

## **PREFACE**

In the curricular structure introduced by this University for students of Post Graduate degree programme, the opportunity to pursue Post Graduate course in Subjects introduced by this University is equally available to all learners. Instead of being guided by any presumption about ability level, it would perhaps stand to reason if receptivity of a learner is judged in the course of the learning process. That would be entirely in keeping with the objectives of open education which does not believe in artificial differentiation.

Keeping this in view, study materials of the Post Graduate level in different subjects are being prepared on the basis of a well laid-out syllabus. The course structure combines the best elements in the approved syllabi of Central and State Universities in respective subjects. It has been so designed as to be upgradable with the addition of new information as well as results of fresh thinking and analysis.

The accepted methodology of distance education has been followed in the preparation of these study materials. Cooperation in every form of experienced scholars is indispensable for a work of this kind. We, therefore, owe an enormous debt of gratitude to everyone whose tireless efforts went into the writing, editing and devising of a proper lay-out of the materials. Practically speaking, their role amounts to an involvement in 'invisible teaching'. For, whoever makes use of these study materials would virtually derive the benefit of learning under their collective care without each being seen by the other.

The more a learner would seriously pursue these study materials the easier it will be for him or her to reach out to larger horizons of a subject. Care has also been taken to make the language lucid and presentation attractive so that they may be rated as quality self-learning materials. If anything remains still obscure or difficult to follow, arrangements are there to come to terms with them through the counselling sessions regularly available at the network of study centres set up by the University.

Needless to add, a great deal of these efforts is still experimental—in fact, pioneering in certain areas. Naturally, there is every possibility of some lapse or deficiency here and there. However, these do admit of rectification and further improvement in due course. On the whole, therefore, these study materials are expected to evoke wider appreciation the more they receive serious attention of all concerned.

**Professor (Dr.) Subho Sankar Sarkar**  
Vice-Chancellor

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## **Module-1 Ben Jonson : Volpone**

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## **1. Introduction : Jonson and Renaissance English Comedy**

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Ben Jonson saw himself and was seen by many of his contemporaries, as a dramatist occupying a unique position among sixteenth and early seventeenth century English dramatists, a fact simply and memorably acknowledged in the words engraved on the marble square over his grave in Westminster Abbey : 'O rare Ben Jonson', Yet Jonson's uniqueness does not lie in his adoption of the role of a professional playwright, for he followed the example of many other men of the time, even well-educated people like the 'University wits', in turning to playwriting for the popular theatres that were coming up in London and its suburbs. Like Marlowe, Greene and Lyly, Jonson gravitated towards the theatre because more traditional career opportunities were not available. Like Shakespeare, Jonson became an actor-playwright, though he wrote plays for several companies of actors, working perhaps as a free-lancer instead of being permanently attached to any one company.

Jonson's uniqueness lies in the kind of comedy which he wrote and which, he convinced himself and never tired of persuading others, was completely different from the plays written by his contemporaries. Jonson did not immediately find his own distinctive voice, however, for he started his writing career with plays which could not have been very different from the common run of dramatic entertainments of the time he also collaborated with other playwrights to churn out both comedies and tragedies. These early plays are lost, but it has been suggested that since they were not very different from the common dramatic works of the time, Jonson suppressed them to give greater substance to the image of

himself as a writer who deliberately went against prevailing dramatic tastes. Jonson did prove his originality, however, with his first stage success, Every Man in His Humour. As the prologue added to the revised version of the play (published in the 1616 Folio of Jonson's works) asserts, the playwright was determined to turn his back on contemporary dramatic practice and avoid the 'ill customs' of the age. The Folio title-page carries a Horatian motto which aptly expresses Jonson's independence of spirit: 'Content with a few readers, I do not labour that the crowd may admire me'. The prologue to Every Man In His Humour also indicates very clearly that Jonson's theory of comedy was essentially classical, though we should do well to remember that his comedy was also indebted to native English dramatic traditions like those of the morality play, trickster comedy, and citizen drama. Jonson did not actually create the distinctive kind of comedy known as the comedy of humours, for Chapman's An Humourous Day's Mirth was the first English Comedy in which many of the characters are identified with a dominant 'humour' or mood, very much like 'mania' in modern psychological idiom, though the theory of humours was medieval in origin and a physiological explanation of character traits. According to this theory, an imbalance of the four humours or bodily fluids—blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile—gave rise to a dominant temperament. Jonson and his contemporaries used the term 'humour' to refer to various kinds of eccentricities and affectations, as well as obsessions which often assume monstrous proportions. In this last sense, the conception of 'humour' has some relevance even to Jonson's later comedies. The humorous theory is also particularly well suited to Jonson's satiric aim of holding up for ridicule various kinds of irrational behaviour.

Jonson, thus, was not the first playwright to adopt the form of the comedy of humours, but he made some distinctive contributions to the form. First, he extended the scope of the form by including within it elements derived from non-dramatic satire, especially that of Hall, Marston, Donne and Nashe. The traits of behaviour and personality ridiculed by these satirists are more vividly depicted and acquire greater dramatic vitality in Jonson's play. Secondly; Jonson's satiric norms are clearer and stricter than those of his contemporaries and predecessors, just as his exposure of follies and affectations was more merciless. His 'humourous' characters are usually punished so severely that it is sometimes felt that the punishment exceeds the norms of comedy. The question has often been raised about the way both the knaves and the gulls are punished in Volpone. Thirdly, Jonson's condemnation of the 'humorous' characters is far more explicit than what we find in Chapman, who often presents affectations as amusing rather than punishable. The amused contemplation of human folly and its acceptance as a fact of the human condition, which we find in Shakespeare's comedies, were alien to Jonson's aims as a dramatist. Jonson's chief aim as a dramatist was to ridicule follies and affectations and in this respect he was following the tradition of classical satiric comedy. Jonson's intention to follow a course different from that of most of his contemporaries including Shakespeare, is more evident in his later comedies,

beginning with Every Man out of His Humour, a play which he characterised in the Induction as 'strange, and of a particular kind by itself, somewhat like Vetus Comoedia [That is, Greek Old Comedy]', The only practitioner of Old Comedy whose plays have survived is Aristophanes, and even in his case, only eleven have survived, while the plays of two other practitioners of this form of comedy whose names we know-Cratinus and Eupolis-survive in fragments. Jonson must have found a close affinity between his comic aim of driving the 'humorous' characters out of their affectations and the aggressive spirit of Aristophanic comedy. Other classical authors whom Jonson admired and followed are Pindar, Horace, Martial, Juvenal, Persius, Plautus, Terence and Quintilian. He saw their works not as products of a remote culture but as sources of wisdom and critical guidance for a serious writer seeking to offer a criticism of contemporary life. Jonson never imitated these authors uncritically, but adapted classical raw materials to contemporary social and political mores. The truths gleaned by him from the classical authors were enriched by his own shrewd and accurate observation of life. (Any annotated edition of Volpone will make you aware not only of the numerous classical reminiscences in the play but of Jonson's creative application of themes and ideas from classical authors to contemporary conditions.) It is therefore appropriate that Jonson's classicism should be regarded as the most easily recognizable mark of his comic art. But an over-emphasis on this undoubtedly important aspect of his distinctive genius might lead us to ignore both his habitual independence of mind and his frequent use of native English traditions. In the Induction to Every Man out of His Humour, Jonson argues that modern writers of comedy should alter the form to suit the requirements of the age just as the ancient classical authors and Indeed, in his great middle comedies, such as Volpone and The Alchemist, he went beyond both ancient and modern authors by creatively adapting classical themes and conventions to his own very different satiric aims. In Every Man out of His Humour and Cynthia's Revels he extended the comedy of humours into a unique form of 'comical satire', a phrase that aptly sums up the distinctive form and spirit of most of Jonson's comedies. Satire was the natural bent of his mind and it was reinforced by his intimate knowledge of classical satiric comedy. Indeed, his comical satires were often too anti-authoritarian and following the example of Aristophanes, too libellous to be tolerated by the rigid censorship laws of England. He did not enjoy the freedom which Aristophanes had to pillory his contemporaries and therefore several of his works provoked difficulties with the authorities. He was also involved in a mutual and bitterly recriminatory satiric quarrel with some of his fellow writers and this phase of English dramatic history is known as the War of the Theatres. Jonson also had a lofty conception of poetry and of himself as an advocate of the high poetic art, a conception which repeatedly led him to denounce the poets whom he contemptuously dismissed as "poetasters". He believed moreover that a satirist should have a didactic aim. It has been aptly remarked that for him aesthetics was finally at the service of ethics, Sidney had argued in his Apology for Poetry that the ideal comedy should be didactic and this



observation like many other pronouncements of Sidney in that treatise, exactly echoes Jonson's preoccupations. Thus Sidney emphasised that not only should comedy be an 'imitation of the common errors of life', but that these errors should be represented in the most ridiculous and scornful way, so that 'it is impossible- that any one beholder can be content to be such a one' In these observations we may find much of Jonson's aim and method in his own comedies. By drawing on classical source and by harnessing his natural inclination and talent for satire as well as his gift for poetry, Jonson wanted to create a new form of comedy, for which the most appropriate phrase is 'comical satire'. Jonson's great middle comedies-Volpone, Epicene and The Alchemist- are also, from one point of view comical satires, far removed from the romantic comedy with love as its main theme that Shakespeare and most of his contemporaries practised. Jonson vehemently protested, moreover, against the non-naturalistic mode of much contemporary comedy, preferring a realistic and original kind of comedy which would present men rather than monsters. He was opposed to the common violation of the classical unities of time, place and action. In the prologue to Every Man in His Humour he makes it plain that he found the theatrical conventions of the time absurdly unrealistic leading to crude violations of the unities in representing first a newly born child who then 'shoot[s] up in one beard and wead/past three score years". Jonson himself wanted to follow the classical unities and forms, though he recognised the need to adapt these to his own purposes. The action of Volpone takes place on a single day, not because Aristotle so required, but because Jonson needed speed and inevitability for his action. The true dramatist, he averred, 'will not run away from nature' and should present before his audience facts rather than fantasy. In following classical rules he would not, therefore be servile. In the prologue to Volpone he declares, speaking of himself in the third person. The laws of time, place, persons he observeth/From no needful rule he swerveth'. He did not consider the rule regarding unity of action 'needful' and so he introduced a sub-plot. He was also aware that the punishments meted out to the gulls and knaves in the end might appear to many too severe,. and violative of the comic tone and unity of impression as it was classically conceived.

### **Summing Up**

Jonson was right to think of himself as different from most of his contemporaries. He made classical authors and classical rules of drama the foundation of his comedy, though he 'Englished' his classical sources in such a way that they could be applied to contemporary conditions of which he was one of the shrewdest and most accurate observers. Though individual comedies have their own distinctive characteristics, most of Jonson's comedies can be aptly described as comical satires. His classical learnings and his predilection for satire make his kind of comedy completely different from romantic comedy which was the chosen form for most of his contemporaries.

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## 1.1. Text and Performance

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One of his contemporaries, Thomas Dekkar, taunted Jonson for his alleged slowness of composition, calling him a 'nasty tortoise' in *Satiromastix*. But *Volpone* was composed in five weeks during the Winter of 1605-06; Jonson announces with pride in the Prologue that "five weeks fully penned it". It was first performed by Shakespeare's company then known as the King's Men at the Globe in February or March, 1606. It was subsequently performed at Oxford and Cambridge in 1606 or 1607. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the play was frequently performed, though many of its Indecent and coarse passages were sometimes omitted in performance. The subplot was considered by some eighteenth century critics as an excrescence and almost totally dropped in the 1771 performance of the play at Covent Garden. No performance of the play is recorded between 1785 and 1921. Since 1921 it has become the most frequently revived non-Shakespearean play of the Renaissance or early modern period. Distinguished twentieth-century actors like Ralph Richardson, Anthony Quayle, Paul Scofield and Ben Kingsely appeared in the roles of Volpone and Mosca in some noteworthy productions of the play. In several of these productions the costume and characterisation strongly stressed the beast fable elements of the play; for example, in a 1968 production, the Would-be-s were represented as parrots. Film and television adaptations as well as adaptations for opera and musical comedy attest to the play's popularity.

### 1.1.2. Volpone : Synopsis

A bare summary of the plot is given by Jonson himself in 'The argument' following the acrostic (as he also does in *The Alchemist*), following the usual practice of Plautus. Volpone, a magnifico, that is, a nobleman of Venice, is old wealthy and childless, though Mosca hints later in the play that the dwarf, Nano, the eunuch Castrone and the hermaphrodite, Androgyno, who make up his unnatural household, are his illegitimate children. Volpone has no relatives either and plots with his parasite Mosca to defame a group of men whose greed knows no bounds and who are anxious to inherit Volpone's wealth. These legacy-hunters are the gulls whose avarice leads them to behave like puppets in the hands of the knaves, Volpone and Mosca. Each of the legacy-hunters is told separately by Mosca that the former is going to inherit all Volpone's wealth, while Volpone himself pretends to be so seriously ill that he has to be constantly bedridden. The three would-be heirs-Voltore, an advocate, Corbaccio, an old gentleman, and Corvino, a merchant-vie with earth other in showering gifts on the apparently dying Volpone. They are prepared to go further, as the plot gradually reveals. Corbaccio is ready to disinherit his only son, Bonario, and make Volpone his heir, Corvino, an absurdly jealous husband, has a beautiful wife, Celia Mosca's account of her beauty prompts his master to see Celia. He adopts the disguise of the mountebank Scotto of Mantua and has a glimpse of Celia at her

window. Since Celia's beauty provokes a strong desire for her in Volpone. Mosca agrees to procure her for his master. Mosca persuades Corvino that Celia's company is what the desperately ill Volpone needs to be restored to health and Corvino threatens, pleads with and abuses his virtuous wife and forces her to enter Volpone's bedroom, because Mosca has assured him that Corvino will be named Volpone's heir.

Meanwhile Mosca brings Corbaccio's son Bonario to Volpone's house so that he can overhear his father disown him. Mosca also asks Bonario to hide himself in the house, and it is done without Volpone's knowledge. When Corbaccio arrives Mosca tells him the lie that Bonario has been looking for his father with drawn sword, determined to kill both Corbaccio and Volpone. This clever lie makes Corbaccio more determined to disinherit his son and he actually gives Mosca his will in which Volpone is named as his sole heir. Celia, who has refused to obey her husband's command that she should share Volpone's bed, is sought to be seduced by the old man, who then makes an attempt to rape her. At this point Bonario comes out of his hiding place and rescues Celia. To prevent Volpone's exposure by Bonario, Mosca persuades Corvino and Corbaccio to go to court and make false accusations against both Bonario and Celia. Voltore is their advocate and uses his eloquence to convince the magistrates (Avocation) that Bonario has an illicit affair with Celia, that they were caught in the act and that Bonario having come to Volpone's house in order to kill his father and having failed to find Corbaccio, dragged the mortally sick Volpone from his bed and accused the latter of attempted rape. These allegations are supported by Corbaccio and Corvino and Celia and Bonario are ordered to be taken into custody.

But Volpone wants to torment the legacy-hunters further and thinks of a new mischief. He names Mosca as his heir and spreads the false news of his own death. The greedy gulls come to Volpone's house, each expecting to have been named Volpone's heir, and are furious when Mosca informs them that he is now the sole heir, Volpone relishes the discomfiture of the fortune hunters as he watches the whole scene from a place of concealment. Still seeking to torment the legacy-hunters, Volpone in the disguise of a court official pursues them through the streets of Venice pouring ridicule on their extreme greed and total discomfiture. These new developments brings about a change in the legacy-hunters' plans and Voltore tells the court, just when Celia and Bonario are about to be sentenced, that they are innocent and that Mosca is the man to blame for everything. But Voltore is led into further absurdity when Volpone still disguised as a court official, whispers to him that Mosca's master is very much alive and that Voltore continues to be Volpones' heir. Voltore now pleads with great ingenuity that he is susceptible to fits of insanity and that his earlier statement about Celia and Bonario being innocent was the result of such a fit. Mosca, whose new found wealth and status encourage one of the magistrates to think of him as his prospective son-in-law, is now sent for. When Volpone whispers to him to

inform the court that his master is alive, Mosca at first pretends that he does not recognise his master and then demands from Volpone half of everything he owns. Volpone first refuses and then accepts Mosca's demand, but the latter, intoxicated by his own cleverness, indicates that he wants more. When he magistrates order that Volpone, still in disguise, should be whipped for insolence, he discards his disguise, reveals his identity and discloses the whole conspiracy from the beginning. Celia and Bonario are declared innocent and freed by the court which, however orders severe punishments for Volpone, Mosca and the greedy legacy-hunters.

The subplot of the play, far from being an excrescence, is a comic counterpoint to the main plot, as we shall see. It involves a foolish and talkative English traveller, Sir Politic Would-be, and his wife, a woman who pretends to be a know-all and who wants to seduce Volpone, She also turns out to be a legacy-hunter. A younger and more intelligent Englishman, Peregrine, teaches Sir Politic a bitter lesson by playing a practical joke on him. The subplot is the vehicle of a good deal of incisive topical satire on the follies of the English.

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## 1.2 Aspects of the play : Jonson's handling of his sources

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Volpone has been called a triumph of creative assimilation. Jonson's extensive classical reading, his close acquaintance with native English literary traditions, and his detailed and varied studies are here fused together in a brilliant whole, Jonson's borrowings from various sources are invariably appropriate to the dramatic context and yet the effect is not one of careful labour and cold calculation, indeed the effect has been aptly described as one of a lighting flash of illumination. The theme of legacy hunting can be found in Greek New Comedy, but Jonson's actual sources were the works of classical Latin satirists : Horace's *Satires*, Petronius's *Satyricon*! and Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead*, All these tall stories of greedy hairs who flatter wealthy people in the hope of inheriting their wealth and are eventually outwitted by their victims. The closest parallel to Volpone is Petronius's *Satyricon* which describes a fictional town, where the roguish Enmolpus, a bachelor millionaire, pretends that he is dying, in order to cheat the legacy hunting inhabitants Petronius describes the legacy hunters metaphorically as carrion-eaters and this slight hint inspires Jonson to give his play the shape of an extended beast fable for which he went to medieval and Renaissance sources. Of course the ultimate source for the beast fable-elements in the play is classical Aesop's Fables, Jonson's more immediate source was however, the medieval beast-epic of Reynard the fox, translated by William Caxton in 1481 as *The History of Reynard the Fox*. It tells the story of a sly fox who pretends to be dying in order to deceive and entrap predatory birds and to rape the crow's wife. In the beast-epic, the fox appears in many guises; he is tried for his crimes, but always escapes the final judgement. The names of the main characters, besides indicating their beast or bird-like characteristics, suggest Jonson's debt to his friend John Florio, author of *A World of Words* (1598), an Italian-English dictionary.

Thus Volpone, an Italian name, means, according to Piano's definition, an 'old fox' and a 'sneaking burking wily deceiver'. In the play he has the fox's characteristic red hair, The character also remains us of two of Aesop's fables : The fox and the Grapes and the Fox, the Raven and the Cheese Mosca is any kind of fly, including parasites. He is called in the play's list of characters Volpone's Parasite, that is, a hanger-on who flatters the wealthy in exchange for hospitality. A parasite is also a Latin comedy type, frequently appearing in the plays of Plautus. The name Voltore means, according to Florio's dictionary, a ravenous bird called a vulture'. It was usual to describe legacy-hunters as vultures, because they battened to the dead. Corbaccio's name suggests a 'filthy great raven' (Florio). The croaking of the raven was supposed to foretell death. The raven was also supposed to possess keen sight and hearing and these traits are parodied by Corbaccio's deafness and myopia. Corbaccio is also raven-like in his attitude to his son, for ravens were supposed, by Elizabethans to be negligent parents, Convino, on the other hand, is a gorcrow or carrion crow. Since the crow is united for life with us partner, Corvino, who does not care for marital fidelity, is ironically named. One of the means by which the subplot is integrated with the main plot is that it too suggests the beast fable through its principal Sir Politic Would-be and Lady Would-be are parrot like in their incessant chatter, while Peregrine means a pilgrim hawk, an apt name for a traveller. It has been pointed out by commentators that in Greek myth hawks, sacred to Apollo, the God of enlightenment attacked ignorant fools. Yet another element of the beast fable is to be found in Sir Pol's comical attempt to disguise himself as a tortoise. That the play is going to follow the pattern of a beast fable is evident from Volpone's own words in Act I scene ii :

'Vulture, Kite,  
Rave and gorcrow, all my birds of prey  
That think me turning carcass, now they come.'

As for the remaining characters, apart from the anonymous groups of merchants, officers, magistrates, women attending on Lady Would-be, some are physically abnormal, as their names indicate-Nano the dwarf, Castrone the eunuch and Androgyno the hermaphrodite one, that is both male and female'. Names continue to be important with characters like Celia, the heavenly woman, and Bonario, 'honest good, uncorrupt' (Florio).

It is believed by many that Jonson had a real life original for Volpone - the businessman Thomas Sutton. Jonson's sketch of a contemporary in his comedy can be compared with Aristophanes's libellous portrait of Socrates in The Clouds, Like Volpone, Sutton was of a retiring disposition and surrounded by flatterers who believed that they would inherit his wealth. Sutton, however, outwitted these legacy-hunters by changing his will every six months. Sutton even had a Mosca in his agent, John Lawe, who managed his business. Sutton made plans to endow a charitable hospital and made the necessary arrangements before his death. Jonson must have thought that Sutton's money should be most properly utilised in building a hospital, for this is how Volpone's confiscated estate is to be used,

according to the judgement of the magistrates at the end of the Play. Helen Ostovich has therefore concluded that the correlation between Sutton and Volpone are too extensive to be accidental and too topical to be ignored. The fact that Sutton later offered Jonson a pension of £40 shows that he took the playwright's satire seriously. In the dedicatory epistle to his comedy, Jonson strenuously denies that he had any 'uncharitable thought' or meant any 'malicious slander', but significantly adds that his satire is directed at 'Creatures for their insolencies worthy to be taxed'. Sutton must have served as a contemporary example of the corrupting power of gold, Aristophanes, Jonson used obscenity and elements of crude physical force to enliven his satire. He claims that unlike that contemporaries, who only aimed to provoke laughter at any cost, he had a serious moral purpose. In a similar way, Aristophanes speaks of his rivals in the Clouds and tells the audience, "If you find their plays funny, then do not laugh at mine."

