and delightful tone throughout the poem. The inclusion of words like baobab, roots and rain indicate towards the loving earth.

### NOTES

NOTES

**Check Your Progress**

1. When and where was Wole Soyinka born?
2. In which year was *Telephone Conversation* published?
3. What does the poem *Dedication* highlight?

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**13.3 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS**

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1. Nigerian poet Wole Soyinka was born on 13 July 1934 in western Nigeria.
  2. *Telephone Conversation* was published in 1963.
  3. The poem *Dedication* highlights the ceremony of isomoloruku.
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**13.4 SUMMARY**

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- Nigerian poet Wole Soyinka was born in Isara, on 13 July 1934. He was a member of the Yoruba tribe; during his childhood he was taught the tales about the tribal gods and folktale by his grandfather, who was a respected member of the tribe.
- Soyinka began writing at a very young age and many of his poems and short stories were regularly published in *Black Orpheus*, the Nigerian literary magazine.
- In 1963 his renowned poem *Telephone Conversation* was published in the collection titled *Modern Poetry from Africa*.
- It was during his exiled years he wrote two works of prose, the first was titled as *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature* and the second was *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis*. In 1999, his focus was back on his country and he wrote *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*.
- Some of the significant collections of Wole Soyinka as a poet, dramatist and essayist are *Idanre and Other Poems* (1967), *Ogun Abibiman* (1976), *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems* (1988), and *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* (2002).
- The poems written by Wole Soyinka reflect the paradoxes inherent in his culture. The African traditions have influenced his cultural upbringing.
- The poem *Telephone Conversation* talks of a telephone conversation between a black man and a white woman that reveals racial prejudices.

- In the poem, a black man is looking for a place to stay. He likes the location of the lady's home: it is in a neutral territory; so neutral that no racial incidents have occurred there.
- The limited choice of words as well as the simple object of comparison that the poet uses to describe the landlady suggests her to be a linguistically impoverished character despite her affluent economic status.
- Colour plays a crucial role in the poem. The most important colour is that of his skin which is black. Red is also an important colour in the poem: it refers to the rage he feels at being objectified.
- In the poem *Dedication* the poet has displayed an attitude of hope and guidance. He is urging the people of Nigeria that they should be optimistic for the future of their country's newly attained independence and at the same time should also preserve the cultural heritage of the land.
- *Dedication* is a poem which highlights the ceremony of *isomoloruku*. In the Yoruba tradition, it is a ceremony which takes place on the eighth day of the baby's birth.

## NOTES

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### 13.5 KEY WORDS

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- **Motif:** It is a literary term that is an idea, object, or concept that repeats itself throughout a text.
- **Pantheon:** It refers to all the gods recognized by a particular religion.

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### 13.6 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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#### Short Answer Questions

1. Prepare a brief biographical sketch of Wole Soyinka.
2. Mention the prominent works of Wole Soyinka.

#### Long Answer Questions

1. How has Soyinka tried to liberate Africa by creating the concept of New Africa?
2. Why has the poet given so much emphasis on colour?
3. Discuss the post-colonial aspect of the poem, *Telephone Conversation*.

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## 13.7 FURTHER READINGS

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### NOTES

O'Neill, Michael. 2010. *The Cambridge History of English Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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## UNIT 14 JEAN ARASANAYAGAM

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### Structure

- 14.0 Introduction
- 14.1 Objectives
- 14.2 Jean Arasanayagam: An Introduction
  - 14.2.1 *In the Month of July*: Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 14.3 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 14.4 Summary
- 14.5 Key Words
- 14.6 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 14.7 Further Readings

### NOTES

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### 14.0 INTRODUCTION

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This unit will introduce you to the life of Jean Arasanayagam and her poem *In the Month of July*. The poem is an account of a man who was attempting to get away from his chasers and in the bargain gets attacked by a mob resulting in his death. Jean Arasanayagam is a poet and writer of fiction and non-fiction. Her work has been published widely in Sri Lanka and abroad.

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### 14.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the life and works of Jean Arasanayagam
- Critically analyse the poem *In the Month of July*

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### 14.2 JEAN ARASANAYAGAM: AN INTRODUCTION

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The English language poet and creative writer Jean Arasanayagam was born in Kandy, Sri Lanka in 1931. Most of her work focuses on the religious and ethnic unrest prevailing in Sri Lanka. The poet's husband, Thiyagarajah Arasanayagam along with her two daughters, Devasundari and Parvathi are acclaimed writers. Jean Arasanayagam is regarded as a prominent postcolonial writer of Sri Lanka. In her writing career she has published many internationally acclaimed poems. The poems written by her are seen as critical political analysis about the problems of racial discrimination and political violence which are prevalent in modern Sri Lanka due to the searing enmity between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority.