One of Jonson's effective means for making his satire incisive is the use of commedia dell'arte elements in his play. This form of comedy developed in sixteenth century Italy and had a great influence on European drama. The success of this kind of comedy depended to a great extent on the comic ingenuity of the performers and the entertainment had element of force, mime, clownish buffoonery. The main characters were stock comic types like Pantaloon. The Captain, a Doctor, servants. The main female characters also were stock types. The adoption of an Italian mode of comedy is brilliantly suited to a play set in Italy. Each commedia actor usually has a single obsession, which resembles a Jonsonian humour, and these obsessions are often defined by their physical or verbal traits, such as Corbaccio's deafness and Corvino's jealousy. The characters in the commedia are presented as wearing masques, which are comparable with the beast fable names of Jonson's characters. The pantaloon, who is the main laughing stock is sometimes a weak old man, as Volpone pretends to be, and sometimes a dictatorial father, like Corbaccio, the child of this father, like Bonario, in the end becomes independent. Sometimes the pantaloon is an ageing husband who thinks that he is cuckolded by his young wife, as Corvino believed in Act II scan V, II, 23-26, Voltore corresponds to the pedantic Doctor of commedia dell'arte in his pompous speeches in court. The chief comic trickster is the Harlequin whose traditional costume consists of a mask and foxtail and who can change his personality like a chameleon. The similarity with Volpone, especially in his roleplaying, is unmistakable. The Harlequin may have a servant who seeks to emulate his master, as Mosca does in the last Act of Jonson's play.

Jonson's imagination makes a remarkable fusion of these and other disparate sources in Volpone, The sub-plot involving Sir Politic and Lady Would-be by which Jonson links the Venetian setting and characters to his immediate audience also has classical, models, especially the character of lady Pol whose talkativeness derives from the talkative, domineering women ridiculed by Juvenal in his Satire VI, while the details of her literary talk and her indefatigable spirit which enables her to brush aside intended rebuffs and turn



these very vebuffs into fresh matter for conversation were suggested by a declamation of the Greek rhetorician Libanius. The first entertainment provided for Volpone by the freaks in Act I scene ii has for its main source Lucian's dialogue Somnium. The play is full of reminiscences of other classical and Renaissance authors, details of which can be found in any good edition (some editions are listed in the section Recommended Reading), There is for example, Jonson's parody of the golden Age from Book I of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (I.i 12.II-20). Volpone's description of ugly old age (I iv II. 144-159) is based on Juvenal's Satire X, while his song to Celia in Act III Scene vii is loosely based on Catullus's Ode 5. Numerous phrases in the play echo classical authors like Seneca, Pliny Martial and Plautus. The fool's song in Act I scene ii was influenced by Erasmus's Praise of Folly. Details for the satire on doctors and lawyers were taken by Jonson from Cornelius Agrippa's The Vanity and Uncertainty of Art and Sciences, chapters 83 and 93. Just as Sutton's name has been suggested as the original of Volpone, it has been argued that the portrait of Sir Politic Would-be too was based on a contemporary. Jonson may have acted as a government agent or spy and the man to whom he reported his finding was Sir Robert Cecil, Elizabeth's investigator into political conspiracies. But Jonson also suffered periodic accusations of sedition because of his pungent topical satires. The potrait of Sir Pol a kind of Machiavel who delights in masterminding plots, may have been based on Cecil and perhaps reflects Jonson's growing disillusionment with Cecil and his awareness of the absurd lengths to which the whole business of espionage could be taken. Another possible original for Sir Pol was Sir Henry Wotton, who was a friend of Jonson's and who was named ambassador to Venice in 1604. Like Sir Pol, Wotton was a gossip, very much interested in foreign customs and languages and had a habit of keeping notes and papers. Yet another model for Sir Pol was Anthony Sherley, the famous adventurer and world-traveller who plotted to become ambassador to Persia and was eventually disgraced,

### **Let Us Sum Up**

Thus Jonson had numerous and diverse sources, classical medieval and Renaissance, as well as contemporary figures. Such diversity of source material not only shows Jonson's learning but also reveals his extraordinary ability to assimilate a rich diversity of material and apply it to contemporary manners, customs and values. The fact that he took only five weeks to compose Volpone suggests that all this rich storehouse of knowledge, far from being laboriously called from different sources, was part and parcel of his dramatic imagination,

### **1.2.1 Volpone : Setting and Background**

The entire action of Volpone takes place in Venice. In selecting Venice as the setting of his comedy Jonson was no doubt motivated chiefly by the common Jacobean notion of Italy as the home of venice criminality. This notion is strikingly expressed in the almost proverbial saying that 'An Englishman Italianate is a devil incarnate'. Jonson's choice of Italy was also influenced by his reading of Machiavelli. These are echoes of the Italian

political thinker In *Volpone*: Sir Politic should like very much to model himself upon “Nic Machiavel, while an important ingredient in The plot of the play is Machiavelli’s advice in The Prince that one should not involve in one’s plot an associate who could prove treacherous, Jonson’s use of commedia dell’arte elements in his play is peculiarly appropriate to the setting, for the commedia was Venice’s indigenous dramatic tradition. Several other aspects of Venetian life, society and politics should be kept in mind in order to appreciate Jonson’s choice of setting. Venice in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was the most cosmopolitan city of Europe. A large number of foreigners either settled permanently in the city or visited it because of its culture, climate and its status as a centre of trade and commerce. Venice was also famous for its wealth, its political intrigues, its architectural beauty and its courtesans. Many Englishmen in particular were attracted by the reputation of this city as the centre of degeneracy and perversion and Volpone is full of references to this typically English view of Venice.

Though a popular tourist spot for the English, Venice was rarely selected as the setting for English plays: Two of Shakespeare’s plays, The Merchant of Venice and Othello, are set in Venice and a comparison between Shakespeare’s and Jonson’s use of the background is unavoidable and should be instructive. For Shakespeare the main appeal of Venice was as an exotic setting and though his plays refer to such well known features of Venice as the Rialto, the Jewish merchants, the courtesans, the navy and legal system, these references reveal the kind of inadequate knowledge which most Europeans who never visited the city possessed. Middleton also used the Venetian setting for Blurt Master Constable, a play which has little local colour. Though Jonson never visited Venice, his play reveals a detailed knowledge of all aspects of Venetian life and portrays the Venetian scene, especially the area near the Piazza di San Marco, convincingly, Volpone is in this respect unique among Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. But Jonson derived his detailed knowledge of Venetian landmarks like the Piazza di San Marco, the Rialto, and of the commercial and social aspects of Venetian life like its shipping, its markets, its mountebanks and courtesans, from secondary sources like his Italian friends, the musician Antonio Ferrobosco and John Florio, the author of the English-Italian dictionary. The World of Words, who supplied details of Venetian customs and expressions. Jonson’s knowledge of the Venetian government and legal system came from Gasperino Contarini’s De Magistratibus et Republica Venetorum.

Jonson’s choice of Venice as the setting of his play, far from making the work remote from the concerns of his time and his country, actually gave him greater freedom to deal with the vicious traits of the acquisitive society which were as pronounced in Renaissance England as in the Italy of that period. The corrupting power of gold in late Elizabethan and early Jacobean English society is amply documented in history as well as in Jonson’s middle comedies. Jonson’s anti-acquisitive attitude is especially evident in Volpone and The Alchemist. Responding to the comment of Jonson’s best known editors, Herford and



Simpson that the theme of legacy-hunting was not at home in Jacobean England, L.C Knights rightly pointed out that its real significance was as a manifestation human greed, peculiarly appropriate in the era that was then beginning'. The greed for riches, which is the main subject of Volpone, was not only characteristic of the Jacobean age but also a defining phase of the rise of capitalism in the early modern period. Volpone's morning hymn to gold in Act I scene 1 strikes the keynote of the play. Volpone himself is more anxious to acquire wealth by adopting cunning devices than in its mere possession, but the legacy-hunters are chillingly real embodiments of greed. Even among birds of prey, raven, crow and vulture represent a narrow and particularly predatory group differing only in their circumstances and not in their bent. Jonson's portrayal of the four judges completes his incisive satire on greed assuming the proportions of mania. When Mosca is revealed as Volpone's heir, the judges adopt a very polite tone in speaking to him, while the Fourth Judge considers him 'a fit match for my daughter'. Corbaccio is infirm, deaf and suffers from weak eyesight, but greed for wealth gives a new vitality to this virtually lifeless old man. Then there is Volpone's lust which like the avarice of the legacy hunters, results in a terrifying disregard of other human beings. It is not surprising that questions have sometimes been raised regarding the appropriateness of such monstrous wickedness as material for comedy but Jonson seems to consider it as funny enough to be the right stuff for his satiric comedy. But many might agree with Enid Welsford when she suggests in The Fool that 'when the mood of contempt is predominant-as for instance at the end of Volpone-one feels that comedy is losing its character and turning into pure satire'. Some might feel that Volpone is a black comedy, a form of comedy which displays a masked cynicism and in which the wit is mordant and the humour sardonic.

### **1.2.2 Themes**

The rise of capitalism in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods was due to a large extent to the huge amounts of gold and silver which were acquired from the colonised New World. A new class of financiers came into being and the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few people led to a cult of individualism as well as to luxury and ostentation display of wealth. The beast fable framework of Volpone gives Jonson the perfect opportunity to dramatize the dangers of greed and individualism. In the beast fable we find animals behaving like human beings, but in Volpone human beings descend to the level of beasts in their single-minded pursuit of wealth. A Venetian lawyer, an old gentleman and a wealthy merchant deny their human nature in their greed for gold which in the words of Volpone's hymn to gold in the opening scene, 'mak'st men do all things' and makes even hell 'worth heaven'. The exclusive pursuit of gold as the most desirable end in an acquisitive society is the major theme of Jonson's satiric comedy. Classical satire on legacy hunting also exposed the excesses of greed and its delusions. Jonson's play focuses on the self-delusions of the legacy-hunters. Each of them believes that he is the sole heir of Volpone,

is driven by Volpone and Mosca to extreme demonstrations of his affection for Volpone and is in the end left empty-handed. The actions of the legacy-hunters show that gold transcends 'All style of joy in children, parents friends and can override 'virtue, fame,/ Honour, and all things else' (I.i). Jonson adds a further ironic twist to this theme by extending the idea of cheating to the arch-cheaters. Volpone and Mosca. Volpone announces that he is dead and that Mosca is his heir. He does this in order to intensify the agony of the legacy-hunters. But this new plan turns out to be the 'the fox-trap' in which he himself is caught. Here Volpone overreaches himself and this overreaching is entirely consistent with his character. There are enough hints that Volpone's folly lies in his susceptibility to Mosca's flattering words and his fondness for a variety of disguises. Volpone's various disguises are an important aspect of the theme of transformation which is introduced by Mosca's masque in Act I. In a burlesque of the Pythagorean theory of transmigration of souls, the hermaphrodite Androgynus has now become the repository of the soul of Pythagoras which first came from the God Apollo. Again, the powder which Volpone, disguised as a mountebank, offers the crowd of onlookers in Act II scene ii, came from Apollo, but the powder which turned Venus into a goddess has now been reduced to a hair-rinse or mouth-wash. When noble essences are debased and degraded, monstrous follies come into being.

Yet another important theme in Volpone is lust, brilliantly dramatized in Volpone's passion for Celia. His lust for Celia is the first significant plot development that leads to Volpone's downhill slide. The linking of lust to the theme of legacy hunting was suggested to Jonson by his classical sources. In Horace's Satires II. V-Teiresias tells Ulysses that he should hand over his wife Penelope, the classical model of feminine constancy, to a rich libertine whose favours Ulysses seeks. Petronius's Satyricon shows Eumolpus gaining sexual pleasure from the daughter of one of his suitors, despite the fact that Eumolpus is apparently impotent and paralysed. Jonson surpasses his classical models first by making Corvino an extremely jealous husband, so that his offer of his wife Celia to Volpone not only shows how the greed of gold can override all values but appears as a comically shocking reversal and secondly by using her resistance to temptations to expose the distorted values of Corvino and Volpone.

Jonson's handling of disguise reveals what has been called his 'deep-rooted antitheatricalism', which considers transformations of shape inauthentic. We may admire the skill with which Volpone plays many roles in the play, moving from one to another with obvious relish, such as high appearance as Scoto of Mantua and his impersonation of a dying man; but his disguises always prove disastrous. For his impersonation of Scoto he receives a sound beating and his appearance in the guise of a commandatore mocking his victims leads Voltore to reveal the conspiracy to the Venetian court. In the end Volpone is unable to regain Mosea's loyalty and has to choose between being outwitted by his parasite, and confessing his mischief and receiving punishment. It is certainly ironical that

Mosca, who applauds Volpone's skill in performing a variety of roles, is himself no mean actor and finally takes advantage of Volpone's pretence to make Mosca his heir.

## Let Us Sum Up

In Choosing Venice as the setting of Volpone Jonson was not seeking to give his play an exotic appeal. The choice of setting in fact enabled him to expose the greed and viciousness which were as characteristic of Renaissance England as of Italy. Jonson invented the sub-plot containing English travellers to underline further the relevance of the play to his English audience. The main themes of his play, apart from legacy hunting, are the craving for gold in a society which was witnessing the rise of individualism and capitalism, the destructive power of lust and the transformation and shape-shifting effected by the two main characters' supreme skill in acting, a skill which however leads both the disaster. Many other themes in Volpone have been emphasised by recent critics and only few may be mentioned : conspiracy, corruption, excess, folly, manipulation, materialism, misanthropy, misogyny, paranoia, patronage, pride, sadism, scheming, self-love sickness, spying, corrupt authority, impotent innocence, perverse art. An alert reading of the play will enable you to trace these themes.

### 1.2.3 Structure

Many of Jonson's prologues and inductions to his plays are statements of his artistic aims and the prologue to Volpone is no exception. It is a manifesto in which the playwright paraphrases Horace's famous dictum that art should provide both pleasure and instruction. Jonson proudly asserts that 'In all his poems still hath been this measure :/To mix profit with your pleasure'. Jonson also asserts that his play has been constructed according to classical principles, observing the rules of classical decorum : 'The laws of time, place, persons he observeth./From no needful rule he swerveth'. Thus Jonson limits his dramatic action to about twenty four hours and to a single place (Venice). But he also asserts that he is not obliged to follow unnecessary rules. In the Epistle he admits that the harshness of the catastrophe 'may, in the strict rigour of comic law, meet with censure', though he also justifies it on the grounds that the 'goings out' of several ancient classical comedies are not 'joyful' and that the ending of his comedy underlines its didactic efficacy.

Another of Jonson's apparent departures from classical rules of construction is in giving his play a double plot. Dryden said that Jonson did not exactly observe 'the unity of design' in Volpone. John Dennis described the Politic Would-be pair as 'excrescences' which have nothing to do with the design of the play. In his Timber Jonson declared that only two things should be considered to ensure that the action is a tragedy or a comedy grows 'till the necessity asks a conclusion' and that these two things are : the unity of time and the scope for 'digression and Art'. Thus even if we agree with Dennis and others that the sub-plot is a digression, we must also accept that it does not violate Jonson's artistic principles. In

fact, however, the sub-plot is not a digression but linked to the main plot on the thematic level. Sir Politic Would-be, his wife, and Peregrine are the three principal characters in the sub plot and all of them derive their essence, like the chief characters of the main plot, from the beast fable. Sir Politic is the chattering poll parrot, his wife is a more obnoxious specimen of the same species, while Peregrine is the falcon, who, unlike the carrion birds in the main plot preys on other birds and animals and not on decaying flesh. The falcon is swift, bold, and beautiful in its movement. The falcon is an appropriate agent to expose the folly of the parrots. Another characteristic of parrots is that they are mimics and Sir Pol and his wife imitate their environment. They also supply an element of bulesque in comically imitating, without of course knowing it, the actions of the main characters.

Sir Pol is the Englishman who tries to Italianize himself. He is quintessential slow-witted Englishman who poses as a sophisticated, cosmopolitan known-all committing glibly on affairs of the state. He is fond of devising complicated plans, as seen most vividly in his design for a machine to detect plague (iv.i). His views on international intrigue reveal the same love for complicated ideas. Through Sir Pol, Jonson Italianizes English Plots, a good example of which was the Gunpowder Plot, a conspiracy to blow up James I and his parliament on 5 November 1605. Sir Pol has been aptly described by Helen Ostorich as ‘a double agent theatrically, if not politically’. The audience has mixed feelings about him, enjoying a feeling of superiority to him as an absurdly eccentric Englishman in a foreign land and sharing his apprehension that secret agents are a threat to the security and stability of European governments. Since Jonson was – Catholic and knew some of the conspirators in the gunpowder plot, he was treated with suspicion by busybodies like Sir Pol though Jonson was entirely innocent. The original audience of Volpone were no doubt aware of the atmosphere of intrigue and suspicion which prevailed in the royal court.

Sir Pol’s obsession with plots, state secrets and Machiavellian intrigue also represents his attempt to Italianize himself. His wife imitates Italian fashions and even practises the art of seduction in which the Venetians were supposed to be proficient. Sir Pol and his wife caricature the characters of the main plot too. Sir pol for example, is a comic travesty of Volpone, the would-be politician while Volpone is the real politician, whose plans are cleverly executed. Like Volpone, Sir pol is full of admiration for his own cleverness and harbours plans for amassing wealth, but he only talks about these plans, unable to execute them. Lady Would-be in her turn imitates the legacy-hunters, and her extravagantly absurd behaviour parodies the more sinister, gestures of Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino. In her jealousy she is like Corvino, in her pedantry she reminds us of Voltore, while like Corbaccio, she makes compromising proposals to Mosca who can therefore blackmail her. Like the three main legacy-hunters, she becomes Mosca’s dupe, blinder and more self-deluded than any of the three men. In their mimicry, Sir Pol and his wife, like Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino, emphasise a major theme of the play-that it is unnatural for human

beings to imitate animals and birds. By duplicating the habits of beasts, the characters in both the main plot and the sub plot make a travesty of humanity.

Another effects of the interaction between the main plot and the subplot is the heightening of Celia's chastity by contrasting it with Lady Would-be's lecherousness. Lady Would-be is very fond of cosmetics and makes explicit sexual advances to Volpone, In fact, the thwarting of Lady Would-be's attempted seduction of Volpone sets the stage for Volpone's attempted seduction of Celia. Celia's behaviour during this attempted seduction is a telling contrast to the conduct of Lady Would-be. While Lady Would-be is busy applying extravagant make-up, Celia, after realizing that Volpone lusts after her beauty, prays that her beautiful face may be disfigured by poison in order to prevent Volpone's lust. For Lady Would-be, the cosmetic art is an essential prelude to sexual conquest; for Celia, it is the desired disfigurement of her face which becomes a mark of her chastity Again, Lady Would-be tries to ape Italian vices, but Celia's behaviour shows how uncontented she is by the prevailing immorality of Venice. Yet another reminder of the moral degeneration prevailing in Venice is to be found in Sir Pol's grandiose schemes for money-making. He tells Peregrine that he knows many sure ways of making money and only needs the help of a trustworthy assistant to execute those schemes. This could have provided a neat parallel with the Volpone-Mosca relationship if only Peregrine were willing to play Mosca to Sir Pol's Volpone. But Peregrine merely wants to know the particulars of Sir Pol's plans. However, while Sir Pol is outlining his schemes to Peregrine, Lady Would-be suddenly bursts in on her husband, reminding us of an earlier scene where Corvino finds his wife conversing with a mountebank. Corvino beats away the mountebank, Lady Would-be abuses Peregrine. Both Corvino and Lady Would-be swear by 'honour', but both discard it when it proves inconvenient. Corvino forgets honour when it stands in the way of his avarice, his desire to inherit Volpone's wealth. Lady Would-be forgets all about honour when she discovers that Peregrine is a young gentleman and not, as she had suspected, a harlot in disguise. During the process of perverting justice in Act IV we see many instances of unnatural, beastly behaviour. The irony is that the characters who are beast-like in nature accuse the innocent people of behaving unnaturally. Thus Corbaccio calls his son 'the mere portent of nature, a Monster of men, swine, goat, wolf parricide'. Lady Would-be, whose testimony almost clinches the false case against Celia, brands the latter as 'chameleon harlot' and 'hyena'. Corvino has earlier called Celia a crocodile, implying that she sheds false tears. Thus 'the beast characters in the play display an unerring faculty for describing the innocent as beasts'. It is only Bonario and Celia who are free from the tendency of all the other characters to try to become what they are not. In this overall tendency towards metamorphosis Bonario and Celia strike a different note in always being true to their essential natures. In the unnatural state of Venice, it is these

unchanging characters who are castigated as chameleons and hyenas, In the monstrous perversion of justice during the first trial the avocation express their horror at the unnaturalness of Celia and Bonario.

However, another trial is to follow in the course of which Volpone overreaches himself as does Mosca, and both are given harsh sentences. Before we come to that part of the play it will be interesting to see what happens to the sub-plot characters. Lady Would-be has made sexual overtures not only to Volpone but also to Mosca and the latter threatens her with blackmail : ‘use the poor Sir Pol, your knight, well; /For fear I tell some riddles; go, be melancholy’ (v.iii). Thus the pedantic lady, who had earlier reeled off different exotic ways of curing Volpone’s melancholy, is now told to treat herself for the same ailment. It is true that the justice meted out to her is less severe than that administered to the legacy hunters, but that is because a parrot is less dangerous than a crow or a vulture. Lady Would-be therefore, is left to correct her folly privately. ‘Much the same kind of treatment is received by her husband. Sir Pol, though his final humiliation is comparable to some extent with what happens to Volpone in the end. The group of mercatori organised by Peregrine perform the office of the avocatori who pronounce judgement on Volpone, On being told by Peregrine perform the office of the avocatori who pronounce judgement on Volpone. On being told by Peregrine that his persecutors will put him to the rack, Sir Pol climbs into an ‘engine’ designed by himself a tortoise shell. But the merchants, by stamping and poking the shell, force Sir Pol to come out of it. This scene has been severely criticised by many, but its relevance to the theme of the play is unquestionable. The play has shown throughout men imitating beasts and theme of mimicry reaches a visual climax in this farcical scene. Sir Pol, the most imitative of the characters, puts on the shape of an animal, The final unshelling of the tortoise provides a visual prefiguration of the fox in the last scene. However, Sir Pol, like his wife, displays folly rather than vice and is chastised by ridicule rather than any kind of severe punishment, unlike the vicious characters, again, he is purged of his folly by the medicine of ridicule.

## **Let Us Sum Up**

It should be clear by now that the subplot is relevant to the total structure of Volpone. Jonson offers a contrast between Italian vice and English folly. The Would-be couple, who embody English folly, are like parrots who mimic Italian vice. The vice itself is also a kind of mimicry, though much more venal in nature and much more comprehensive, These two aspects of unnaturalness are linked dramatically by the beast fable which provides the basis of the play.

### **1.2.4 The Endling**

The ending of Volpone has aroused a great deal of critical controversy, it is often said



that this ending is contrary to the spirit of comedy because of the severity of the punishments visited on the main characters. Jonson himself anticipated this criticism; as he says in his Dedicatory Epistle, he wanted 'to put the snaffle in their mouths that cry out, we never punish vice in our interludes'. Besides, we may detect a comic appropriateness in the sentences delivered on the beast-like characters. As the first Avocatore concludes 'Mischiefs feed/ Like beasts till they be fat, and then 'they bleed'. The five criminals are imprisoned in the slapes chosen by them : Mosca is a galley slave, Volpone is to be crippled in a way that matches his moral nature, Voltore is banished from the legal profession, Corbaccio is despatched to a monastery, and Corvino is turned into an object of public ridicule, wearing an ass's cap. Jonson maintains, moreover, that the end of comedy is not always joyful and cites in this connection the example of some ancient classical writers. Jonson does not mention any classical dramatist by name, but it has been plausibly argued by Helen Ostovich that he has Aristophanes in mind, for Plautus and Terence offer no models of unhappy comedy. On the other hand, in Aristophanes's Ecclesiazusae everyone is statically punished.

Ostovich, who cites Aristophanes's play as an example of comedy which does not end joyfully, calls Ecclesiazusae a 'black comedy'. T.S. Eliot thought that the terms 'burlesque' and 'farce' were more suitable to Jonsonian comedy. Some others maintain that a comedy like Volpone could not be easily accommodated even within the flexible notions of comic art held by the Elizabethans. A possible explanation for the 'unmistakable difference in tone between Volpone and Jonson's earlier comedies has been found in the fact that Jonson wrote Volpone after his failure with the tragedy, Sejanus. The stern catastrophe of Volpone and the criminality of the characters, it has been argued, come nearer to Jonson's own view of tragedy; he himself had stated in relation to an early comedy like Every Man in His Humour, that the aim of comedy was to 'sport with human follies, not with crime'. Coleridge suggested that the play would be more like a comedy if the role of Volpone could be diminished and if Celia were the ward or niece of Corvino rather than his wife; an ideally happy ending then would be to cast Bonario as Celia's lover.

But there are indications that Jonson was preparing the audience for the stem catastrophe of the play, In the first place, the cruel sentences delivered by the Avocatori are consistent with the tone of sadistic superiority that runs throughout the play, Secondly, as the play moves towards its close there are more frequent reminders of the bestiality of the characters than there have been earlier. It may also be suggested that the manner and sequence of the punishment are anticlimatic. Mosca and Volpone are sentenced first. Our attention is then directed to the minor criminals, to the less serious and more comical retributions. A farcical note is struck when Corbaccio, of whose deafness much fun has been made earlier in the play, is even unable to hear the sentence that has been pronounced. An ironic light is also thrown on the Avocatori's manner of dispensing justice.

They are confused by the contradictory reports of Volpone's death They are impressed by Mosca and find him attractive, one of them even thinking of Mosca as a prospective son-in-law. Therefore the severity of their judgements may be taken as evidence of their venality. So far as Volpone himself is concerned, he is no doubt unnerved by the first trial, but recovers sufficiently to turn the tables on the lesser rogues, unmasking them and dismissing them with contempt. He even pours scorn on his punishment by punning on the word 'mortifying' in his response to the first Avvocato's pronouncement of judgement : 'This is called mortifying of a fox'. There is multiple pun here, for 'mortifying' means : (1) neutralising or destroying power; (2) subjugating through bodily discipline; (3) humiliating, (4) disposing of property for charitable or public purpose (5) hanging game to make it tender for cooking. Besides, Volpone comes back to deliver the epilogue in which he declares, 'though the fox be punished by the laws, / He yet doth hope there is no suffering due / for any fact which he hath done 'gainst you'. He even asks the audience's to 'clap your hands' if they decide not to censure him. It may be suggested that the audience applause for his versatility and vitality acquits him, as Volpone appeals beyond moral condemnation to an appreciation of his role playing. The way Volpone slips out of the plots of the play into the theatre is also reminiscent of the Reynard beast epic in which the fox adopts many disguises, is tried for his crimes which include rape and feigning death, but always escapes the final sentence of the court. Our general feeling is that the fox, his victims and the court which sits in judgement over them, all are equally corrupt and that retribution is therefore pointless. The audience is appropriately asked to 'fare jovially'.

### **Let Us Sum Up**

The ending of Volpone is very different from the traditional happy ending that is often supposed to be essential for comedy; it is also unlike the conclusions of Jonson's own earlier comedies in which follies are corrected by being subjected to the medicine of laughter. Some therefore call Volpone a 'black comedy', arguing that the extremely severe ways in which the main characters are punished darken the mood of the play; However, the punishments delivered by the judges raise questions about the judges' own motives and conduct. Jonson wanted his comedy to end with the punishment of vice. But by suggesting that the judges are almost as venal as the criminals Jonson portrays the very systems of legal justice ironically. A further irony occurs when Volpone manages to escape the sentence delivered on him and speaks the epilogue in which he reminds us of the proverbial ability of the fox to escape punishment despite repeated trials.

With a play like Volpone, written in Jonson's characteristically condensed and allusive style, it is difficult to decide how much should constitute essential annotation. The student



will need a good annotated edition of the play. (Some good editions are recommended below.)

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### 1.3 Questions

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Answer each of the following questions in not more than 50 words.

1. What do the names Volpone, Mosca, Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino mean?
2. What traits of the characters mentioned in Q1 are indicated by their names?
3. What does the nickname 'Sir Pol' suggest? In what way is he contrasted with Peregrine?
4. What are the unities? Does Jonson maintain the unities in his play?
5. Briefly mention the reasons for which Jonson is considered unique among Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists.
6. Mention the titles of four plays by Jonson apart from Volpone. Did he write any tragedies?

Answer the following questions (You should limit your answer to 300 words) :

1. Critically examine Jonson's achievement as a comic dramatist.
2. Comment on Jonson's handling of his sources in Volpone.
3. What is the significance of the Venetian setting and background in Volpone?
4. Bring out the major themes of Volpone.
5. Analyse the structure of Volpone and show how the subplot is related to the main plot.
6. Comment on the ending of Volpone. Would you call the ending dramatically satisfactory?

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### 1.4 Recommended Reading

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1. Cay, W. David. Ben Jonson, A Literary Life. London : Macmillan, 1995.
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# Hamlet

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## 1.0 Objectives

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In this module you will read about the various dimensions of the character Hamlet and the play Hamlet and become aware of the many interpretations of both the prince and the play that have emerged, The list shown in the structure gives you the themes and aspects of Hamlet treated in various sections.

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## 1.1 Cast of Characters

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CLAUDIUS king of Denmark, and Hamlet's uncle. The villain of the tragedy, Claudius is not entirely a heartless monster. Constantly stung by his conscience, Claudius finds

himself enmeshed further and further in the web that he had spun when he murdered his brother and married his brother's widow.

HAMLET, the protagonist of the tragedy. More nonsense has been written about Hamlet than about any other of Shakespeare's characters. His character has been variously interpreted both in books and on the stage. He most certainly is not mad; he specifically mentions (I, v) that he intends to put on "an antic disposition." Also the notion that Hamlet's is the tragedy of the man who cannot make put his mind has been exploded by enlightened critical opinion. Probably the exigencies of the five-act structure and the necessity of creating a full-length play are responsible for Hamlet's vacillations. Shakespeare, in order to string out the action, must motivate each failure of Hamlet to avenge his father. He has motivated these failures carefully, if not always credibly. One must remember, further, that much of the material for the play was filtered from Saxo Grammaticus' *Historica Danica* through a lost revenge play on the subject (probably by Kyd); that the pseudo-madness in Saxo is motivated; and that the Ghost, the play within a play, and the fencing scene in all probability come from the lost play, which Shakespeare undoubtedly reworked. From internal evidence we can see Hamlet as a sensitive, yet active, young man, Cf. Ophelia's characterization of him. (III, i).

POLONIUS, a fussy old courtier, father of Ophelia and Laertes. He functions in the tragedy as the butt of Hamlet's jokes, and through his death, as the final motivation for the exile of Hamlet to England.

HORATIO, close friend of and obviously a foil for Hamlet. Hamlet characterizes him as a stoic, a man whose imagination is not his master. His stoicism complements and sets off Hamlet's imaginativeness.

LEARTES, son of Polonius and brother of Ophelia. Also a foil for Hamlet, Leartes is quick to demand revenge for his father's murder and is immediately ready to carry it out.

GERTRUDE, Hamlet's mother and wife of Claudius. Gertrude's participation in Claudius' murder of the elder Hamlet is never quite clear. The Ghost advises Hamlet not to harm his mother; yet at various places in the play she seems cognizant of, if not an accessory to, the murder.

OPHELIA, daughter of Polonius and sister of Leartes. One of the sweetest and most helpless of Shakespeare's tragic women, Ophelia also has a function as a foil to Hamlet; her real madness quite obviously sets off Hamlet's feigned madness.

### **Supporting Characters**

BERNARDO and MARCELLUS, officers, FRANCISCO, a soldier.

CORNELIUS and VOLTIMAND, ambassadors from Claudius to Fortinbras

FORTINBRAS, Prince of Norway, who inherits the Danish kingdom, GHOST of Hamlet's father.

GUILDENSTERN and ROSENCRANTZ, school friends of Hamlet, used by Claudius to spy on his nephew.

(A gentleman; REYNALDO, servant to Polonius; a Priest; Players, Two Clowns, grave-diggers, famous comic figures; a Norwegian Captain; English Ambassadors; Lords; Ladies; Officers; Soldiers; Sailors; Messengers; Attendants)

(Place : Elsinore, Denmark)

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## 1.2 Background

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BACKGROUND, The date of the composition of Hamlet is highly conjectural. Most opinion leans towards 1600 or 1601. There are three distinct texts; the mangled first quarto of 1603, the better second quarto of 1604, and the First Folio version (1932). All three are ordinarily used with the greatest reliance being placed on the First Folio text. The ultimate source of Hamlet is to be found in the *Historian Danica* by Saxo Grammaticus (c. 1200). The tale was adapted by Belleforest in his *Histories Tragiques* (1576). The real difficulty in ascertaining the direct source of the tragedy lies in the fact that there is a lost play on the subject between Belleforest's tale and Shakespeare's play.

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## 1.3 Act By Act Analysis

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ACT I. Denmark is in a turmoil. The elder Hamlet, king of Denmark, has died suddenly and mysteriously. When Prince Hamlet is summoned from school at Wittenberg for his father's funeral, he discovers that his uncle Claudius has succeeded to the throne and has, with unseemly haste, married Gertrude, Hamlet's mother and widow of the late king. Hamlet wishes to return to the University, but Claudius refuses permission; however, when Laertes asks the King's consent to go to Paris, it is immediately given (ii). In addition, there are rumours of an invasion of Denmark by young Fortinbras of Norway, whose father the elder Hamlet slew in battle. Furthermore, the guards of a section of the battlements at Elsinore have been nightly disturbed by a ghost which strangely resembles the late King. They have informed Horatio, who watches with them and sees the ghost, which, however, refuses to speak to him. Horatio, in turn, determines to bring Hamlet to the battlements; for he feels that the apparition may speak to the Prince (1). In the meantime, Hamlet is revolted by his mother's incestuous marriage and is nearly ready to renounce life. When Horatio tells him of the apparition, he excitedly consents to share the watch that night (ii). On the battlements the Ghost appears to Hamlet, and drawing him away from the others (iv), speaks to him. It tells him that it is his father's spirit and informs him that his father has been treacherously slain by Claudius, who poured poison in his father's ears. Hamlet

swears revenge on Claudius, and, without sharing his information with his companions, tells them that he intends to play mad; he then enjoins them to strict secrecy (v). Meanwhile, Laertes and Polonius forbid Hamlet's beloved Ophelia to trust the Prince or even to see him again in private. Laertes leaves for France after receiving some commonplace advice from his father (iii).

ACT II. Hamlet's apparent madness has upset the court. When Polonius discovers that Hamlet has acted in a peculiar manner while with Ophelia, he is sure that the Prince has gone mad from love (i), Polonius springs his discovery on Claudius; and the two plan to bring Hamlet and Ophelia together, to hide, and to watch the reaction of the Prince. Meanwhile, a number of people arrive at court: the Ambassadors to Norway, who bring word that Fortinbras has no hostile designs on Denmark, but merely intends to pass through Denmark to attack Poland; and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two school friends of Hamlet, who have been sent for by Claudius to act as spies on his nephew. With these friends a band of players has also arrived. Hamlet determines to use the players to make certain that the Ghost has not been a devil in disguise, and that his uncle is really the murderer (ii).

ACT III. The king and Polonius spring their trap on Hamlet, but he spurns Ophelia. Claudius, convinced that love is not the cause of Hamlet's madness, decides to send him to England under the supervision of Guildenstern and Rosencratz (i). Before this plan can be effected, Hamlet, who has revised the players' tragedy to include a sequence directly drawn from the crimes of Claudius and Gertrude, is convinced of Claudius' guilt by watching his uncle's reactions during the performance; he now intends to consummate his revenge (ii). Meanwhile, when Hamlet is summoned to his mother's chamber, Polonius offers to hide himself in the room to listen to Hamlet's conversation with Gertrude. On his way to see his mother, Hamlet discovers Claudius unprotected while at his prayers; but he refuses to murder his uncle now because he feels that, being at prayer, Claudius' soul will go directly to Heaven. (Claudius had killed the elder Hamlet without giving him a chance to make his confession or to receive unaction) (iii). Hamlet's threatening actions frighten the queen so that she calls out for help. When there is an answering cry behind the arras. Hamlet, thinking the cry comes from his uncle, stabs Polonius, who is hiding there. Hamlet's words and gestures confirm his mother's opinion that he is mad; for when he sees the Ghost stride into the chamber, she is unable to perceive it. However, he receives her promise to be neutral toward him (iv).

ACT IV. Hamlet's murder of Polonius makes his departure for England imperative (i). Rosencratz and Guildenstern accompany him, with a sealed request that the king of England execute the Prince upon his arrival. (ii) Meanwhile, Ophelia is driven mad by the knowledge that her beloved has killed her father. (v) and dies – probably a suicide (vii). Laertes returns from Paris and demands revenge for his father's murder. (vi) Claudius suggests a fencing match between Laertes and Hamlet, who has escaped from his

ship and is returning to Denmark. Laertes suggests that he anoint his own sword with a deadly poison, and Claudius offers to furnish a poisoned chalice, should the sword fail (vii).

ACT V. At Ophelia's burial Laertes, with a great show of grief, throws himself into her grave. Hamlet, who has just arrived in Denmark and who is secretly watching the funeral, rushes out and grapples with him. However, Claudius separates them, and together with Laertes, he perfects the plan for the death of Hamlet (i). Hamlet has just finished telling Horatio that he has exchanged the letter in the hands of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for one that calls for their own deaths, when he receives the supposedly friendly challenge from Laertes. He accepts the challenge in spite of the misgivings of Horatio. Hamlet touches Laertes twice before the latter finally wounds him. In the scuffle the swords are exchanged, and Hamlet wounds Laertes with the poisoned sword. Unknowingly, Gertrude drinks from the poisoned cup; but before she and Laertes die, they inform Hamlet of the complete perfidy of the king. Hamlet, thereupon, kills Claudius with the poisoned sword. Hamlet then dies in the arms of Horatio, swearing his friend to remain alive and to tell the truth of the story. The English ambassadors enter with news of the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Then when Fortinbras arrives from the war with Poland, he, by default, inherits the throne of Denmark and intends to restore order in the state (ii).

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## 1.4 Sources (in detail)

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The story of *Hamlet* goes far back in Scandinavian legend, in this respect bearing comparison with the Anglo-Saxon account of Beowulf. As mentioned earlier, the earliest surviving literary tale of *Hamlet* is found in Saxo Grammaticus' *Historia Danica* (C. 1200), For his *Histories Tragiques* (1576), a widely popular collection of tales in French. Francis de Belleforest adopted it, with basic themes, prototypes of characters, and story elements later to be found in Shakespeare's play. These include adultery, fratricide, revenge, assumed madness, and the villain's use of spies and especially of the girl loved by the hero. Nevertheless, the differences between Belleforest's version and Shakespeare's are great and significant. The chief ones in the former are as follows;

1. The action takes place in pre-Christian times, and the standards of morality and conduct differ accordingly.
2. The slaying of King Hamlet is public knowledge, although the unsurprising murderer succeeds in convincing the public that he acted only in defense of the Queen.
3. Hamlet is depicted as a defenseless youth who pretends to be mad in order to protect himself.
4. Although Hamlet is dedicated to truth, he emerges as being vindictively cruel.
5. As in Saxo Grammaticus, Hamlet's manifestations of madness take rather absurd forms, a notable example being his crowing like a cock and failing his arms.
6. The Queen sincerely repents and Hamlet tells her that he plans to kill her villainous

husband.

7. Hamlet marries the daughter of the King of Britain and remains in England for a full year.

8. Hamlet returns to Denmark just as his uncle is celebrating the young Prince's own death.

9. Hamlet succeeds in getting all the courtiers drunk and then sets fire to the palace and kills the King.

If this were the only version of the Hamlet story available to Shakespeare, critics would have no more difficulty as regards source than they have in dealing with *Othello*, the source, for which is just one story. But there was written and performed in England an earlier Hamlet play, usually referred to as the *Ur-Hamlet*, which unfortunately has not survived in manuscript or print.

The *Ur-Hamlet* dates before 1589, for in that year Thomas Nashe made a reference to it. The General opinion is that the *Ur-Hamlet* was the work of Thomas Kyd, best known for the widely popular. The *Spanish Tragedy* (printed in 1594), a tragedy replete with a ghost and sensational incidents, in which a father takes vengeance on his son's murderer. A diary entry made by Philip Henslowe, an Elizabethan theatrical manager, tells us that this *Hamlet* was acted on June 11, 1594, by members of the Lord Admiral's Men and the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the latter being the group, of which Shakespeare was a member. A third reference is found in Thomas Lodge's *Wit's Misery* (1596).

What conclusions are to be made from all this? First, when Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was first presented, the audience was already familiar with a Hamlet story, one in which revenge is the dominant theme. Second, since the *Ur-Hamlet* apparently belonged to the popular Senecan tradition of the Elizabethan stage and has been generally attributed to Thomas Kyd. *The Spanish Tragedy* which survives, must be prototype. In that play are found the pagan revengeful ghost, the protagonist's unceasing efforts to attain vengeance, his intermittent madness, and extreme sensationalism. Kyd properly is credited with dramatic skill in plot construction, for he carefully provides motivation and suspense before moving to the catastrophe, or resolution. What especially is missing is the intellectual probing, the apparently studied ambiguity, the complexity of character portrayal, the superior poetry all of which are to be found in Shakespeare's play. One may assume that the popular *Ur-Hamlet* sufficed in so far as melodrama is concerned; Shakespeare had to transcend the melodramatic, imbuing the material with new significance and interest without sacrificing the sheer excitement of the action.



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## 1.5 The Play : An Introduction to Interpretations

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Although many students of Shakespeare believe that *Hamlet*, among all the plays in the Shakespearean canon, best reflects the universality of the poet-dramatists' genius, it remains an enigmatical work, what has been called a "grand poetical puzzle." No artist can control the use to which his insights are put by posterity, and this dictum is especially true of Shakespeare, whose Hamlet has caused more discussion than any other character in fiction, dramatic or non-dramatic.

Many readers have been disturbed by what has been called the "two Hamlets in the play" : one, the sensitive young intellectual and idealist, the "Secret Prince" who expresses himself in unforgettable poetry and who is dedicated to truth, the other, a barbaric Hamlet who treats Ophelia so cruelly, who slays Polonius, and who callously reports sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths. It has been argued that Shakespeare transmuted an old play without reconstructing it in response to audience who would not have tolerated excisions (J. M. Robertson, "*Hamlet*" *Once More*, London, 1923).

Most commentators cannot accept this argument. For one thing, audiences and readers find themselves very sympathetic to Hamlet—some even to the extent of identifying with him. But if there are those who create Hamlet in their own images, fortunately others have sought to find the key to his character through intensive study of Renaissance thought. Yet no answer that satisfies all, or even most, has been found. In the words of a competent Shakespearean critic of the last century, H. N. Hudson, "It is easy to invent with plausibility almost any theory respecting (Hamlet), but very hard to make any theory comprehend the whole subject" (Introduction to *Hamlet*, 1870). Some familiarity with leading theories regarding the tragic hero is necessary if the commentaries provided scene by scene in these Notes are to prove most useful.

Most interpreters of *Hamlet* start with the assumption that the tragic hero has a clear and sacred obligation to kill Claudius and to do so without delay. The basic question, then, is why does so much time elapse before the young Prince sweeps to his revenge? It is argued that, if Hamlet had substituted prompt action for the considerable verbalism in which he repeatedly berates himself for procrastination, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Leartes, and—most important—Hamlet himself would have survived. But then Shakespeare would not have achieved tragedy and the resulting work would have been no more than a potboiler. There must be found some effective explanation for Hamlet's long delay.

### 1.5.1 Hamlet, The Victim of External Difficulties

Before one turns to the more elaborate and better-known theories, it is desirable to notice one that provides a simple answer : as is true in Belleforest's prose version of the



story, the Hamlet of Shakespeare's plays faces external difficulties which make immediate, positive action impossible. Claudius was too powerful and only once before the final scene placed himself in a defenseless position. Moreover, had the prince been able to carry out the Ghost's injunction of immediate revenge, he would have placed himself in an especially different position. However could he have convinced the people that he justifiably had executed revenge? To be sure, this theory leaves many questions unanswered. But, as will be true with reference to other theories, no rebuttal is required here and now.

### **1.5.2 Hamlet, The Sentimental Dreamer**

Leading, Romantic critics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw Hamlet as a young man, attractive and gifted in many ways, but incapable of positive action. For them, "The native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought," to use Hamlet's own words (III, i. 84-85). One would have little difficulty in finding several passages in the play which seem to support such an interpretation. These will be noted in the commentaries.