In 1984, Jean Arasanayagam received the National Award for Literature. She belongs to the Burgher family and got married to a Tamil this led to a

## NOTES

situation of identity crisis as the Tamil linkage after her marriage made her a casualty of the ethno-political violence during 1983. The riots started in the month of July and her family like many others had to live in refugee camps in order to stay safe. She has called this as a horrible experience which tore her world apart. Her poetry has always been influenced by the varied experiences of her life. However, the events of 1983 completely changed the themes and outlook of her poems. The poems written after 1983 deal with the issue of identity crisis in the country and the shocking moments associated with the outbreak of violence in the country. Her poems often try to deal with her personal status in the country which does not consider her as a citizen.

Her renowned poem *The Ruined Gopuram* describes the destruction of the Hindu temple. The poem describes the way the temple was turned into ruins and along with that it gives details of the sufferings and pain of the people during this destruction. The poem primarily highlights the belief of people in spite of suffering misery.

Her poems are descriptive to such an extent that they evoke intense and emotional feelings among the readers. The opening lines of her poems are very impactful and *The Ruined Gopuram* is no exception. In just few words, the poet is able to portray the destruction which took place at the once beautiful landscape. “white sands and palmyra fonds”, “freakishly black” highlighting the unusual atmosphere prevailing in the poem. The words used by the poet are brilliant, for example, “Beside the broken walls”. The word ‘broken’ signifies the deplorable condition of the complete event. The poet’s imagery is very powerful. The shift in the scenes is supported by strong images.

The poet employs excellent symbolism and words which add depth and glamour to her poems. Her style of diction is par excellence as it is able to generate strong emotions amongst the readers. The poet is able to transfer the feeling of chaos to her readers with the skillful use of poetic devices.

Besides writing emotionally strong poems the poet has written poems like *Garden*. *Garden* is recognized as a significant work of the poem and is closely associated with the Biblical themes of the Garden of Eden denoting enticement, immorality and eviction. The poem’s visual imagery is linked with other themes of the poet such as colonialism, cross-bred and quest for true identity.

In addition, the poet admits that “Much of my work begins as a self-questioning, as a kind of private dialogue with myself”. The poet criticizes people who think for the wellbeing of their blood relations and do not care about the rest of the people. Through her poems she wants to arouse humanitarian feelings so that the hearts of people are filled with compassion, empathy and thoughtfulness as she strongly believes that these qualities will help in removing feelings of hatred and racial discrimination among the

people. Jean Arasanayagam has been able to maintain her popularity through her literary works.

*In the Month of July* is another poem which is as expressive as her other poems especially *The Ruined Gopuram*. The poem is a part of the collection titled *Apocalypse* published after the riots of 1983. The poet's description of the man who dies while escaping his pursuers is able to convey the agony of people during the unrest of 1983. The poet remembers the aiming game which children played with stones. In this poem these pebbles have been transformed into bullets causing the death of the man. The individual in the poem becomes a victim of ethnic riots. He was in the process of getting away from the people who were trying to kill him but got attacked by a larger group and died.

## NOTES

### 14.2.1 *In the Month of July: Summary and Critical Appreciation*

The poet starts the poem by remembering the game of pebbles played by children. She further adds that the game though just involved throwing stones but it required some amount of skill. She begins by recalling a game that children play with pebbles. It requires a certain skill she continues— 'Skillfully tossing them from back of hand to palm requiring a certain skill'. The pebbles are replaced by stones and rocks as the children grow old. The stones are able to smash the skulls. The innocent childhood game is no longer harmless fun as it has developed into a weapon for killing people.

The man climbs a tree in order to escape the mob but the mob begins to aim stones at him which makes him fall from the tree, thus, killing him. A man fleeing from the mobs, "... climbed a tree / The mob aimed stones at him / Until they got him down" and the poet in these lines depicts the extent of violence and inhuman behaviour which was displayed by people during the riots. The poet's remark that the man was slippery with blood just goes on to tell that he was already badly hurt and almost dead when he fell from the tree. "slippery with blood, his body already battered". Through these words the poet tries to amplify the inhumane behavior of the mob.