Goethe is to be credited with first providing in detail this basically sentimental interpretation. His Hamlet is a young man of "lovely, pure, and moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms of hero." In brief, Goethe's Prince of Denmark is an impractical dreamer. Some thirty years later, A. W. Schlegel, Goethe's compatriot, arrived at the same conclusion. His Hamlet has "no firm belief either in himself or in anything else.....in the resolutions which he so often embraces and always leaves unexecuted, his weakness is too apparent ..... his farfetched scruples are often mere pretexts to cover his want, of determination....." (*Dramatic Art and Literature*, 1810).

Leading English Romantics arrived at the same conclusion. Coleridge's well-known remarks on the character of Hamlet have been most influential. For him, the Prince of Denmark suffers from an "overbalance of the contemplative faculty" and, like any man, "thereby becomes the creature of mere meditation and loses his power to action" (*Notes and lectures on Shakespeare*, 1808). And William Hazlitt observes: "At other times, when he is most bound to act, he remains puzzled, undecided, and sceptical, dallies with his purposes, till the occasion is lost, and finds out some pretence to relapse into indolence and thoughtfulness again" (*Character in Shakespeare's Plays* 1818).

That this Romantic view of Hamlet has survived into the twentieth century in only too evident Arthur Quiller-Couch stated: "Hamlet's character is the prevalence of the abstracting and generalizing habit over the practical..... He is full of purpose, but void of that quality of mind which accomplishes purpose" (*Shakespeare's Workmanship*, 1931).

### **1.5.3 Hamlet, the Victim of Excessive Melancholy**

Traditionally, Hamlet has been called the Melancholy Dane, and quite appropriately. His first lines in Act I, Scene II, wherein he first appears, and certainly his first long

soliloquy establish him as grief-stricken. Moreover, Hamlet himself refers to melancholy in a way which suggests that it is a debilitating factor. Ordinary grief, of course, is one thing; everyone experiences it. But Hamlet's grief, it is argued, is pathological; it is a destructive thing which causes him to procrastinate and leads to his death. Actually, this theory dates from the eighteenth century. Among later critics who have accepted it is A.C. Bradley, whose still widely influential Oxford lectures on Shakespeare's tragedies were first published in 1904. In a definite way his work represents the keystone in the arch of Romantic criticism because he treats Hamlet not as one of the *dramatis personae*, nor as an artistic representation which stops just where the author chooses, but as a living human being. Again like the early nineteenth century Romantics, Bradley found Hamlet to be irresolute. He makes reference to what he calls Hamlet's "otiose thinking which hardly deserves the name of thought, an unconscious weaving of pretexts for inaction." At the root of this, Bradley finds melancholy which was 'increased by deepening self-contempt.'

Melancholy has been called the "Elizabethan malady". It was recognized as a disease and was the subject of treatises published in England and on the Continent. At the time Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*. Timothy Bright's *A Treatise of Melancholic*, first published in 1586, was well known. In an age when the proper study of mankind was man, it seems improbable that a writer like Shakespeare, with his manifest intellectual curiosity and acquisitive mind, and unfamiliar with contemporary ideas regarding the causes, symptoms, and results of melancholy. Indeed, melancholy characters of one kind or another appeared rather often in Elizabethan, and Jacobean plays, *Hamlet*, inevitably, has been classified as the intellectual melancholy type. The disease which afflicts him is the most destructive kind, namely, melancholy adust. When Hamlet speaks of "my weakness and my melancholy", (II, ii. 630), for example; when he speaks, "wild and whirling words" (I. V. 133); when his mood shifts from deep depression to elation, he is following the pattern of behaviour peculiar to the melancholic as described by Bright and other writers on the subject. So goes the argument.

#### **1.5.4 Hamlet, the Victim of the Oedipus Complex**

The Freudian, or neo-Freudian, interpretation of *Hamlet* appeals to many people today. The first and most elaborate presentation of this theory was made by Ernest Jones, disciple and biographer of Sigmund Freud, as early as 1910 and received full expression in *Hamlet and Oedipus* (New York, 1949). Concisely stated, the Freudian interpreters fervently believe that the Prince of Denmark suffered from the Oedipus complex—an undue and unhealthy attachment of a son for his mother which is apt to be morbidly suppressed and cause great mental distress. To quote Harry Levin, this ingenious theory "motivates Hamlet's delay by identifying him with Claudius, through whom he has vicariously accomplished the Oedipal feat of murdering his father and marrying his mother" (*The Question of Hamlet*, New York, p. 56). Levin rejects this theory.

### 1.5.5 Hamlet Motivated by ambition

A few commentators see *the Tragedy of Hamlet* as one of the Elizabethan ambition plays. For them, the primary reason for Hamlet's desire to kill his uncle is not to avenge his father's "foul and most unnatural murder," but rather to make possible his own advancement to the throne. The delays and inner conflicts are the revolt of his awareness that personal ambition and pride, not sacred duty, motivate him. Once more it is possible to cite lines from the text which, if taken out of context, lend support to this theory.

### 1.5.6 Hamlet, Misled by the Ghost

Not all critics agree that the Ghost of Hamlet's father is an 'honest ghost' or that Hamlet himself has a solemn duty to slay Claudius. This, of course, is to deny the widely held assumption that the Prince was called upon to execute public justice—that he functions as God's minister, not as scourge who, though he may be the instrument of divine vengeance, is himself a grievous sinner and must suffer for his sins. For these critics, Shakespeare depicts a tragic hero who should not take vengeance into his own hands not only Gertrude—but also Claudius—should be left to heaven.

To do full justice to the immediate subject, one should investigate in depth Renaissance theories of revenge. For the immediate purpose, let it be noted that Hamlet has been said to have been misled by the Ghost, the test of whose honesty is not the establishment of Claudius' guilt but rather the nature of its injunction. It is argued that the Prince is called upon to execute *private* vengeance, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, contrary to all Christian teaching. His problem, then, is that of a man who believes in heaven and hell and whose reason tells him that the man who defies divine ordinance ultimately must face judgement. It follows that Shakespeare portrays a tragic hero who should *not* take vengeance into his own hands and a Ghost that is "a spirit damn'd." This theory has been developed brilliantly by Miss Eleanor Prosser in her well-documented study, *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford University Press, 1967). Certainly there are passages in the text of the play which may be used to establish vindictiveness in Hamlet's character. Instead of seeing Hamlet as one whose propensity for thought prevents him from performing the necessary action, Miss Prosser finds him to be one who operates with reason, restrains him for some time from acting impulsively in response to instinct.

From this survey of better-known interpretations of *Hamlet*, two conclusions can be made. First. Shakespeare's tragedy is a work of surpassing interest and genius, and the tragic hero is universally attractive and fascinating. Second, only the naive will start with the assumption that there is one obvious interpretation of the play and that critics, not Shakespeare, have introduced complexities into it. It would be gratifying to be able to offer these Notes with the subtitle. "The meaning of *Hamlet*" and to present a simple, direct interpretation based upon a major generalization and to ignore passages in the play which

do not fit into the argument. But such a presentation would not do justice to a great play or help the student. Therefore, when considered appropriate, passages, which seem to lend support to a given theory will be called to the student's attention. But always he must ask himself whether or not the entire play urges the acceptance of such a theory, ultimately, major themes emerge from the entire plot, not from isolated episodes or passages.

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## 1.6.0 Major dimensions / aspects of the Hamlet

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### 1.6.1 The Revenge Theme

It is the premise of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as of the traditional Hamlet legend, that a son should avenge a father's murder. But *Hamlet*, though it contains most of the conventions and formulas of the Elizabethan Revenge play, is ultimately not just a typical Revenge drama. It transclads these formulas and conventions to become one of the profoundest tragedies ever written on the condition of man in the world.

Revenge was a most popular theme and subject matter for plays in Shakespeare's time. The earliest writers of tragedy in the English language, Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton chose a story of revenge for their *Gorboduc*, first performed in 1561. Since then for another six decades revenge continued to be one of the most popular themes for dramatic representation.

Revenge as the motive for the dramatic action can be traced back two thousand five hundred years ago to the Greeks ; Aeschylus' earliest trilogy—The Oresteia—explores the revenge theme (among others) powerfully. Later, *Seneca* modelled his tragedies on the Greek master texts and brought Revenge to the Elizabethan stage through Jasher Heywood's translation of Seneca's ten tragedies—which had a far-reaching impact on Elizabethan playwrights. Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* reveals the influence of Seneca as do later Elizabethan – Jacobean dramatists.

The following formulas/conventions came to be associated with the genre of the Revenge tragedy (most of which Shakespeare utilised in *Hamlet* in his own unique way)

- a. A murder has to be committed in secret.
- b. The responsibility of revenge must fall on the murdered man's nearest kith and kin.
- c. The ghost of the murdered man must appear from time to time to urge on the hesitant revenger.
- d. *Madness* in the revenger (either real or assumed or both), *delay* on the revenger's part, *melancholia* are usual features in the mental make up of the protagonist.
- e. Intrigue and counter intrigue, tool villains, violence, bloodshed, multiple murders, sensationalism, cruelty, melodrama were all regular inputs used by Revenge plays – otherwise called "Tragedy of Blood".

The rich potential of the genre caught the imagination of such writers as Kyd, Shakespeare, Marston, Tourneur and Webster (and a host of others) who all wrote their own variations upon these formulas and conventions.

For some scholars the problem (and the interest) of *Hamlet* lies in the fact that the story and portrait of a sensitive Renaissance intellectual is superimposed on a primitive story of revenge. Shakespeare employs the theme of Revenge in *Hamlet*, but he raises it to a profound intellectual and philosophical level chiefly by conceiving the character of Hamlet the avenger as a virtuous, sensitive, complex, ambivalent and scholarly youth. Also, Shakespeare's conception of Revenge is not simple, but complex and complicated. What the ghost appeals to in Hamlet is the "nature" that is in him: it is natural that Hamlet should avenge his father's murder. But if the play imposes on its hero the duty of revenge, it does not follow that revenge, any more than the "nature" that prompts it has Shakespeare's or Hamlet's or our unqualified approval. This complex ambivalence is at the heart of the character of Hamlet and our response and gives a profound excitement and validity to all those ideas about the dual nature of man and the intermixing of good and evil that permeate the text.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare presents a revenger who is both ruthless and reluctant. As a revenger he must act on behalf of outraged virtue to restore a violated order, to set right what is "out of joint". But the act he envisages, plans and is compelled to do involves him in evil of the kind which he would normally be moved to punish. As the ruthless revenger Hamlet exemplifies in his person the evil which is inseparable from the good in human nature; as the reluctant revenger he can symbolize the good's abhorrence of it: "What is intolerable in Hamlet's situation is that it cannot be reduced to the familiar antithesis of right and wrong—his conscience (and ours) both demands and opposes action".

### **1.6.2 Hamlet's Madness**

One of the central questions that vex us about *Hamlet* is ; is Hamlet, at any time and in any sense, really mad? Hamlet puts on an "antic disposition", but many critics and readers think; that in course of time, under the strain of the situation, the pretence adopted as a mask becomes a reality. Freudians and others associate *melancholia* and a *morbida state of mind* with Hamlet. Such a frame of mind is antecedent to and indeed not far removed from insanity. Hamlet's periodical outbursts of historical vehemence when he seems to lose self-control and self-mastery are an indication of an least incipient near-madness. His mental balance (with Ophelia, with Laertes in the Grave-Digger's scene with his Mother) seems disturbed and off-balance at key moments in the play.

But conservative literary critics do not find such arguments to be quite justified. For them, Shakespeare could not have intended Hamlet to be mad : a tragic hero may have "hamartia" and / or "hubris" but cannot be insane, for it presupposes the cessation of

intellectual and moral functioning and the loss of responsibility. The tragic hero must be above all responsible. *E. K. Chambers* observes : “Shakespeare did not mean Hamlet to be mad in any sense which would put his actions in a quite different category from those of other men. How could it be so, since that would have divested his story of humanity and left it meaningless.”

Hamlet assumes “antic disposition” and appears “mad north by north-west” and can “tell a hawk from a handsaw”. He does so for many possible reasons. First, he feigns madness as a measure of self-defence. The Ghost’s revelation shows him the danger to his own life, and on his remaining alive depends the success of his revenge. He must live till at least that is achieved. So Hamlet pretends to be mad, because then Claudius will not bother too much about a mad man. Secondly, Hamlet maintains this “antic disposition” as a screen from behind which he can watch the King and wait for the opportune moment of revenge. Nobody will suspect Hamlet if they think him insane. Thirdly, by putting on this mask of madness, Hamlet is able “to give some utterance to the load that pressed upon his heart and brain”. (Bradley). It gives him the freedom of speech and action which he could not have otherwise obtained – it works as a safety valve for his intense passions.

### **1.6.3 The Play-within the Play scene (Act III, Sc. II)**

#### **Summary and Commentary :**

Hamlet instructs the players how to deliver the lines of *The Murder of Gonzago* and discusses the art of acting in general, urging them to avoid unnatural extremes in the imitation of an action. Polonius enters with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern : he announces that the King and the Queen are ready to “hear” the play.

While members of the Court assemble, Hamlet praises Horatio for his steady temperament and then gives him the details relating to *The Murder of Gonzago*. He asks Horatio to keep close watch on the King, just as he himself will do, and to note the King’s reaction to one speech in particular. If Claudius does not reveal guilt at that point, the Prince continues, both have seen “a damned ghost,” not the honest spirit of the late King Hamlet. The faithful Horatio assures the Prince that he will follow the instructions carefully.

The Court group enters the hall. Claudius greets his nephew and receives a baffling reply. There follows a brief exchange between Hamlet and Polonius. When his mother invites him to sit beside her, Hamlet declines, lying down at Ophelia’s feet.

The play itself is preceded by a dumb-show or pantomime, depicting a king and queen deeply in love with each other. When the king falls asleep on a bed of flowers, the queen departs. A man enters, removes the king’s crown and kisses it, pours poison into the king’s ear, and leaves. The queen returns, finds her husband dead, and gives expression of grief. The murderer returns and, after the king’s body has been carried away, woos the queen. At first she resists his attentions, but soon accepts his love.



In answer to Ophelia's question, Hamlet assures her that the actor who enters to speak the lines of the prologue will "tell all"—that is explain the significance of the action. When the four lines of the prologue are recited, Ophelia remarks that it is brief. "As woman's love," Hamlet replies. The performance of the play then commences.

The action in *The Murder of Gonzago* is the same as that depicted in the dumbshow up to the point where the murderer, identified as one Lucianus, nephew to the king, pours the poison in the king's ear. The queen is emphatic in her declaration never to remarry should she become a widow. In the words of the player-king, spoken as he is about to "beguile/The tedious day with sleep" "Tis deeply sworn."

The brief interlude gives Hamlet the opportunity to ask Gertrude how she likes the play. "The lady protests too much," she replies. Claudius then asks Hamlet if he is familiar with the dramatic story and if it is any way an offense. The Prince replies : "No, no, they do but jest, poison in jest. No offence i' th' world." Again in reply to a question by Claudius, he explains that the play is called "The Mouse-trap." The Prince's words to Ophelia especially reveal his state of excitement. He calls upon the actor playing the role of the murderer to stop grimacing and begin to speak his lines. All along he has been, as Ophelia says "a good chorus." When the murderer pours the poison into the player-king's ear, he assures the audience that this is the dramatization of an actual murder and that they will see how the murderer "gets the love of Gonzago's wife."

Alarmed, Claudius rises, Polonius calls for an end of the play. The King cries out : "Give me some light. Away!" All but Hamlet and Horatio leave the hall. It is a triumphant Prince who, after reciting a bit of doggerel and indulging in ironic banter with Horatio, declares that he will "take the ghost's word for a thousand pound." Horatio agrees that the King reacted like a guilty man.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern return to inform Hamlet that the King is greatly disturbed and that the Queen wishes to speak with her son privately. In his state of high excitement, the Prince takes special pleasure in confusing the two. Aware that they tend to believe that personal ambition explains his behaviour Hamlet explains that he lacks "advancement." Especially his ironic remarks reveal his contempt for so-called friends who will not be forthright with him and presume to think that they can "pluck out the heart of [his] mystery." Polonius enters with the same message for Hamlet: the Queen wishes to speak with him. Again the Prince adopts the antic style, voicing absurd irrelevancies before he informs the Lord Chamberlain that he will honor his mother's request. He is then left to himself.

Now Hamlet's words, spoken in soliloquy, reveal a bloodthirsty mood. But he counsels himself not to inflict physical harm upon his mother, to whose chamber he will now go : "Let me be cruel, not unnatural" he says.

### **Commentary :**

Hamlet's advice to the players, which takes up some fifty lines, seems on the surface to be interesting primarily not for what it contributes to The Tragedy of Hamlet but for what one learns about Shakespeare, the professional actor and playwright concerned that actors do justice to his script. Scholars have pointed out that a rival company of actors was noted for splitting the ears of the groundlings, those less affluent members of the audience who stood in the pit of the theater, pandering to those who confused bombast with eloquence and realism. That there is a personal element here seems likely, especially when Hamlet says "And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them" (42-44), counsel hardly applicable to actors performing *The Murder of Gonzago*.

This episode also provides a desirable release of tension after the disturbing nunnery scene. And again it provides evidence of Hamlet's breadth of character and normal interests. He is shown to have been a young man who enjoyed the theater and as one whose critical judgement has been highly developed. If nothing else, this tends to refute the theory that the Prince was the complete introvert unduly given to introspection just as it adds somewhat to his intellectual stature.

Hamlet's chief concern in this episode is that The Murder of Gonzago be so performed that it will be a convincing imitation of life itself and, in this sense, will hold "the mirror up to nature." Only then can he be sure that it will provide the test of Claudius' conscience. If an unskillful player oversteps "the modesty of nature," presenting a "whirlwind of passion" which "out-herods Herod" (a character in the mystery plays notorious for bombast), the performance cannot possibly impress the courtly audience as worthy of serious consideration.

But there is more here. At another level Hamlet is providing a commentary on mankind in general and making a plea for the use of God-given reason and a concern for truth as opposed to appearance. In a word let man vindicate his supposed status as a "wondrous work" and the "paragon of animals." When the Prince speaks of holding the mirror up to nature, one inevitably recalls Ophelia's encomium of a Hamlet who had been the "glass of fashion and the mould of form" (III. i. 161). Moreover this episode looks forward to Hamlet's praise of Horatio as one who is not passion's slave.

Hamlet's praise of Horatio (59-79) has been accepted by a great many commentators as the passage which establishes Horatio as the norm characters in relation to the tragic hero—that is, as the individual in the play who possesses the very qualities which Hamlet should have if he is to avoid tragic downfall. The young man whom the Prince so much admires is depicted as the true Stoic, one who accept "Fortune's buffets" (strokes of ill fortune) with equanimity because he maintains proper balance between "blood and judgement" (74)—that is, between emotion and reason—and thus is not "passion's slave." One can understand why many believe this passage provides a key to the interpretation of



*The Tragedy of Hamlet.* To be sure, the commoner Horatio, admirable as he is, has never been put to a test comparable in magnitude to that which Hamlet faces : tragic heroes must be tested and the test must be a great one.

Hamlet requests Horatio to watch the King closely to see if Claudius “occulted [hidden] guilt/Do not itself unkennel in one speech” (85-86). It is of some interest to know that the Prince now has his spy. At Elsinore, where “seeming” and the use of indirections are commonplace, he will fight fire with fire, as it were Ophelia has been “loosed” upon him; now he will have Horatio help in “unkenneling” Claudius’ secret. His words reveal at least a premonition of the King’s guilt; but then, since they are expressed in a conditional clause and since Hamlet goes on to consider the possibility that his “imagination is as fould/As Vulcan’s stithy” (88-89), the element of doubt relating to the nature of the Ghost is stressed once more. The question which disturbs some commentators remains : is it an assumption of the play that the establishment of Claudius’ guilt proves that Hamlet saw and listened to an “honest” ghost, not to an evil spirit. Perhaps the Devil himself, who used a truth to make possible Hamlet’s death and damnation?

As all prepare to see the play, Hamlet’s state of high excitement comes through. “I must be idle,” he says to Horatio (95) and this a cue that he will adopt the antic pose again. This pose gives him the opportunity to make remarks to the King, to Polonius, and Ophelia which may be interpreted as evidence of mental instability and, at the same time, serve to perplex a vitally concerned listener like Claudius. It may even be argued that, at this moment shortly before the Mouse-trap is sprung, Hamlet is close to the breaking point. His reply to the King’s apparently gracious concern for how Hamlet “fares” is calculated to strengthen the ambition theory first advanced by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern :

Excellent, I faith-of the chameleon’s dish. I eat the air promise-cramm’d. You cannot feed capons so. (98-100)

No one should underestimate Claudius’ intelligence; he is fully aware of the play upon the word *air* (heir) and of Hamlet’s tacit reference to the fact that his uncle, not Hamlet himself, succeeded the late King. One satirical barb suffices for the time being. Hamlet next turns to Polonius, giving the Lord Chamberlain an opportunity to boast about his talent as an actor, indeed as one who once created the role of Julius Caesar in a university production. It will be recalled that Polonius has taken pride in skillful acting almost from the first, thus his directions first to Reynaldo and then to Ophelia both of whom he coached on how to act their respective parts. One other point can be made in this connection. When Hamlet is told that Caesar was killed by Brutus he replies : “It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf there” (110-12). For the Prince to refer to Polonius as a calf is consistent with his calling him a “fishmonger” and “that great baby.....not yet out of his swathing-clouts”; that is, it is another expression of contempt for this foolish old counsellor. But not long hereafter, Polonius engaged in another spying expedition, will be slain; and it

will be Hamlet himself who will play the brute part. Shakespeare provides a bit of dramatic presaging here.

For his purpose, Hamlet must find a place where he can closely watch Claudius. But in his reply to Gertrude's invitation that he sit next to her, he is able to contribute to Polonius' theory, that is, he is mad for the love of Ophelia. The bawdy remarks he makes to that young lady carry forward the theme of honesty in women, "You are merry; my lord," says Ophelia. Hamlet's reply reveals his state of tension and his disillusionment. "O God, your only jig-maker" (132) may be paraphrased as "life is a farce." His lines which follow are packed with bitterness and his ironic reference to the length of man's memory may be an indictment not only of Gertrude but also of himself: "remember me" the Ghost had intoned repeatedly. Hamlet, who had then declared that he would sweep to his revenge without delay, is reminded in this episode that four months have elapsed since his father's death.

Especially in pre-Shakespearean drama, the dumb-show was used to indicate action which was not presented in the play proper or to symbolize what was to be presented. The dumb-show here poses certain problems. It is certainly not one of those "inexplicable dumb-shows" Hamlet had criticized earlier (13). It includes most of the circumstances of the murder as told by the Ghost, although it includes nothing suggesting that Gertrude was unfaithful to King Hamlet when he was alive or that she was involved in the murder. Why did Shakespeare include this dumb-show? Why is not Claudius startled and aroused by it? These have been abiding questions among Shakespearean critics.

Since the play-within-a-play is written advisedly in an artificial style in contrast to the play proper, Shakespeare may have added the dumb-show to intensify the contrasting elements—so a few critics have believed. But, although Ophelia suggests that it may impart the argument (150), such was not the practice among English dramatists. Then why should Shakespeare depart radically from the usual practice if he wished only to provide contrast? This has led to other conjectures. One is that Hamlet, who has arranged for the entire production, includes the dumb-show so that he will have a double opportunity of catching the conscience of the King. Another is that Hamlet did not anticipate the dumb-show and is annoyed at its presentation. A third is that Claudius pays no attention to the preliminary stage business occupying himself, perhaps, in low-voiced talk with Gertrude. Thus he asks a bit later, "Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in't?" (242-43). And, since all this is in the realm of conjecture, one may argue that Claudius, no ordinary villain, exercised supreme control during the dumb-show, a control he could not sustain when, in the play itself, Lucianus pours poison into the ear of the sleeping player-king. Whatever the answer may be, one thing is indisputable, Shakespeare achieves a dramatic master stroke, a moment of supreme excitement, when the King rises in fright and cries out: "Give me some light. Away!" (280). The Mouse-trap has been sprung; Hamlet has caught the conscience of the King.

The Prince's reaction is not one of horror but of elation – understandably because, despite his expression of doubt, he now has absolute proof of Claudius' guilt. Perhaps he is relieved especially because he can act as one executing public justice, not just as a son carrying out blood revenge in accordance with an old, barbaric code. The difficulty, however, is that nowhere in the play does Hamlet explicitly question the propriety of revenge. One is reminded that some critics believe that Shakespeare was unable to surmount the basic difficulties of transmuting the earlier Hamlet material when he provided an unmistakably Christian framework for his dramatic version. The Ghost spoke truly : Claudius is guilty of fratricide and regicide. But is Hamlet to emerge as minister (one righteously carrying out God's vengeance upon a heinous sinner) or as scourge (one whose sinful act of taking vengeance into his own hands God permits for His own purpose, but who ultimately will face God's punishment). Again, it should be noted Hamlet's prime concern has been to establish Claudius' guilt, not the "honesty" of the Ghost. All this deserves notice if one is to do justice to *The Tragedy of Hamlet* and to understand why it has been subject to apparently endless discussion. But this is not to deny that readers and audiences have not the slightest doubts that, Hamlet Prince of Denmark, should slay Claudius and remove the source of all rottenness in the State.

Exactly which lines Hamlet composed for insertion into *The Murder of Gonzago* is not known. But there are lines spoken by the player-king which seem to have direct applicability to Hamlet and his problem, certainly not to Claudius. Consider lines 197-207, beginning "But what we do determine of we break." Hamlet's announced purpose to move swiftly to revenge his father's murder was of "violent birth" and especially in his second soliloquy (II. ii 576 ff.), he has questioned, in effect whether or not his purpose lacked "validity" (strength) since Claudius survived and even seemed to flourish. The player-king's words on passion (204-7) may be a kind of indictment of Hamlet; some who see the Prince as the slave of extreme melancholy particularly think so.

Hamlet's mood of excitement and elation is sustained in the first part of his dialogue with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern one of whom informs him that the King is "In his retirement marvellous distemper'd" (312). "With drink sir?" asks Hamlet and one is reminded of his "dream of evil" speech, voiced when he waited for the appearance of the Ghost (I.iv. 13 ff.) In this current display of the antic disposition, his discourse, wild though it sounds to the King's spies shows method and basic rationality. Especially this comes through when, after stating that he will obey his mother's request he asks "Have you any further trade with us?"—advisedly using the plural form of the pronoun and thus presenting himself to them not as a former schoolfellow and as a friend, but as the Prince of Denmark (347). His use of irony is quite bitter and penetrating when he assures Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "by these pickers and stealers" that he still loves them. In an earlier scene when they first sought him out, Hamlet had spoken of handshaking as the "appurtenance of Welcome" employed as a matter of fashion and ceremony (II, ii. 388-89); his reference here to hands and fingers as "pickers and stealers" is far more devastating. Apparently

Hamlet enjoys misleading these two “Sir, I lack advancement,” he says to Rosencratz; and then he concludes with a reference to a proverb that is indeed musty : “While the grass grows...,” (358). But it is quite possible that the Prince is again being ironical; he may well be expressing a strong desire to get on with the act of revenge.

When one of the players reenters with a recorder (an old type of flute), Hamlet, deadly serious, finds an even more devastating way of showing his contempt for Guildenstern. His longer speech at this point has wider application. Guildenstern states that he lacks the skill to play a recorder, yet he is presumptuous enough to think that he can “play” upon Hamlet, as the latter makes abundantly clear :

‘Sblood  
do you think that I am easier to be play’d on than a  
pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though  
you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.  
(385-88)

In his praise of his true friend Horatio, Hamlet had lauded those who “are not a pipe for Fortune’s finger/To sound what stop she please” (75-76). Now, having forced Claudius to reveal his guilt, perhaps Hamlet is announcing his right to be numbered as one of those. But surely, in terms of the entire play, there is more here. The late Aldous Huxley wrote provocatively that Hamlet, an idealist dedicated to truth, above knew that man could be a whole orchestra, not just a simple pipe to be played on. If that reading is correct, then Hamlet, with his gift for universalizing, speaks for man who, were he to realize his potential, indeed is the paragon of animals, like unto the angels. Only the pragmatic, earthbound and self-seeking, be they high-placed or not reject their heritage and imitate humanity so abominably in the theater of life.

Polonius, that easy target for Hamlet’s barbs, enters. Once more he is the bearer of stale news, and once more this old counsellor renders himself ridiculous. He does, however, get an answer from the Prince; Hamlet will come to his mother by and by. And then, just before all but Hamlet leave the latter says, somewhat ambiguously. “By and by is easily said” (404). It is possible that he is showing again his awareness of having found occasion to delay.

So far in this scene, Hamlet has manifested first the mood of the decisive, composed intellectual in his advice to the players; next, the mood of the generous-minded and idealistic friend in his warm praise of Horatio; then the mood of satirical gaiety in his words to the King, Polonius and Ophelia; and last, the mood of contempt and aloofness in his words to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Now, speaking in soliloquy at the end of this climactic scene, he provides a prime example of a shocking shift in emotion. This is not the Hamlet who exclaimed “O cursed spite,/That ever I was born to set it right!”—the Hamlet who recoiled at the thought of being called upon to execute vengeance. Rather it is the

Hamlet who immediately after hearing the Ghost's story, inveighed against Gertrude ("O most pernicious woman!") and Claudius ("O villain, smiling, damned villain!"): It is the Hamlet who, in his second soliloquy after having denounced himself as "a rogue and peasant slave," cried out:

Blood bawdy villain!  
Remorseless, treacherous lecherous, kindless villain!  
O, vengeance!

(II, ii 608-10)

If anything his words here are even more greatly overwrought, what with the reference to yawning churchyards (Open graves), hell's contagion and (the very language of a Black Mass) drinking hot blood. These are words one would expect to hear not from the gifted hero of a high tragedy but rather from the protagonist in a melodramatic revenge play; they are not those of a tragic hero intent upon executing public justice, but of an individual determined to carry out blood revenge come what may. Yet Shakespeare has provided motivation, and Hamlet's emotional stress is understandable. At the same time it would seem that the dramatist exhibits in this passage a hero who is far from being able to accept "Fortune's buffets and rewards....with equal thanks"; in terms of the high standard of personal control which he found exemplified in Horatio, Hamlet is enslaved by passion.

But, characteristically Hamlet checks himself: "Soft! now to my mother. / O heart, lose not thy nature" (1.4 10-II). Nor does one find here another excuse for delay for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had reported that the king was inaccessible. That his mother's sin remains a great part of his tragedy is reemphasised. Hamlet prays that he will not follow the example of the matricidal Nero. He will "be cruel, not unnatural"; he will "speak daggers to her, but use none" (1-411-14).

#### **1.6.4 Hamlet and the theory of the 'objective correlative'**

Sir, the objective correlative is love.  
It vapourizes not inside the heart  
Like fogs of happiness or despair, it is  
Of mass, space, energy, composited.  
And touchable. What vagaries the heart  
Round, square, and tall as any classical stone  
As any human, form, correlative.

The American poet Roy Harvey Pearce thus sums up poetically his ideas regarding Eliot's theory of the 'objective correlative'. There is no denying the fact that this theory has exercised a good deal of influence on the Critical temper of the twentieth century. It has not only anticipated Richards' correlation of verbal media but also inspired the New critics keen on exploring the structures of meaning lying below the levels of plot and character for

the complex pattern of the 'objective correlatives' through which the poet expresses his emotions. The term 'objective correlative' was first used in a mid-nineteenth century art lecture given by the American poet and painter Washington Alston, but it was not until Eliot redefined the term in his 1919 essay 'Hamlet and His Problems' that it elicited widespread interest and debate in critical circles.

Precisely, the term 'objective correlative' means a verbal equivalent for an emotion—an image, action or situation—or more usually, a pattern of images, actions or situations—that evokes a particular emotion without expressly stating what that emotion should be, to quote from Eliot himself.

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked, Prufrock, Tiresias, Gerontion and Sweeney, in Eliot's own poems, reveal a dexterous application of the theory of the 'objective correlative' Dante and Lucretius have presented us with the emotional and sensory equivalents for their philosophical ideas which they cultivated and organized and with a rich measure of spiritual conviction. It is interesting to note that Pablo Neruda while trying to express his sense of disgust found an 'objective correlative' in the account of a cup of a tea at the bottom of which lay a set of dentures.

Eliot calls Hamlet 'an artistic failure' for he believes that here Shakespeare fails to find the proper 'objective correlative in order to communicate Hamlet's emotion. The motivation between the external circumstances (or reactions) and the internal emotions is adequate in both Antony and Cleopatra and Coriolanus but Hamlet's disgust with life is not adequately motivated by the unseemly marriage of his mother and the suspected murder of his father. In other words, Hamlet's disillusionment is occasioned primarily by the guilt of his mother but 'his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her'. Hamlet fails to comprehend and objectify his emotion which remains to poison life and obstruct action. Eliot explains what happens in the light of his own theory.

"The artistic 'inevitability' lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion: and this is precisely what is deficient in Hamlet. Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear."

Thus, according to Eliot occurrences in the play do not justify Hamlet's depth of emotion; moreover the dominant emotion of the play, which is the feeling of a son towards a guilty mother, is for Eliot 'an intractable material'.

However important Eliot may be in his explication of the theory of the 'objective correlative' he seems to be unresponsive to the problem faced by a sensitive and



introspective youngman who experiences evil in flesh and blood on the threshold of his life. To wreak vengeance on Claudius is only a part of Hamlet's problem and even his sex-  
nausea is not the whole of it. He cannot rush headlong into action, for the problem he is confronted with is to reconcile the basic contradictions of human life. It is this problem which paralyses his will and impedes his action, although he is ready to avenge the desperate private wrong which rankles in his mind. Eliot seems to have ignored what every sensible individual feels, soon or late in his or her life. Dr. Jekyll is true but equally true is Mr. Hyde, and since together they constitute the web of eternal humanity, it is both healthy and wise to affirm and accommodate all manner of experience, even if they are incompatible. Hamlet is unmade, for he is incapable of integrating the warring opposites of life-good and evil, virtue and vice, gold and dross, rose and canker. He fails to achieve a totality of perception, an all-inclusive, mixed vision of life. He observes multiple beauties in the created universe, but he also gets to experience it as a 'pestilent congregation of vapours', and the sense of discrepancy between the ideal and the actual completely bears him down.

Objections have been raised against the expressionist character of Eliot's theory of the 'objective correlative' which insists on the discovery of external forms for previously determinate emotions, Eliot's theory has come in for intense overhauling by Eliseo Vivas who contends that a poet discovers his emotion in the act of composition and that it is neither possible nor necessary for a reader to feel the same emotion as the poet did. Eliot implies that Shakespeare knew in advance the particular emotion for which Hamlet was to be the correlative and that the reader should measure the effectiveness of the poet by reflecting of his power of transaction or of demiation the business of which is no evoke the emotion inscribed in the creative pattern. Eliseo Vivas says :

I see no reason to assume that all else in the poem is put there merely to arouse an emotion in us or to bring about its objective denotation. Surface formal, and ideational elements are all in their own right of intrinsic interest.

[The objective correlative of T.S. Eliot's, Creation and Discovery.]

The emotion expressed is of considerable interest, but it cannot be the 'chief or exclusive interest to the reader'. Eliot himself seems to have been conscious of some of the critical observations made about his theory of the 'objective correlative'. In the preface to Elizabethan Dramatics (1962) he recants or modifies many of his earlier opinions and declares that 'for the understanding of Shakespeare, a lifetime is not too long'.

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## 1.7 Conclusion

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"You would pluck out the heart of my mysterm". Hamlet's words to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern describe what thousands of books and articles have tried to do since *Hamlet* was first performed or read. But his character (and the play) remains ever-elusive. Hamlet plays many roles throughout the play : alienated outsider, actor, intellectual, swordsman, a

man of great wit, humour and charm, true and loyal friend humiliated son, blood-thirsty revenger, lacerating masochist and sadist and many more. His moods swing from depression to elation, from extreme self-loathing to quiet acceptance of his fate in “The readiness is all”. Hamlet’s complex and charismatic character (as much as the play’s) continues to fascinate because it is impossible to pin down its infinite variety.

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## 1.8 Question and Topics

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1. Comment critically on Hamlet’s *madness* or *conflicts as revenger* or *delay*.
2. Comment critically on Hamlet’s relationship with his *Mother* or *Ophelia*.
3. *Analyse* and comment on the significance of the play-within-the play scene.
4. Consider *Hamlet* as a Revenge Tragedy.
5. Would you subscribe to the view that Hamlet is an artistic failure? Give reason for your answer.

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3. *What Happens in Hamlet*, Dover Wilson
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# The Tempest

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## Structure

### 2.0 Introduction / Objectives

### 2.1 Cast of Characters : Main Characters

#### 2.1.1 Note on Dramatis Personae

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## 2.0 Introduction/Objectives

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Dear Students,

In the following pages you will find the various aspects and dimensions of *The Tempest* which will help you to a clearer and deeper understanding of Shakespeare's text.

We are beginning with Section I : *The Cast of Characters* of the play, followed by 1.1 : a note on the dramatis personae and their particular *names*. This is followed by The *Act by Act analysis* (2), and a brief note on sources (2.1).

Then comes a section on the basic, shares characteristics of Shakespeare's *Last Plays* or *Romances* (3) followed by the section *Texts and contexts* (4). We have in the *Bermuda Pamphlets* (4.1) the essential the then contemporary background and source information; followed by *Allegorical interpretations of the play* (4.2), *The Themes* (4.3) *Nature versus Art* (4.3.1) *Prospero's Magic* (4.3.2), and a section on the *Epilogue* (4.3.3). Finally we close with a detailed section on *Shakespeare. The Tempest and The theme of Colonialism* (5) and how in postcolonial times our perspectives have changed (5.1).

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## 2.1 Cast of Characters : Main Characters

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ALONSO, King of Naples, accessory to the plot which has deprived prospero of his dukedom.

SEBASTIAN, his brother, also an accessory; he later joins with Antonio in an abortive plot to kill Alonso.

PROSPERO, the rightful Duke of Milan. Having been deprived of his dukedom, Prospero on the island, devotes himself to magic.

ANTONIO, his brother, who has usurped the dukedom and who foments a plot to replace Alonso with Sebastian as King of Naples.

FERDINAND son of Alonso. He falls in love with Miranda.

MIRANDA, daughter of Prospero. She loves Ferdinand.

### Supporting Characters

ADRIAN and FRANCISCO, Lords.

ARIEL, an airy spirit and servant to Prospero.

CALIBAN a monster son of the witch Sycorax and unwilling servant of Prospero.

GONZALO an honest old counsellor, who has befriended Prospero.

STEPHANO, a drunken butler, whom Caliban mistakes for a god and who intends to succeed Prospero as master of the island.

TRINCULO a jester, a member of the plot to kill Prospero.

(Master of a ship; Boatswain; Mariner; the following spirits. Iris, Ceres, Juno Nymphs Reapers; Other Spirits attending on Prospero)

(Place A Ship at sea; an uninhabited island)

### 2.1.1 Note on Dramatis Personae

*Ariel*. The name of this delicate phantom - 'thou which art but air, Prospero calls him —was almost certainly intended to convey the idea of 'an airy spirit'. The word actually occurs in Isaiah xxix. 1 : 1 Ariel, the city where David dwelt, "in the 'Bishop's Bible' of

1568 and in the Authorized Version of 1611, but had been “used in magical writings for one of the spirits who control the elements or the planets” (E. K. Chambers). Ariel is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s earlier fairies in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, but he belongs rather to the race of familiar spirits or demons, who are summoned by a magician (as fairies are not) to do his bidding. Spirits were commonly differentiated from each other by the element in which they lived: earth, air, fire, water. Accordingly, one meets with gnomes, sylphs, salamanders, or nymphs, Ariel appears to be equally at home in all four elements, although his nature has nothing of the earth in it.

*Caliban.* The name “Caliban” is usually thought to be derived from a transposition of the letters in ‘Cannibal’ though some hold that it comes from the gypsy word ‘cauliban’ = ‘blackness’. The verb ‘ban’ in Shakespeare’s day meant to ‘curse’, and as Caliban on his first appearance is heartily cursing Prospero, and continues to do so throughout the play, the idea of cursing may have been present in Shakespeare’s mind when he invented the name.

In spite of his origin Caliban has not got superhuman powers; he is rather subhuman. But what does he look like? He is ‘savage and deformed’. But is he, as Trinculo asks himself, ‘a man or a fish’? According to Trinculo, he is ‘legged like a man, and his fins like arms’, and is ‘half, and half a monster’. Another witness, Antonio, declares quite independently that he is ‘a plain fish’. On the other hand, Caliban himself talks of digging up pignuts with his long nails – which one would not expect to find on fins. Before we see Caliban at all Prospero has described him as ‘a freckled whelp’, and the moment before he makes his first entry Prospero has shouted ‘thou tortoise!’ though ‘tortoise’ here is, no doubt, more abusive than descriptive. We may be reasonably sure, at any rate, that the original Caliban (whose ‘make-up’ alter all, was almost certainly settled by Shakespeare himself) had something uncouth and deformed in his appearance and that somehow or other – by the movement of his arms, or by some actual hint of deformity in them – he at least suggested a fish. It is true that we use the phrase “a queer fish” without much precise significance, but the references to Caliban’s fish-like appearance (and smell) in *The Tempest* are too definite and too frequent to be explained away. The modern producer is generally content to suggest his savage nature by giving him long shaggy hair, and dressing him in skins.

The names Alonso, Sebastian Antonio Ferdinand, and Gonzalo all occur in Eden’s *History of Travaille* (1577). It was almost certainly there that Shakespeare found the *mane* of Caliban’s father, the god Setebos. Prospero and Stephano were characters in the first, or Italian, version of Ben Jonson’s *Every Man in his humour*. This play was acted in 1596, with Shakespeare (who was an actor as well as dramatist) in the cast.

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## 2.2 Act By Act Analysis

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ACT I, Because the chief interests of Prospero, Duke of Milan, lay in “secret studies” rather than statecraft, twelve years ago he was dispossessed of his dukedom by his brother Antonio, aided by Alonso king of Naples. Antonio, to gain Alonso’s aid promised tribute and homage to Naples. When Antonio set Prospero and his daughter, Miranda, afloat in a rotten boat, they were saved by the ministrations of Gonzalo, who had put into the boat fresh water, food, clothing, and Prospero’s books. The two have landed on an island inhabited only by Caliban, son of the witch Sycorax. By setting Ariel free from a tree where he had been confined by Sycorax Prospero has gained an instrument by which to implement his deep knowledge of magic, Prospero, meanwhile has promised Ariel eventual freedom. Although Prospero has taught Caliban to speak and has made much of him, Caliban has attempted to ravish Miranda. As punishment, Prospero has reduced him to menial tasks and has kept him under enchantment (ii). As the play opens, a terrible, storm founders a ship carrying Alonso, Sebastian Antonio, Ferdinand and Gonzalo from the wedding of Alonso’s daughter (i). This tempest has been raised by Prospero who intends to gain revenge against his former persecutors. Ariel separates the noble personages from the mariners as they seek refuge on the island; and careful to save the lives of all of them he leads Ferdinand son of Alonso to Prospero’s cell. Although Miranda and Ferdinand are immediately attracted to each other Prospero charms Ferdinand and sets him at menial tasks; Prospero wishes to be certain that the conquest of his daughter be not easy (ii).

ACT II. On Another part of the island Alonso, Sebastian, Antonio, Gonzalo and other are glad to escape with their lives; but Alonso mourns for Ferdinand, whom he believes dead, and the others worry as to how they will be rescued. When Ariel charms all but Antonio and Sebastian to sleep, these two plot the murder of Alonso, intending to supplant him with Sebastian, Ariel awakens the others in time to prevent mischief (i). In still another part of the island Caliban meets the drunken Trinculo and Stephano; impressed especially by Stephano and his liquor, Caliban claims him as his master (ii).

Act III. Prospero, much pleased, overhears Ferdinand’s proposal of marriage to Miranda (i). Meanwhile Caliban proposes to Stephano that while Prospero sleeps, the two, together with Trinculo surprise Prospero and kill him; they will then be masters of the island. Ariel overhears their plans (ii). Ariel, disguised as a happy, then teases Alonso and the others; he sets a table with food, and when they try to eat, snatches the food away, accusing them of their previous sins. Alonso is overcome with remorse (iii).

ACT IV. Prospero now makes his peace with Ferdinand and blesses the betrothal of Ferdinand and Miranda by presenting a pageant in which spirits clothed as Iris, Ceres Juno, and nymphs celebrate the impending nuptials. Suddenly remembering Caliban’s plot, Prospero calls Ariel to him. Ariel informs him that he has charmed the conspirators, who,



half drunk, have wandered over the island, and have landed in a dirty wallow. When Caliban finally leads them to Prospero's cell, the drunkards discover cheap but glittering apparel and to Caliban's disgust, forget all about the plot. Ariel and other spirits enter and drive the three roaring around the island (i).