### Critical Analysis of the Poem

*In the month of July*, the poet tries to draw a connection between the pebble throwing game played in the childhood and the stone pelting during riots. The poet was very disturbed by the riots and she remembers the minutest of its details. Her poem tries to reflect upon her personal identity crisis along with the tortures faced by people. Death is a recurring theme of her poems in the collection as she had personally witnessed violent killings and barely survived the riots of July 1983.

According to Sri Lankan poet and writer, Reginald Siriwardena most of poems in *Apocalypse* 83 indicate the 'collective sense of horror and tragedy'

## NOTES

(qtd. in Sjöbohm 38) and point towards the poet's personal experience and talk about her fears and vulnerable state of mind.

The poet has equated the constant exercising of violence on the Tamils to a game— a fun activity or an entertaining sight. She is trying to depict that violence is an inherent aspect of human nature and how the innocent game of throwing pebbles has got converted into throwing of stones with the potential to kill human beings. The mob is able to kill the man by throwing stones at him which once again depicts the strong inhuman aspect of human nature. Most of the people in the mob did not even know the man on the tree.

The image of the victim being slippery with blood even while he was on the tree conveys the poet's attempt to highlight the extent of violence "slippery with blood, his body already battered". The exhibition of violence has taken the form of sacrificial refection which took place during ancient times. Through her poetic devices in the poem the poet not only wishes to criticize the discrimination but along with that she wants to present her understanding of few of the actual events which are a part of history and have been presented by other writers as well. She has attempted to provide her version of the riots as witnessed by her. The events in her poems are not a figment of her imagination. The fiction created around historical events can have many interpretations as remarked by Hayden White. According to White, historical as well as fiction writers create 'a verbal image of 'reality'' as the writers are at liberty to project their own perception. There is no way to authenticate the various versions as they are merely the reproduction of the writer's mind and self-interpretation.

Her poems make the readers relive the events which took place during the year 1983. The poet has made a self-admission that

*Nothing's important but the poems  
I have written, the lives I have lived  
In each of them Which once destroyed  
Can never be remembered*

In these lines, the poet emphasis that poems help her in keeping her memories alive and she will be able to remember the stories behind the death of so many innocent people. Her poems on violence during that period provide evidence against all those manipulative political figures who try to justify the racial riots in one way or the other.

Therefore, her poems can be identified as her declaration of resistance, her efforts to speak against the wrong and the public procrastination against the defilement of minority rights. She has used several narrative and metaphorical techniques in order to increase the effect of ferocity in her poem *The Month of July*. She has outrightly accused people who approved violence in the name of ethnic discrimination. They were the ones who pulled

the shots from behind the scenes and ignored the loss to life and property. These political minds were selfishly looking for personal gain.

Jean Arasanayagam

### Check Your Progress

1. When and where was Jean Arasanayagam born?
2. In which year did Jean Arasanayagam receive the National award for Literature?

### NOTES

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## 14.3 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

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1. Jean Arasanayagam was born in Kandy, Sri Lanka in 1931.
2. In 1984, Jean Arasanayagam received the National Award for Literature.

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## 14.4 SUMMARY

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- The English language poet and creative writer Jean Arasanayagam was born in Kandy, Sri Lanka in 1931.
- In 1984, Jean Arasanayagam received the National Award for Literature.
- Her renowned poem *The Ruined Gopuram* describes the destruction of the Hindu temple.
- *In the Month of July* is another poem which is as expressive as her other poems especially *The Ruined Gopuram*.
- *In the month of July*, the poet tries to draw a connection between the pebble throwing game played in the childhood and the stone pelting during riots.

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## 14.5 KEY WORDS

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- **Colonialism:** It is the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically.
- **Sinhalese:** This term is used for the members of a people originally from northern India, now forming the majority of the population of Sri Lanka.

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## 14.6 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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### NOTES

#### Short Answer Questions

1. Write a short note on the life and works of Jean Arasanayagam.
2. What were the major influences on the life of Jean Arasanayagam?

#### Long Answer Questions

1. What does the title of the poem *In the Month of July* allude to?
2. Evaluate the poem *In the Month of July*.

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## 14.7 FURTHER READINGS

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- O'Neill, Michael. 2010. *The Cambridge History of English Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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