ACT V. Ariel now leads Alonso, Gonzalo, Sebastian, and Antonio to Prospero's cell where Prospero discloses his identity, reveals Sebastian's and Antonio's abortive plot against Alonso and demands the restoration of his dukedom. Prospero then shows the company Ferdinand and Miranda playing chess. Alonso, repentant yet overjoyed to find his son alive, blesses the betrothal. Ariel delivers the master and boatswain, who reveal that the boat was not sunk and is now ready to sail. Finally, Ariel drives in Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo with their gaudy apparel; when the whole company laughs at them, Caliban cannot understand how he has mistaken these drunkards for gods. Before Prospero accompanies the group into his cell for the night, he sets Ariel free, but instructs him as his last task to furnish calm seas and auspicious winds for the voyage to Naples (i).

Ground : Played in 1611, this play is probably the last one written entirely by Shakespeare. The first printing is in the First Folio of 1623. There are a number of influences traceable in the play, but the primary source is probably a letter written by William Strachey called 'A true repertory of the wracks of the *Sea Adventure*, and redemption of Sir Thomas Gates, Knight, "not printed until 1625 but in private circulation after its date of composition, July 15, 1610. Two other accounts of the wreck probably influenced Shakespeare: Sylvester Jourdan's *A Discovery of the Bermudas, otherwise called the isle of Divels* and Strachey's *A True Declaration of the Colonie in Virginia*.

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## 2.3 The Matter of Romance : Shakespeare's Last Plays

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Those who have argued for a much earlier version of the play have done so on the supposition that a German play, *Die Schone Sidea*, by Jacob Ayrer, who died in 1605, was based by him upon an earlier version of *The Tempest*, which he had seen performed in Germany by travelling English company. Several of the plays in Ayrer's *Opus Theatricum*, published in 1618, are in fact adaptations of English plays, but the only similarity between *Die Schone Sidea* and *The Tempest* is that both embody themes which are the common property of romance. There is no reason to suppose any relation between Shakespeare's play and the German drama, although the energies of many critics have been fruitlessly expended in the search for parallels. Nor is there any reason to relate *The Tempest* to certain *scenari* of Italian commedia dell'arte, most notably one called *Li Tre Satiri*, in which an island native conspires with two Europeans to steal the book of a magician. Other sources have been suggested as well. Some similarities to Prospero's career have been noted in that of one Prospero Adorno, Duke of Genoa, of whom Shakespeare may have

read in William Thomas' *History of Italy* (1549). In the fourth chapter of the Spanish *Noches de Invierno* (1609) by Antonio de Eslave there is an analogous tale, and it has most recently been suggested that the stories of Ayres Eslave and Shakespeare all derive ultimately from a common source in the actual history of Bulgaria, that Shakespeare used a nonexistent Italian romance based upon *Il Reno degli Slavi* (1601) of Mauro Orbino, which in turn was derived from the *Regnum Slavorum* of Deocleas Presbyter. Such speculation, fruitless as it may seem, will no doubt continue. If Shakespeare had a specific source for *The Tempest*, we do not know what it was; we do know that virtually all of the elements of his plot were the common property of romantic legend and had been used over and over again for centuries by storytellers and dramatists throughout Europe.

Romantic story had been a crucial ingredient of Shakespeare's comedies from the very beginning of his career but in *The Tempest* as in the other late plays with which it is associated—*The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, and *Pericles*—the matter of romance with its traditional themes of loss and reconciliation, and of new happiness arising out of ancient sorrow dominates the play and conditions all of its elements. These plays traditionally have been seen as a kind of epilogue to the dark world of the tragedies, in which Shakespeare's intensive probing of evil, violence and the meaning of human disaster has given way to a peaceful acceptance of the goodness and perfection of both man and nature. Behind *The Tempest* lies the ancient notion of a Golden Age in which heroic men had lived in perfect felicity, the pastoral tradition had embodied this ideal society in the never-never lands of Arcadian romance; Christianity had conceived of it as the Garden of Eden before the fall of Adam and Eve. In Shakespeare's play the Golden Age is achieved on a magical island where ancient evil is destroyed by love and forgiveness; the young lovers Ferdinand and Miranda joining to face a new world in which the enmity of their fathers has been destroyed, and in which art and nature, civilization and the pastoral world, are reconciled and allowed to complement one another.

The Shakespeare was interested in the ideal society is suggested by the reading upon which he drew for *The Tempest* Gonzalo's speech on the ideal commonwealth (II.i. 142-63) comes directly from John Florio's translation of Montaigne's essay "Of Cannibals," which is concerned with stating the case for natural man. The play is strongly influenced by the sense of wonder with which Shakespeare's contemporary Englishmen contemplated the new world of America, and particularly by a body of report about the strange adventures of a group of English seamen on the island of Bermuda, where they had lived as in paradise feeding on exotic native fruits and hearing strange music in the air.

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## **2.4 Sources and Background : Text and Contexts : The Bermuda Pamphlets**

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On June 2, 1609, a fleet of seven ships and two small vessels sailed from Plymouth

to Virginia. The flagship, the *Sea Adventure*, carried the new Governor (Sir Thomas Gates), the Admiral (Sir George Somers) and Captain Christopher Newport. On July 24 a terrible storm scattered the fleet. It arrived at Jamestown in August but the *Sea Adventure* was missing. She had run ashore on the Bermudas on July 28, but without loss of life. Gates, Somers, and the rest—some 150 in all—remained on the islands for about nine months. On May 10, 1610, they sailed away in to small pinnaces which they had built, arriving at Jamestown on May 23. The settlement was in a desperate condition. Early in June Gates decided that it must be abandoned, and all the colonists embarked with him for Newfoundland, but Lord Delaware, with new settlers and fresh supplies arrived in time to turn them back. He took charge of affairs on June 10 and soon after despatched Gates and Newport for England. They arrived in September, and thus the first news of the adventure of Gates and Somers in Bermuda reached the mother country.

In 1610, soon after their arrival, three narratives of these adventures were published (1) *News from Virginia*, a ballad by Richard Rich; (2) *A Discovery of the Bermudas, otherwise called the Ile Divels* by Silvester Jourdan (dedication dated October 13, 1610); and (3) A true declaration of the estate of the Colonie in Virginia an official publication, entered in the Stationers' Register on November 8, 1610. Both Rich and Jourdan had been with Somers in the *Sea Adventure* when she was wrecked. The ballad has no Shakespearean significance. The other two narratives coincide with *The Tempest* in some details which, though slight, warrant the inference that Shakespeare had read them, as, indeed, he was very likely to do if he felt any interest in the news of the day. More important, however, is a long letter from William Strachey, another of Somers' companions. This seems to be dated July 15, 1610, and doubtless came over with Gates in September. It was not printed until 1625, when Samuel Purchas included it in the fourth volume of his *Pilgrimes*, under the title "A true reportory of the wracke, and redemption of Sir Thomas Gates Knight; upon, and from the Glands of the Bermudas", but it must have circulated in manuscript, and we may be reasonably sure that Shakespeare read it. The resemblance between Strachey's letter and *The Tempest* can hardly be accidental. There is considerable reason to suppose that Shakespeare was personally acquainted with Strachey, but when The Tempest was written Strachey was still in Virginia as Secretary of the Colony. He returned in the late autumn of 1611 and took up his lodging in the Blackfriars. Meantime the letter had of course circulated privately among the leading members of the Virginia Company. It may have been shown to Shakespeare by Sir Dudley Digges, a prominent member of the company, with whose family we know that Shakespeare had some connections.

### **2.4.1 The Bermuda Pamphlets**

The Bermuda pamphlets are not to be regarded as sources of *The Tempest* in spite of the details Shakespeare may have borrowed from them. There are, in fact, considerable

and important differences between Strachey's account of the wreck and Shakespeare's. The tracts are important rather for their sense of wonder and discovery which conditions the tone of Shakespeare's play, and perhaps for turning his thoughts to the relation between primitive and civilized man, a theme which intrigued the imaginations of English settlers returning from the New World. It was actually an ancient theme, for the relation between nature and civilization, the primitive goodness of the country versus the corruption of the city, had long been the subject of European pastoral literature.

### **2.4.2 Allegorical Interpretations of the Tempest**

Critics have read all kinds of allegorical meanings into the story of *The Tempest*. Dowden has given the following brief survey of some of these interpretations :

“A curious and interesting chapter in the history of Shakespeare criticism might be written if the various interpretations were brought together of all the allegorical significances of Prospero. He is the primitive man abandoned to himself declares M. Mezieres....That Caliban is the missing link between man and brute (Shakespeare anticipating Darwinian theories) has been elaborately demonstrated by Daniel Wilson. Caliban is one of the powers of nature over which scientific intellect obtains command, another critic assures us, and Prospero is the founder of the Inductive Philosophy. Caliban is the colony of Virginia. Caliban is the untutored early drama of Marlowe.”

Dowden also quotes a long passage from Professor Lowell in which the scene of the play, the island, is said to be the soul of man; Prospero stands for Imagination, and the higher reason, Ariel, Fancy, Miranda is mere abstract Womanhood and Ferdinand is nothing more than Youth. Sebastian and Antonio are types of weak character and ambition. Gonzalo, of average sense and honesty; Adrian and Fancisco of the walking gentlemen, who serve to fill up the world.

Dowden himself has given no less fanciful an interpretation of *The Tempest*. According to him Prospero is “the man of genius, the great artist, lacking at first in practical gifts which lead to material success, and set adrift on the perilous sea of life, in which he finds his enchanted island, where he may achieve his works of wonder. He bears with him Art in its infancy...the marvellous child Miranda. The grosser passions and appetites—Caliban—he subdues to his service. But these gross passions and appetites attempt to violate the purity of art—And who is Ferdinand? Is he not, with his gallantry and his beauty, the young Fletcher, in conjunction with whom Shakespeare worked upon the *Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Henry VIII*? Fletcher is conceived as a follower of the Shakespearian style and method in dramatic art. But Shakespeare had perceived the weak point in Fletcher's genius—its want of hardness of fibre, of patient endurance, and of a sense of the solemnity and sanctity of the service of art—Ferdinand must honour her (Miranda) as sacred, and win by her toil—” and so on.

Such speculations, in themselves interesting enough make the work rather an allegory than a drama and thus misrepresent its quality. Its characters affect us as persons not as propositions. And yet, such interpretations have continued to be offered by critics.

### **2.4.3 Themes of The Play**

Attempting “to sketch the themes of *The Tempest*” Frank Kermode says; “It has rarely seemed sufficient to discuss the play at the level of the plot alone... The *Tempest* is a pastoral drama, it belongs to that literary kind which includes certain earlier English plays, but also, and more significantly, *Comus*, it is concerned with the opposition of Nature and Art, as serious pastoral poetry always is, and it shares this concern with the sixth book of the *Faerie Queene*, to which it is possibly directly indebted.

The main opposition is between the worlds of Prospero’s Art, and Caliban’s Nature, Caliban is the core of the play; like the shepherd in the formal pastoral, he is the natural man against whom the cultivated man is measured. But we are not offered a comparison between a primitive innocence in nature and a sophisticated decadence... Caliban represents nature without benefit of nature; Nature, opposed to an Art which is man’s power over the created world and over himself, nature divorced from grace, or the sease without the mind. He differs from logo and Edmund in that he is a “naturalist” by nature without access to the art that makes love out of lust; the restraints of temperance he cannot, in his bestiality, know, to the beauty of the nurtured he opposes a, monstrous ugliness; ignorant of gentleness and humanity, he is a savage and capable of all ill: he is born to slavery, not to freedom, of a vile and not of a noble union, and his parents represent an evil natural magic which is the antithesis of Prospero’s benevolent Art.

This is a simple diagram to an exquisitely complex structure, but it may be a useful guide, Caliban is the ground of the play. His function is to illuminate by contrast the world of art, nurture civility, the world which nonetheless nourishes the malice of Antonio and stains a divine beauty with the crimes of ambition and lust. There are possibilities of purgation, and the tragi-comic theme of the play, the happy shipwreck...is the means to this end.

#### **2.4.3.1 Nature Versus Art**

The colonization of the New World stimulated the imaginations of Shakespeare’s contemporaries and helped create the great vogue for travel literature gathered most notably in Richard Hakluyt’s *Principal Navigations* (1589) and *Samuel Purchase his pilgrimes* (1625). Through this literature ran two important themes, in sharp conflict with one another. One was the idea of ‘primitivism’ to become increasingly more important in the literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries : the idea that the New World contained men unsullied by civilization, living in the state of nature and exempt from the defilement of original sin. This notion, which exalts the superiority of nature to art, is

contained in Montaigne's essay "of Cannibals," which Shakespeare used in the play. The other notion, present also in much contemporary travel literature may have reflected the actual experience of European settlers rather than the romantic longings for a Golden Age. It saw the natives of America not as "noble savages" but as vicious creatures untouched by the grace of God and therefore incapable of the nobler feelings. Nature itself was viewed as corrupt; only through civilization could it be controlled and rendered beautiful. The natural man, untouched by the advantages of art and civilization, was subject to the baser animal passions, a natural slave who must be controlled by the white civilized European. Such a man is Shakespeare's Caliban, and in *Prospero's* rule of the island *Shakespeare* expresses the common Renaissance notion that it was the natural duty of any European prince to *rule any native country*. Shakespeare in *The Tempest* asserts the importance of art and civilization. At the same time he asserts the essential beauty and nobility of nature which need only to be brought under the control of a Prospero the educated man of noble birth, endowed by the grace of God.

Caliban, whose name is an anagram of cannibal, is strongly influenced by current notions about the American Indian, as he is by the older literary theme of the European wild man, a familiar figure in painting, heraldry, and perhaps most significantly in Elizabethan and Jacobean court entertainments, for The Tempest owes much to the tradition of the masque. The wild man was traditionally unchaste, governed by animal lust, below civilized man in the great chain of being. To emphasize his animality, Shakespeare makes him deformed, the unnatural combination of man and fish. Such strange creatures were fairly common in contemporary travel accounts. Being inferior to civilized man, Caliban is a slave by nature, the product of sexual union between an incubus and a witch. He responds intimately to nature, and in the pleasure with which he hears music, there is a reflection of the common Renaissance idea that music can appeal to the beast devoid of reason.

Being ruled entirely by his body, and being devoid of soul it is natural that he should attempt to rape Miranda. But Caliban is less evil and guilty than is the corrupt civilized man, Antonio. Caliban, being untouched by divine grace, can make no distinction between good and evil; he is devoid of moral sense. Antonio has a moral sense, but by his actions he reduces himself to lower than the beast. Caliban can be controlled by Prospero, as he is, and he can be educated. At the end he vows to seek grace.

### **2.4.3.2 Prospero's Magic**

The art by which Prospero controls nature is the disciplined use of holy knowledge or white magic; as such it is distinct from the black magic of the witch Sycorax, who by union with the devil can exploit nature for evil purposes. Prospero's instrument is reason, which he exercises through the grace of God and through which he can liberate the spirit of nature—symbolized by Ariel—and control both the brute forces of nature and his own passions.



His art is that of civilization, imbued with divine purpose and capable of controlling the external world by the exercise of virtue. Representing as he does the power of mind as opposed to that of the sense, he stands for chastity, just as Caliban stands for sexual promiscuity. Chastity is the quality of Christ, the essential symbol of civilization by which man controls his own animalism. The severity with which he applies its control to the young love of Ferdinand and Miranda is thus to be expected.

The self-discipline which Prospero has acquired in his exile is also the self-discipline of the ideal Renaissance prince, one always in control of himself, who knows how to help his people by his own learning, virtue, and ability. It is suggested that before his forced exile from Milan, Prospero had neglected the duties of his rule for the sake of his learning. On the island he has learned to translate his learning into the practical affairs of life, and it is suggested also that he will apply this new ability upon his return to Milan. The Jacobean audience would not have regarded Prospero as a supernatural creature. White magic was a respected pursuit in Shakespeare's England; it was communion with evil spirits which was forbidden by law and punishable by death. Among contemporary magicians—we would probably call them natural scientists—widely reputed for their skill and patronized by both Elizabeth and James, were Dr. Simon Forman and Dr. John Dee. Such semilegendary figures as Friar Roger Bacon, Bishop Robert Grosseteste, and Albertus Magnus were remembered in Shakespeare's day for their supposed ability to extend the limits of nature. Prospero's magic art represents an ideal to which learned men of Jacobean England could legitimately aspire.

### 2.4.3.3 Epilogue

Prospero now addresses the audience, half as Prospero still, half as the actor who has played the part of Prospero. But again certain readers believe that in the Epilogue Shakespeare is speaking of himself, and that when Prospero talks of being sent to Naples or being here confin'd by you' Shakespeare is weighing the possibility of his own retirement to Stratford-on-Avon or of remaining in London. With this Interpretation in mind, all sorts of phrases take on a personal significance, e.g. 'my charms are all o'erthrown' = 'I have given up writing plays, and now only an ordinary citizen.' His 'dukedom' is (presumably) enough money saved to retire upon, but what fanciful interpretation can be put upon 'the deceiver' it is hard to say. Whether there is any likelihood that Shakespeare was making a veiled reference to his retirement in the Epilogue (and we do not even know for certain that *The Tempest* was his last play) Prospero's words have a quite satisfactory surface meaning;—I am no longer Prospero, the powerful magician, for I have broken my magic staff. I am now a humble actor in your hands waiting for your applause to let me leave the stage and join my fellow actors. So now that you have watched the play and seen me recover my dukedom, please let me go off the stage ("this bare island"). Release me with

your applause (“the help of your good hands”). If I don’t succeed in obtaining your cheers (“gentle breath”, & c), our play has failed, for we aimed at pleasing you. I can’t *compel* approval now because I’ve adjured my magic; I can now only pray you to be merciful to the faults of actors and play—otherwise I shall be left in despair. As you would have your own sins forgiven, so in your indulgence give me liberty to go.’

All through the Epilogue Prospero is almost putting himself in the position of his own Ariel; he is some one bound to serve the public, and the public is able to free him as he freed Ariel. He carries on, too, the idea of magic and spells.

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## **2.5 : Shakespeare and The Subject of Colonialism in The Tempest**

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Gervinus thinks that in regard to Caliban (whose name is a mere anagram of Cannibal) and his dispossession of the island by Prospero, Shakespeare may possibly have ‘meant to answer the great question of the day concerning the justifiableness of European usurpation over the wild aborigines of the new world. “From such a perspective, even Frank Fernode’s interpretation might appear to be that of the colonist. Regarding this, we may refer to the analysis of Smirnov :

*The Tempest* contains another new and significant factor. Shakespeare reflects here on one of the major phenomena of his epoch, the political basis of colonia expansion, so essential to capitalism in its period of primary accumulation. His solution of these problems is as perspicacious as it is unambiguous.

The French humanist Montaigne, one of the older contemporaries of Shakespeare, who abhorred the rising feudal reaction, replied to it with an idealization of the American Indian, a new subject to the readers of that period. He presented a fantastic picture of the blissful existence of primitive people, ignorant of an oppressed state, of titles, rank, mercenary interests—in short of all the things which were tormenting civilized Europe. Even earlier than Montaigne, Thomas More derived some of the ideas of his Utopia from descriptions of the life of American Indians. In *The Tempest*, however, Shakespeare not only justified but provided a basis for the enslavement of the natives as a policy of colonization by depicting Caliban as an inherently stupid and vicious creature, mentally and morally unfit, whose only usefulness consists in dragging wood and being lashed for his obstinacy. Prospero is shown as Caliban’s natural master, a true bearer of culture to uncivilised lands. How little does such a solution of the racial problem resemble that of *The Merchant of Venice* or *Othello*. Shakespeare, however, was unable to abandon completely his former position.

Excepting Prospero, Gonzalo is the most intelligent and positive person in the play like Montaigne, who is here Shakespeare’s direct source. Gonzalo, too, dreams of creating a new state on this island where there would be ‘no contracts, succession,

bound of land, tilth'. The other characters ridicule him, but Gonzalo enjoys the sympathy of Shakespeare.

The play contains still more revealing scenes (II, ii) –the remarkable portrayal of the methods used by the 'colonizers', when Stephano makes Caliban drunk, and the latter offers his island, with all its natural wealth and himself as an eternal slave, in exchange for the divine drink.

I'll show thee every fertile inch o' the land  
And kiss thy foot pray thee, be my God.  
I'll show thee the best springs; I'll pluck the berries';  
I'll fish for thee, and get thee wood enough.

Drink and the whip—such were the methods employed on the natives by the first apostles of capitalist civilization. Caliban's revolt is also significant. He pours forth his complaints simply and awkwardly (I, ii).

This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,  
Which thou tak'st from me...  
For I am all the subjects that you have,  
Which first was mine own king....

This is followed by open revolt, not it is true, in the name of complete liberation, but in order to exchange one master for another a 'bad' master for a 'good', according to Caliban's understanding. That Caliban is confused does not matter, he is possessed by a passion for freedom. This finds expression in his tempestuous, truly revolutionary song :

No more dams I'll make for fish,  
Nor fetch in firing  
At acquiring,  
No scrape trenchering, nor wash dish  
Ban, Ban, Ca—Caliban  
Has a new master—get a new man.  
Freedom hey—day! Hey—day freedom! Freedom!

His method of revolt is instructive, Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo depart to kill Prospero, but are distracted from their aim by garments hung in their path by Ariel. In despair, Caliban begs his companions to disregard them, not to delay. He alone is inspired by freedom, he alone is a true revolutionary." (Smirnov)

Many other critics points out Shakespeare's sympathy with the old pioneers who laid the foundations of the British colonial empire. But they also drew attention to his large

humanity which helped him to foreshadow some of the problems of colonization. This is evident in his portrayal of the relationship between Prospero and Caliban. Prospero's attitude was that of the white man. Ridley says "He is not...to most readers a wholly attractive figure'. He is too dominating and domineering to win our sympathy. It gives us a clue to understand his failure to win over Caliban in spite of his efforts to civilize him. The object of the subjugation of the native people by the colonisers was exploitation. Prospero admits that he cannot love Caliban but he 'cannot miss him' either.

'He does make our fire/fetch in our wood and serves in offices  
That profit us.'

Caliban voices his grievances such as all enslaved colonized people do. He feels that all Prospero's initial kindness to him was in order to know from him the secrets of the island, Shakespeare sums up in a nutshell the inevitable fate to which colonial people are ultimately reduced :

"and here you stay me / In this hard rock while you do keep from me  
The rest o' the island".

Caliban transcends his individual character, and becomes a symbol. His attempted bid for freedom with the help of even such miserable characters as Stephano and Trinculo is typical of the attempts that enslaved peoples are likely to make to get rid of their rulers. He makes use of any instrument that he finds.

Caliban is earthy, but not gross. He has mental refinement to feel the beauty and the Music of nature such as the really gross Stephano and Trinculo have not. Shakespeare shows the wastage of human nature under colonial domination. Raleigh says Shakespeare attempted to explore the paradox of the combination of the virtues of the Golden Age with the extension of trade and sovereignty "he interrupts Gonzalo's speech with a running fire of scornful comment from the two men of sin. Yet he, too, for all we know, would have been willing to say with Montaigne, "I am sometimes troubled that we are not sooner acquainted with those people, and they were not discovered in those better times when there we men much more able to judge to them than we are."

### **2.4.3.3 Colonial and Post Colonial Perspectives on the Tempest :**

#### **A Note :**

India threw off the colonial yoke in 1947 and achieved Independence. During the fifties and sixties a number of African nations and other Third World countries also got their independence and emerged from the colonial era into the post colonial era. Political, cultural and social perspectives and relationships were radically altered and this was

reflected in our reading of Shakespeare too and specially in our reading of *The Tempest*, a model site (text) where questions of colonialism are raised.

During colonial times and before 1947 for Western readers Prospero was the philosopher—hero of the play and Cannibal it's sub-human villain. We too in the East were taught by our colonial masters to see the characters in this Western way.

Post colonialism brought a radical change in our way of looking Prospero and Caliban (and *The Tempest*). We came to clearly see the white Prospero as the colonising power (The boss-man) who wrongly takes over the island belonging to Caliban and makes the native into the whiteman's slave. To us Indians and Africans now Prospero appears not as the hero but as the villain coloniser who unjustly invades and takes over our countries. And Caliban appears as the hero (The subjugated native colonised by the white power) who struggles for Freedom against the coloniser.

Thus in postcolonial times Caliban becomes the representative of “us”, the Indians and the Africans and hence the hero while Prospero represents “them”, the white coloniser. The Villain.

## **Modules-3 & 4**





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## UNIT 1 □ R. B. Sheridan : The Rivals

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### STRUCTURE

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- 1.1 Literary Background
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### 1.0 Social Background

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With the return of Charles II in 1660, the old Cavalier class consisting mostly of the landed gentry, expected a revival of an age that had passed away. But they found that they were too weak and too few in number to regain their influence without some sort of alliance with the now powerful merchant class. In *Literature and Society* David Daiches provides valuable glimpses of the society of the time. The following extract is illuminating.

Whatever the superficial evidence to the contrary, the Restoration did mean such an alliance... The alliance between squire and trader held good until the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by which time the landed gentry did not need or thought they did not need, the

help of merchants and financiers. Thus the Cavaliers were back enjoying an Indian summer in political alliance with a class that would share none of their pleasures or recreations. A sense of irresponsibility, of unreality overtook the court and its hangers-on. Below the surface respectable citizens were carrying on trade and making money; on the top the returned exiles amused themselves by trying to recreate a lost world.....’

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## 1.1 Literary Background

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It is not then at all surprising that the most social of all literary forms, the drama should at this time have been at once more artificial and more the self-conscious product of one class in society than it had been in the first half of the century. In tragedy we have the Heroic Play, rhetorical, bombastic, preposterous : here the romantic courtly love tradition that descended from the Middle Ages reached its *reductio ad absurdum*. In restoration comedy we have a species that has become a by-word in text-books on literature for the flippant and cynical treatment of social problems. In tragedy the dramatist escaped from life; in comedy he remained in the society of his day but refused to treat it seriously.

“The aristocracy freed from the threat of ‘levellers’ and egalitarian doctrines in politics and religion were anxious to make their own lives distinguished for ‘elegance’ and sophistication. They had to be different from the respectable bourgeoisie whose habits they disliked and whose growing powers they feared. But the aristocracy were no longer a genuine class at all...so the attempt to produce a new aristocratic literature failed conspicuously. The society Congreve painted is already passing away; wit and gallantry and cynical irony have become literary fashions and the world described becomes an ideal world—it is in a way, a wish-fulfilment world for the wits of the time.

“One has no sooner mentioned a bourgeois ascendancy over literature and society that emerged in the eighteenth century than another aspect of the contemporary scene presents itself. Was not the aristocratic principle still dormant? Parliament was controlled by the aristocratic landowners, the government was oligarchic, and not in any real sense democratic; the bourgeoisie had no political power. In a sense it is true that the aristocratic principle was dominant in the 18th century. But there was no firm line drawn between the middle and upper classes. The ruling class was not a permanently fixed body, but flexible and ever-changing. There was no aristocracy of blood, but only of social and political power. Aristocratic sentiments were still very strong, aristocratic forms were kept up, but behind everything lay the ‘cash nexus’.....In literature the power of the bourgeoisie can be seen more simply and more directly. The periodical essay, the novel, the moralising and didactic verse of the middle of the century...the domestic drama of George Lillo and Edward Moore the comedy of Goldsmith and Sheridan and the sentimental drama of their

dull contemporaries, are all, in different ways, expressions of the bourgeois outlook. Sheridan, perhaps, with his drawing-room wit and irony, preserves as much of the aristocratic as of the middle-class tradition, but such philosophy as there is at the basis of his work consists in a vaguely optimistic trust in human nature guaranteeing its own morality which is another side of the bourgeois doctrine of *laissez-faire*”.

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## 1.2 18th Century Drama

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The eighteenth century saw the birth of a new kind of drama, in spirit and purpose entirely different from the comedy that had held the stage from the Restoration to the end of the seventeenth century. The new genre, sentimental comedy arose as a reaction against the licentious excesses of the comedy of manners. The bulk of the playgoing public was aristocratic, and the Restoration dramatists drew largely from manners of the courtiers—their love affairs and amorous intrigues. Brilliance of wit led to an avoidance of ardour and passion and humanity. The atmosphere of these plays was that of the boudoir of the eighteenth century familiar to the audiences of noble men and ladies and cavaliers and snobs; the dialogue presented the kind of wit and epigram, the persiflage and repartee they revelled in and sedulously cultivated by the gallants of the day. Comedy on the whole, had become highly intellectual and artificial, marked by cynicism and obscenity.

While the indecorous audacities and cynical banalities of Restoration comedy delighted the aristocracy, the middle-class for the most part kept away from the theatre. The publication of Jeremy Collier’s *A Short View of the Profaneness and Immortality of the English Stage* (1698) brought about a change of outlook. The public was on Collier’s side and his blows were so efficient that they practically killed, not indecency only, but the practice of comedy itself.

The rise of the middle-class in the eighteenth century ushered in a new phase in the history of English drama. The drama could not afford to neglect the affluent mercantile class. The drama which had hitherto confined itself to the superficial life of a narrow circle could no longer be indifferent to the moral standards of the playgoing public. Even in the works of those who later continued the tradition of the comedy of manners like Farquhar and Venburgh, a tendency towards sentimentalism was perceptible. But the sentimental strain became so deep as to replace the intellectualism of the preceding age; an easy emotionalism tended to stifle the spirit of comedy. “In place of laughter they sought tears; in place of intrigue; melodramatic and distressing situations; in place of gallants and witty damsels, pathetic heroines and serious lovers.” (Allardyce Nicoll)

Notable among the early exponents of the sentimental drama was Sir Richard Steele.

Outstanding among his lachrymose plays is *The Conscious Lovers* (1722) in which the real identity of a girl of unknown parentage is revealed in the nick of time to save her lover from parental opposition to the *mesalliance*.

The sentimental comedy, popularized by Steele, set the pattern for the drama that held the stage for several years to come. French influence, too, contributed to the development of sentimental comedy. However, the heyday of sentimental comedy was reached later with the plays of Hugh Kelly and Richard Cumberland. *Kelley's False Delicacy* (1760) and Cumberland's *The West Indian* (1771) "the extreme example of English sentimental comedy" were no less widely acclaimed. The sentimental play was marred by artificiality, scenes of pathos and moralizing. The plot was often vitiated by the introduction of some deus ex machina which consisted in the sudden conversion of a dissolute youth to conventional virtue or the discovery that a poor orphan is in reality a rich heiress or the exceptional generosity of the traditionally maligned Jew. The spirit of comedy had been practically driven off the stage.

Oliver Goldsmith (1728-74) protested vehemently against the 'tearful comedy' that threatened to banish laughter from the theatre for ever. In *The Good-Natured Man* (1768) and *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) he satirised the sentimental comedy of the day, though he was not entirely free from the very faults he condemned.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816) was also like Goldsmith eager to keep the spirit of comedy alive and he vigorously objected to the sentimental character of the prevailing drama. In the *School for Scandal* (1777) he draws a contrast between two brothers, Joseph Surface and Charles Surface, the former a shameless sentimental hypocrite and the latter, a recklessly good-natured rake. The contrast is intended to bring out the hollowness of moral sentiment. The comic spirit in Sheridan's play is more akin to that of the comedy of manners than to the Elizabethan drama. Even in the *School for Scandal*, he did not completely break away from the drama in vogue at that time, for in the characters of the good-natured prodigal, Charles Surface, Maria, and the benevolent Sir Oliver Surface there are discernible traits similar to those of the characters in sentimental comedy. But the dexterous stage-craft of the play and its scintillating wit have made it a permanent classic of the theatre.

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### 1.3 Life of Sheridan

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Richard Brinsley Sheridan was born in Dublin, the son of an actor, on October 30, 1751. Of his father Dr. Johnson once said "Sheridan is dull, naturally dull; but it must have taken him a deal of pain to have become what we see him now; such an excess of stupidity, sir, is not in nature." The son got his literary talent from his mother who was the author of *Sidney Bidhulph*, a novel after the manner of Richardson's *Pamela*, as well as of a play

that was acted by Garrick. He was educated partly in Dublin and partly at Harrow. Thereafter, he lived with his father at the fashionable town of Bath. Here he collaborated with a friend in writing a three-act farce *Jupiter* and tried his hand at verse translations. During his sojourn in Bath he “danced with all the women at Bath, wrote sonnets and verses in praise of some, satires and lampoons upon others, and in a very short time became the established wit and fashion of the place.” Here he met Elizabeth Linley a sixteen year old singer with a beautiful face and a heavenly voice. Her profession left her open to unwelcome advances from older men; so she decided to run away from home and asked Sheridan to accompany her as her cavalier. They reached Lille before her father caught up with them and persuaded her to go back to Bath. Sheridan also returned to England and fought two fierce duels with Thomas Mathews, the man who was the immediate cause of Elizabeth Linley’s flight. In the second of them Sheridan was wounded seriously. He recovered in due course and was sent to a tutor at Waltham Abbey to prepare himself for the legal profession. Six months later, he and Elizabeth were married.

The young couple now settled in London, and it was now that Sheridan seriously turned his hand at dramatic composition. In 1775 his first play *The Rivals* was produced at Covent Garden. It was not much of a success and had to be withdrawn. With intelligent revision it was performed with great success. A farce *St Patrick’s Day* was a failure, but *The Duenna* had a run for seventy nights in the first season. Sheridan, now with the help of his father-in-law and a friend purchased from Garrick the Drury Lane Theatre. Here he produced *The Rivals* and followed it by an adaptation of Vanburg’s *Relapse*. In 1777 he produced his masterpiece *The School for Scandal*, a devastating study of the corrupt English aristocracy. Two years later he ended his dramatic career by a comedy of sparkling wit *The Critic*, and turned to politics in real earnest.

Sheridan was elected to Parliament in 1780 and in 1782 became an Under-Secretary in the short-lived Rockingham ministry. In the coalition ministry that followed he was secretary to the Treasury. He was a prominent member of the Whig party and his parliamentary fame was due to his oratorical power. He was one of the principal movers for the impeachment of Warren Hastings and his speech on the Begums of Oudh which lasted for five hours won him high praise from Pitt himself. An equally famous speech was delivered in support of the French Revolution. The speech is all the more significant in view of the opposition of Edmund Burke to the French Revolution. In 1806 he was Treasurer to the Navy and in 1812 his parliamentary career came to an end. He had ceased to be a playwright for more than thirty years, though he retained his interest in the theatre he had purchased. He was a bad business man and he suffered losses which always kept him in

financial difficulties. Socially he continued to be a celebrity, drinking, gambling and spending money with alarming prodigality until he was reduced to bankruptcy and arrested in 1813 and sent to debtors' prison. After this crushing ignominy, his last years were rather pathetic spent in illness and poverty. He died in 1816 and had the supreme honour of being buried in Westminster Abbey.

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## 1.4 Sheridan as a playwright

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Edmund Gosse has called Sheridan "the Beaumarchais of the English Stage". His plays marked the return of theatrical taste to the Moliere ideal of conventional comedy after a brief interval of *drama larmoyante*, the sentimental comedy soaked in tears. In Sheridan's case however, the direct inspiration did not come from Moliere, but from the masters of English Restoration comedy—Congreve, Wycherley and Vanburgh—whose merits he imitated, but with a happy instinct he avoided their vices. Johnson put it neatly. Sheridan could make the audience merry and for a long-time Sheridan was regarded as second only to Shakespeare. He does introduce satire in many of his plays, but his satire is not that of the moralist but of the man of the world. He looks down upon the failings of human nature with indulgence and is critical only of the truly malicious and spiteful character.

As in all eighteenth century comedy, Sheridan's attitude to life was entirely empirical. He suggests no problems, offers no solutions, interprets no movements. He moves in an artificial world of no substance, the hollowness of which is brought out by his irony. He has no deep insight, no psychological understanding. That is why he cannot be ranked with the great playwrights. In this respect he falls short of his French contemporary Beaumarchais, beneath whose brilliance and wit, one can see positive evidence of the coming Revolution.

But Sheridan is a master of stage-craft and dramatic situation. "His plot is so ingenious that each character is found in every possible variety of situation, but also, is so plausibly constructed, that if a moment's credence be given to their existence, the story seems to talk itself, so probable, so inevitable is the progress of events." Sheridan is not a psychologist but a shrewd and penetrating observer. The province of comedy in which he most readily moves is that of situations and verbal virtuosity. Here at least his mastery is astonishing.

"His work, without being in any way didactic, nevertheless recommends and suggests a sort of natural morality, an optimistic confidence in the goodness of man's heart, a philosophy in the manner of Diderot, which is not free from the diffuse sentimentalism of the period."



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## 1.5 The Play : Theatrical History : Its actors, actresses and first performance

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On 17 November, 1774, Sheridan was able to write to his father-in-law : “There will be a comedy of mine in rehearsal at Covent Garden within a few days.” The Covent Garden company had scored its greatest success in Goldsmith’s *She stoops to Conquer*. Before Sheridan, completed *the Rivals* he could have seen the company in *She Stoops* on two occasions. Edward Shuter played a droll old gentleman, so he was Mr Hardcastle and Sir Anthony. John Quick played young squires and was a natural Tony Lumpkin as well as Bob Acres. Lee Lewes liked portraying the slightly arrogant and took Young Marlow and Fog. Mrs Green’ created Mrs Hardcastle and Mrs Malaprop. Mrs Bulkley excelled as the lively, open young woman, so was Kate Hardcastle and Julia. Sheridan carefully studied the capabilities of the likely performers. Harry Woodward who played Jack Absolute, had recently acted Mercutio. W. T. Lewis who had been seen as Romeo was cast in the role of Faulkland, and John Lee who was seen in the role of Benedick, was chosen, for Sir Lucius.

The first performance of *The Rivals* took place on 17 January 1775; and was not a success. It “just escaped damnation”. This was caused partly by the play itself and partly by the incompetence of some of the actors. The prompter was too loud and Lee was a miscast. Fortunately, Sheridan realized how the comedy could be improved, the wildness and freedom of speech of Restoration dramatists were no longer acceptable. He must capture their gusto without their grossness. He remembered the audience valued decorum and sensibility. Some of the coarseness and bizarre word-play were deleted. Sir Lucius was converted into a man of honour. This revised version was presented on 28 January. Clinch replace Lee. Loud applause greeted his Sir Jucius and the play was generally admired. David Garrick, manager of the rival theatre remarked early in the evening, “I see this play will creep”. At the end he had to say, “I see the play will run.”

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## 1.6 Sheridan’s Sources

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It has been said that Sheridan’s own life provided ample materials for *The Rivals* and his knowledge of Bath suggested the background.

For the characters, he drew largely upon his extensive readings. In naming them he was of course using Ben Jonson’s habit of naming a character after the ‘humour’ it represented. Thus Sir Anthony represents the ‘absolute’ temperament of an overbearing father. O’Trigger suggests one whose fingers are always on the trigger of his gun. Lydia

Languish is typical of the languishing sentimental beauties so familiar in 18th century literature. Mrs Malaprop (Fr. *mal a propos*), as her name suggests, was an adept at wrong use of words.

Besides this, many of the characters are almost bodily lifted from other people's works. Mrs Malaprop owes a great deal to Mrs Tryport in a play by Sheridan's mother, *A Journey to Bath*. Even some of Mrs Tryport's malapropisms appear with no change in *The Rivals*. She is also very similar to Mrs Winifred Jenkins of Smollett's *Humphrey Clinker*, as well as to Mrs Slipslop of Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*. *Humphrey Clinker* also gave Sheridan Mathew Bramble as a prototype for captain Absolute. Mrs Heidelberg in Colman and Garrick's play, *The Clandestine Marriage*, has also lent something to Mrs Malaprop, Lydia Languish reminds us of Colman's Polly Honeycombe who is meant to satirise the feminine reader of sentimental romances. Sheridan may also have borrowed the name from Lydia Bramble in Smollett's *Humphrey Clinker*. Mrs Honeycombe also had some influence on Sheridan's portrayal of Sir Anthony. Bob Acres was modelled on John Quick who used to be known as the retired Diocletian of Islington'; Sheridan also must have remembered Shakespeare's Andrew Aguecheek in some respects. George Sampson says that "probably every detail in *The Rivals* appeared in some other play."

Sheridan plagiarised at least one scene from Shakespeare : O'Trigger's incitement of Acres to send a challenge to Capt. Absolute is undoubtedly based on a similar scene between Sir Toby and Sir Andrew. But we must be cautious of accepting all these as true. He was only twenty-three when he wrote it.

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## 1.7 The Play : Critical Analysis

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The play opens with Fag, Captain Absolute's valet and Thomas, the coachman employed by Sir Anthony. They meet in a street in the fashionable town of Bath. While Thomas refers to the arrival of Sir Anthony whose sudden decision to visit Bath is of a piece with his impulsively imperious nature. Fag reveals the secret about his master who has fallen in love with Lydia Languish, 'a lady of a very singular taste'. Capt Absolute is courting Lydia under an assumed name Ensign Beverley, because she prefers a low-ranking Ensign to a General and would not marry the son of a rich baronet. We also hear of the 'old tough aunt', Mrs. Malaprop.

The nature of the rivalry is likely to give rise to complications—a lover against his imaginary self, the Ensign half against the Captain half of Absolute. This is an artificially contrived situation; but for the wrong-headed romantic notions of Lydia such a situation would not be impossible.

Fag and Thomas are a delightful pair of eighteenth century servants. Their talk is interspersed with oaths fashionable in those days. Fag is the type of the faithful servant who

apes the manners and fashions of his superiors, while Thomas seems to be a sort of die-hard conservative who clings to the old fashion of wearing wigs of which Fag is very critical. (Act I. Sc. I)

In the next scene Lucy, the maid, places before Lydia the sentimental volumes she has brought from the circulating library. Julia, Sir Anthony's ward, drops in and from their *tête-à-tête* we gather much about them and their love-affairs. Julia is betrothed to Faulkland who once saved her from drowning. Faulkland is rather an eccentric lover always bent on testing Julia's constancy in love.

Lydia's stupidly sentimental notions of love are revealed here. She would marry the poor man of her choice rather than submit to her aunt, Mrs Malaprop, though she knows that in going against the wishes of her aunt she is sure to forfeit her legacy. She is anxious that 'the course of true love should never run smooth' a romantic elopement followed by a secret marriage in an alien land is the supreme happiness she longs for.

Mrs Malaprop has been encouraging Bob Acres, though Lydia does not care for him. However there has been an estrangement between Lydia and Ensign Beverley, artificially brought about by Lydia herself. She wrote a letter to Beverley accusing him of faithlessness and on meeting him flew into a passion and vowed she would never see him again. Her aunt intercepted her correspondence with Beverley and imposed restraints on her movements. She has come to know her aunt's correspondence under the assumed name of Delia with an impecunious Irish baronet, Sir Lucius O'Trigger with whom she has fallen head over heels in love.

In spite of her silly sentimentality Lydia seems to be an excellent schemer. She is somewhat scornful of Julia's love for Faulkland which is based on sheer gratitude. Her sarcastic remark that 'a water-spaniel would have done as much' reveals her instinctive aversion to sentimentality. Julia is a foil to both Lydia's romantic perversity and Faulkland's effeminate sentimentality.

The 'old tough aunt' expresses to Sir Anthony her emphatic disapproval of her ward's obstinacy in 'clinging to a fellow not worth a shilling'. Proud of her little learning and vain in the extreme, she is an excellent comic character. Her verbal mutilations have gained immortality for her. [Mrs Malaprop has her illustrious predecessors in Shakespeare's Dogberry and Verges, in Mrs Slipslop in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, in Mrs Heidelberg in *The Clandestine Marriage* by Colman and Garrick, and in Mrs Tyfort in *A Journey to Bath* by Sheridan's own mother.]

Despite his furious temper Sir Anthony has a kind heart. His proposal that his son should marry Lydia is accepted with alacrity by Mrs Malaprop who at once dismisses Bob Acres as her suitor. The seeds of rivalry are sown.

Mrs Malaprop now summons Lucy, enjoins her to silence regarding her secret. She believes the girl is a simpleton. Lucy gloats over the way she has deceived both the aunt and the niece gaining not only their gratitude but generous tips of services rendered. The wily maid deceives Sir Lucius into believing that the letters signed 'Delia' come from the niece and not from the aunt, adding one more to the list of rivals for Lydia's hand. (Act I. Sc. ii)

In the next scene we hear that Faulkland has been told that Julia is in town, and knowing nothing of his fretful nature Acres dwells on Julia's mirthfulness. Faulkland is in agony; Capt Absolute enjoys the discomfiture of Faulkland. Acres is a delightfully comic character; his sartorial vanities, his eagerness to play 'the blade', his hare-brained scheme of winning Lydia's hand and his oaths afford much amusement.

Sir Anthony's arrival is announced and Faulkland and Acres leave. Capt. Absolute is told that he is soon to be the master of a large estate, but when he learns that 'his fortune is saddled with a wife' he protests vehemently. The domineering Sir Anthony refuses to divulge even the name of the girl he is to marry and maintains that his son should be ready to marry the girl of his choice even if she is ugly. The Capt. reveals that he is engaged; Sir Anthony leaves in a huff threatening to disinherit his son. While leaving in a fury he raps Fag and the latter pours his spleen on the errand boy. (Act. II. Sc ii)

Lucy after getting her reward of money and kisses from Sir Lucius meets Fag and tells him that the lady Sir Anthony has chosen for the Capt. is none other than Lydia Languish. Lucy is under the impression that Ensign Beverly has a new rival in Capt. Absolute (Act. II. Sc ii)

Captain absolute, having discovered that his father wants him to marry the very girl he is plotting to elope with, is anxious to meet Sir Anthony and tell him that he is prepared to do anything to please him. Meeting Sir Anthony who is determined to be unrelenting, the captain tries to convince him that, in yielding to his father's wishes, he is moved by no other sentiment than sheer filial piety. He pretends to know nothing of Lydia. Sir Anthony is so pleased that he goes on to describe her as a paragon of beauty, but the captain's phlegmatic response to his effusions rouses his suspicions. In fact, he dwells on Lydia's charms with a gusto that makes it appear as if he were himself her lover, and even threatens to marry the girl himself, if his son is disinclined to. He, however, advises his son to meet Mrs Malaprop and pay his addresses to Lydia Languish. The consummate actor that the Capt. is, he plays the penitent to perfection. Sir Anthony is however suspicious of this sudden conversion and reveals that beneath the veneer of simplicity there is a hard core of shrewdness and worldly wisdom. (Act III. Sc i)

In the next scene we find Faulkland meeting Julia. He has expected Julia to be gloomy in his absence and wants her to love him for his own sake and not for having saved her

life once. He tortures Julia, too, by his petulance. He quarrels with her and leaves her in tears.

The scenes meant to satirise sentimental comedy are rather tedious. The language they speak is stilted and sentiments high-flown. Julia, though more sensible than her lover, seems to be a colourless figure that has emerged from the pages of romance. (Act III. Sc ii)

Mrs Malaprop welcomes Capt. Absolute who easily wins her favour by subtle flattery. Mrs Malaprop dwells on the obstinacy of her niece whose correspondence with Ensign Beverly she has intercepted. She shows him one of his letters in which he has made some derogatory remarks about her ridiculous vanity and pompous way of speaking. Captain Absolute pretends to be shocked; she draws his attention to that part of the letter where the audacious Ensign says he 'will elude the aunt's vigilance' and even 'make her a go-between'. The Capt. now suggests an ingenious plan to get rid of Ensign Beverly. Mrs Malaprop is asked to act as go-between and connive at Lydia's elopement with the Ensign. The plan appeals irresistibly to her own scheming nature and she readily complies with his request to tell Lydia that the Ensign is waiting to see her.

The admirable audacity and resourcefulness of the Captain enable him to deal with this delicate situation without disclosing his real identity even when Lydia comes down to meet him; Mrs Malaprop withdraws in triumphant anticipation of outwitting her niece. He convinces Lydia that by some clever means he has kept Captain Absolute away and come in his place so that Mrs Malaprop labours under the impression that he is Captain Absolute. He assures her that he is ready for an elopement and that he would be content to live in poverty.

Mrs Malaprop, however, who has been taken in by the Captain's bold address becomes suspicious as she overhears Lydia mention Beverly and speak of "the idle threats of her ridiculous aunt". No longer able to contain herself, she comes out of her hiding to scold Lydia, as the Captain takes leave of them.

The scene is full of delightful irony; while Mrs Malaprop is deceived into believing that she is playing a trick she is herself tricked into playing the very part that the Ensign has designed for her. The comic situation is enlivened by her malapropisms. (Act III. Sc iii)

In the next scene Acres is shown to be aping the fashionable man-about-town. His flamboyant dandyism elicits the contempt of even his servant David. He has been taking lessons in dancing under a French tutor, but realizes that the nimble movements are beyond the power of his clumsy feet.

Sir Lucius calls on him now to instigate him to challenge Ensign Beverley to a duel, for the Ensign is responsible for his disgraceful dismissal as Lydia's suitor Acres' indignation

is roused and he writes a letter of challenge dictated by Sir Lucius, asking Beverly to meet him at King's Mead Fields that evening. Sir Lucius also tells him that he too is going to have a duel at the same place that evening with another man who has insulted him—Captain Absolute—whom he goes out to find.

The plot, the rivalry complicated by the concealed identity of the Captain, thickens further where all the rivals are drawn into, a duel that is to be fought at the same place and time. (Act III. Sc iv)

David tries to dissuade his master Bob Acres from fighting the duel for such a 'bubble' as honour. He is sincerely sorry for his master, he doesn't have even the ghost of a chance of coming back alive from the duelling ground. But Acres plays the braggart and dismisses the entreaties of his faithful servant with contempt, while inwardly he quakes with fear. He shows the letter of challenge to Capt. Absolute and asks the Capt. to act as his second, and to deliver the challenge to Ensign Beverly. The Captain agrees to take the message, but says that he cannot act as Acres' second. (Act IV. Sc i)

Mrs Malaprop is persuading her niece to accept the Capt as her suitor. The Capt. arrives accompanied by his father. Sir Anthony is surprised to find that his son does not make any advances to Lydia. He is embarrassed and asks to be left alone with Lydia. But Sir Anthony insists his son should speak to Lydia in his presence. Lydia refuses even to look at him. The Capt., thus driven into a corner, finds it difficult to escape exposure. He tries to disguise his voice but in vain. When Lydia hears her lover's familiar voice, she addresses him as Beverly to the surprise of her aunt and Sir Anthony. The Capt., no longer able to continue the dissembling, makes a clean breast of the matter. Lydia is enraged at the deception practised on her; Mrs Malaprop is offended that the Capt. should have made all those unflattering remarks about herself in that letter he wrote in the capacity of Ensign Beverly. Sir Anthony, glad that his son is not, after all, the dull fellow he had taken him for, feels, however, he has been taken in by the Captain's clever pretence. The old baronet is in the best of spirits and exhorts Mrs Malaprop to forget and forgive, and they leave the lovers alone.

The Capt. however, meets with an unexpected rebuff. Lydia petulantly breaks off the engagement. He warns her that she will but make herself the laughing-stock of the world, for everyone will think she has been thrown over by her lover. Lydia is in tears when Mrs Malaprop and Sir Anthony come back. Sir Anthony thinks the Capt. must have been overbold with the delicate girl; he is, however, pleased with his son's boldness, for it is but the 'impatience' of the Absolute blood in his veins. (Act IV. Sc. ii)

Sir Lucius picks a quarrel with Capt. Absolute and challenges him to a duel. They are to meet in the evening at King's Mead Fields. When Sir Lucius leaves, the Capt. is greeted



by Faulkland, who readily agrees to be his second. Faulkland is still in a gloomy mood, after his recent quarrel with Julia whose servant now brings a letter to him and he hastens to pacify her. (Act IV. Sc iii)

Faulkland who is ever intent on testing Julia's sincerity, sends her a message which tells her that he is in very serious trouble and he has to flee the country, Julia takes him at his word and in all earnestness promises to go with him; she is ready to share any misery with him and even to marry him at once to join him in the flight. But when Faulkland realizes how truly she loves him, he confesses the truth. The indignant Julia now puts her foot down, telling him that she will not pardon him for this last trick he has played upon her. Faulkland is thus left to regret his own folly when Lydia arrives on the scene. Lydia describes how she has deceived by her own lover. Julia now reveals the fact that the secret about Beverly has all along been known, to her, for Faulkland had been the Captain's confidant. Lydia is all the more wretched when she learns that her dearest friend Julia too has been deceiving her, and that all her rosy dreams of a delightful romance have been shattered. She has always looked forward to a sensational elopement, escaping from her upper window on a moonlit night by means of a rope-ladder, going in disguise to Scotland where they could secretly get married and "the thrilling paragraphs" in the newspapers. Now that this romantic escapade is no longer possible or necessary, she is disillusioned to find herself made 'a mere Smithfield bargain of, with the most unromantic prospect of 'simpering up to the altar' with Capt. Absolute. While she is dwelling at length upon her disenchantment, Mrs. Malaprop, accompanied by Fag and David, comes in. Fag and David have sought her help to prevent their masters from duelling. They persuade the ladies to go with them to King's Mead Fields, David, in the meantime, is to go and find Sir Anthony to keep the Capt. from taking part in the duel. (Act V. Sc i)

Capt. Absolute ready for the duel with his sword hidden under his great coat is on his way to the appointed place when he meets Sir Anthony. He muffles up his face, but Sir Anthony stops him. The Capt. pretends to be a stranger who has never before seen the baronet. But soon Sir Anthony discovers that his son is carrying a sword, The Capt. ever resourceful, convinces him that it is but another trick of his; if Lydia still persists in her refusals to forgive him, he can draw it out and threaten to kill himself. Sir Anthony lets him go. But no sooner has he left than David comes running and entreats him to dissuade the Capt. from duelling. Sir Anthony also directs his steps to the duelling ground. (Act V. Sc ii)

The last scene brings all the main characters to the same place. Sir Lucius and Acres are waiting for their adversaries at King's Meal Fields. Sir Lucius asks Bob Acres what should be done to his body if the latter gets killed—should it be buried at Bath or should it be 'pickled' and sent home? The words of Sir Lucius strike terror into his mind. The



cowardly Acres trembles with fear and feels his 'valour is oozing out through his palms', but the baronet urges him on, saying that he should vindicate his honour. At the mention of the word 'honour' Acres pretends to have regained his courage and asks Sir Lucius to mention that word whenever he shows symptoms of cowardice. But when Faulkland and Capt. Absolute arrive, Acres finds to his surprise and relief that Capt. Absolute and Ensign Beverley are one and the same person and he refuses to fight. Sir Lucius still urges him on, but to no purpose. The Capt. is ready to fight Sir Lucius, but when he draws his sword, Sir Anthony, David and the ladies reach the place. Lydia and the Captain are soon reconciled to each other. Julia and Faulkland also come to terms. Sir Lucius learns, to his chagrin that 'Lycia' is not Lydia but Mrs. Malaprop, and she is annoyed that Sir Lucius should be scornfully incredulous, Mr. Acres invites them all to a ball at the New Rooms, and Sir Anthony suggests that all the 'single lads' will drink a health to the young couples and a husband to Mrs. Malaprop.

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## 1.8 Characterisation

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Sheridan's characters lack depth perhaps because the social environment from which they arose lacked mental and moral depth. He was clearly indebted to Ben Jonson. His characters are endowed with a certain vitality specially those of Sir Anthony, Captain Absolute, Sir Lucius and Bob Acres, but most of them are, in one way or other, akin to the types familiar to readers in the Jonsonian comedy of humours. Sir Anthony Absolute suggests despotic absolutism. He is the angry father lifted bodily from the comedies of Plautus and Terence. He demands absolute docility from his dependants. He is full of vitality and good humour, he appreciates beauty and romance, even some amount of devilry. He loves his son and likes him to have a beautiful wife.

As for Mrs. Malaprop she is one of the immortals of literature. She is not as great as Falstaff or Mr. Micawber, but she is memorable. Little read in sundry books, she parades her learning with grotesque pride. Sir Lucius calls her 'the very queen of the dictionary'. But the pity was that the right word seldom came to her help. The result was a delightful 'derangement of epitaphs'. Thus she contributed to English literature those priceless absurdities of language such as 'he is the pine-apple of politeness' or "headstrong as an allegory on the banks of the Nile".

The name of Acres is suggestive of the countryside with its lack of sophistication. He is a country boor trying to ape the dandyism of the city-bred person. He has all the fatuity of the typical gull in Jonsonian comedy and belongs to the tribe of Sir Andrew Aguecheek. He is an expert in creating new oaths; but when he tries to learn the latest French dances, he finds them too foreign for his English legs; his very toes are anti-Gallican. Sir Lucius

O'Trigger's name suggests the fiery temper of the sanguinary, trigger-happy dueller, ever on the lookout for an aspersion on his honour.

The name Lydia Languish suggests a romantic sentimentality of nature. She has been nurtured on tales of love and languishment smuggled into her study from the circulating library. She is for ever dreaming of romantic escapades and perfect bliss of happy love in poverty. Thrills and sensations have paralysed her brain and she luxuriates in a world of glorious unreality.

The other characters are involved in a life of frivolous intrigue and rapid sentiments. There is no display of the basic passions of life; the characters are all submerged in levity and caprice. Faulkland is the sentimental lover *per se*; he is jealous, fault-finding and whimsical and carries with him "a confounded farrago of doubts, fears, hopes, wishes and all the flimsy furniture of a country miss's brain." Now he is in the heights of happiness, now in the doldrums of depression. Julia cannot be described as a patient Griselda; she is just an ordinary girl, somewhat anaemic, but with firm convictions. Fag is a wag, a conscious hypocrite, a past master in the art of lying; but he has what Shaw calls "the soul of a servant. Lucy is the feminine counterpart of Fag. If Fag is thoroughly dependable, Lucy is totally unreliable. David is Acres's servant, devoted to his master. He has plenty of horse-sense; he would fight with cudgels and staffs, but has a mortal suspicion of new-fangled weapons like swords and pistols.

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## 1.9 Comedy of Situation / Intrigue

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The play may be considered as a play of situation and intrigue. In this respect, it reminds us of the deliberately contrived situation of the comedy of manners. Intrigue is the very essence of its dramatic interest. Captain Absolute is driven to resort to a stratagem to win "a lady of a very singular taste." So he stoops to conquer, for he has to manoeuvre skillfully to win the lady without letting her lose her considerable legacy by her romantic idiosyncrasy. He assumes the name Ensign Beverley, courts Lydia, and in doing so finds himself unwittingly set in rivalry against his real self. This fantastic rivalry is further complicated by that of Bob Acres whose suit is promoted by Mrs Malaprop and by that of Sir Lucius who is misled by Lucy to suppose that the lady who writes love-letters to him in the name 'Delia' is Lydia. Mrs Malaprop, Lydia's aunt, who writes those letters, intercepts her niece's correspondence with Beverley, while Lucy is only too willing to oblige both the aunt and the niece as go-between, betraying both and profiting by it.

This love-intrigue is further complicated by the subplot of the abortive duel in which Capt. Absolute finds himself in a fantastic predicament. He has to be in Lydia's presence in the dual capacities of Beverley and Absolute at the same time, he has been challenged

to meet two persons Sir Lucius and Bob Acres at the same time while being required to be second to one of them. Even the sentimental Faulkland infected by the spirit of intrigue, launches a puerile plot to vex Julia which like Absolute's recoils on himself.

Sheridan's dramatic skill is discernible in the clever way he manipulates the plot, keeping us in suspense till the end; no less remarkable is the way the whole complicated knot is unravelled in the end.

The Julia-Faulkland episode is integrated into the complex structure of the play. Intended to satirise the sentimental vein of the eighteenth century comedy, the episode itself has become tainted with sentimentality, the very fault he was bent on exposing. Julia, though sensible, trembles perilously on the brink of the sentimental stream. She is the anaemic heroine of a stale romance glorifying the virtue of constancy. That Sheridan should wind up the play with Julia's words on moderation seems to be a concession to sentimental comedy.

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## 1.10 The Title of the Play

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“The Rivals of the play of course are one and the same person. The gallant young lover has introduced himself to the romantic heroine in the character of Ensign Beverley, a poor subaltern, in preference to his more eligible personality as the heir of Sir Anthony Absolute, a baronet with £4000 a year, and has gained the heart of the sentimental Lydia, who prefers love in a cottage to the finest sentiments, and looks forward to an elopement and the loss of a great part of her fortune with delight; but the young man's plans are confounded by the sudden arrival upon the scene of his father, bent on marrying him forthwith in his own person to the aforesaid Lydia. Thus he is at the same time in her eyes the romantic and adored Beverley and the detested Captain Absolute, the wealthy suitor to whom she has been betrothed by her guardians.” (Secombe) Thus Captain Absolute becomes his own rival for the hand of Lydia. There are other rivals hovering on the fringes of the comedy—Bob Acres encouraged by Mrs Malaprop to pay his addresses to Lydia, and O'Trigger who courts 'Delia' under the impression that she was Lydia, and not the aunt Mrs. Malaprop. Moreover, there is Faulkland who is blindly and foolishly jealous of rivals that exist in his imagination.

The title is a commentary on the central theme as well as other themes that embroider the play.

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## 1.11 Annotations

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### Act I. Scene i

**Bath :** a fashionable watering station of the 18th century. It is in Somersetshire. Its

mineral waters, discovered in 1758 made it a popular health resort. The remains of an ancient Roman bath are in a remarkable state of preservation.

**Odd's life** : The word 'god' was not pronounced on the state. So God has turned *odd*.

**Masquerader ..... Jupiter** : Loves like to go about in disguise since the days of Jupiter. [In classical legends, Jupiter or Zeus, the chief of the gods visited mortal maidens in various disguises—he visited Danae, mother of Perseus, in a shower of gold; Antiope, mother of Amphion, as a satyr; Leda, mother of Helen, as a swan etc.]

**Zounds** : a corruption God's wounds.

**Pump room** : where the mineral waters were available

**'od rabbit it** : an oath; a corruption of '*God rot it*'

**zooks !** : an oath, a corrupt contraction of 'gods' hooks or nails.

**Gyde's porch** : rooms kept by Mr Gyde

#### **Act I. Scene ii**

**Malaprop** : (from French *mal a propos*) inappropriate

**The Reward of Constancy** : probably by Mr. Shebbeare (1769)

**The Fatal Connection** : novel by Mrs. Fogerty (1773)

**The Mistakes of the Heart** : novel by Pierre Henri (1769)

**Mr Bull** : ran a circulating library in Bath.

**The Delicate Distress** : novel by Mrs. Griffith (1769)

**The Memoirs of Lady Woodford** : published by Lady Woodford in (1771)

**The gardian Knot** : novel by R. Griffith (1769)

**Tears of Sensibility** : by M. D'armand translated by John Murdoch (1773)

**The Memoirs of a Lady** : by Lady Vane

**sal volatile** : smelling salts.

**Delia or Celia** : Poets used to address their verses to imaginary mistresses with such fanciful names.

**The Innocent Adultery** : by Paul Scarron (1610-1660)

**Ovid** : (43BCAD17) Probably Lydia is referring to Ovid's *Amores*.

**The Man of Feeling** : an Henry Mackenzie (1771)

**Mrs Chapone** : an improving book by Hester Chapone

**Fordyce's sermons** : by James Fordyce (1765)

**Lord Chesterfield's** : Letters written to his son by Lord Chesterfield (1694-1773)

**illiterate** : for *obliterate*

**extirpate** : for *exculpate*

**Controvertible** : for *incontrovertible*

**intricate** : for *intrepid*

**misanthropy** : she seems to mean misogynist

**evergreen.....knowledge** : the reference is to the tree of knowledge mentioned in the Bible, whose fruit was forbidden (*Genesis ii. V. 17*)

**Iaconically** : for *cynically*

**prageny** : for *Prodigy*

**Fluxious** : a term in Newtonian calculus; she may be thinking of some branch of mathematics.

**supercilious** : for *superficial*

**geometry** : for *geography*

**contagious** : for *contiguous*

**orthodoxy** : for *orthography*

**reprehend** : for *apprehend*

**superstitious** : for *superfluous*

**conciliating** : *convincing*

**illegible** : for *ineligible*

**intuition** : for *tuition*

**artificial** : for *artful*

**O Gemini** : an oath (Gemini is one of the signs of the Zodiac consisting of numerous stars of which only the twin stars—*Castor* and *Pollux*—are visible to the naked eye.

**malevolence** : for *benevolence*

**locality** : for *loquacity*

**Hibernian** : Irishman

## **Act II : Sc. I**

**s death** : an oath, '*gods' death*'

**minority waiters** : waiters temporarily out of employment

**Od's whips and wheels** : Acres always adapts his oaths to what he is talking about. Here, he is referring to a journey by coach.

**the Mall** : a street in-London

**Spa** : is a town in Belgium known for its mineral springs. Now it means any place where there is a mineral spring.

**Squallante, rumblante and quiverante** : musical terms invented by Acres on the analogy of '*andante*'

**Od's minnums and crotchets!** an oath using musical terms

**cotillion** : a French country in dance

**Looby** : clumsy fellow.

**Od's frogs and tambours** : '*frogs*' are the ornamental part of a coat-fastening and '*tambours*' are circular frames used in embroidery.

**Bacchus** : god of wine

**Mars** : god of war

**Venus** : goddess of love

**Pallas** : Athene, goddess of wisdom

**the Crescent** : The Royal Crescent, a street in Bath

**Cox's Museum** : museum founded by James Cox, a London jeweller

#### **Act II. Sc ii**

**Incentive** : for *instinctive*

**induction** : for *seduction*

**commotion** : for *emotion*

**superfluous** : for *superficial*

**infallible** : for *ineffable*

**Criterion** : for *particle*

**habeas corpus** : a legal term; 'writ requiring body of person to be brought before judge or into court, esp. to investigate lawfulness of his restraint.'

**gentlemen's gentlemen** : valets of gentlemen

#### **Act III. Sc i**

**at twelve years.....** : It was the custom in rich families to buy a commission for the eldest son, but Sir Anthony may be exaggerating when he says he sent his son into the army at the age of twelve.

**to affect a singularity in the article** : to pretend to like a women with only one eye.

**Phlegmatic** : cold-blooded

**Her eyes.....to you** : her eyes will inflame your passions. According to Greek mythology, Prometheus stole fire from heaven and brought it into the world.

#### **Act III. Sc ii**

**veering but a point** : changes in the direction of the wind are called veering. A point is one of the 32 divisions of the mariner's compass. Julia means that her feelings will not show even the slightest change.

**Aethiop** : Ethiopian, a black man

**antique virago** : old shrewish woman

#### **Act III. Sc iii**

**accommodation** : for *recommendation*

**ingenuity** : for *ingenuousness*

**ineffectual** : for *intellectual*

**the orange tree** : it bears flower and fruit at the same time; similarly Mrs. Malaprop combines in herself beauty (flower) with knowledge (fruit).

**pine apple** : for *pinnacle*

**exploded** : for *exposed*

**conjunctions** : for *injunctives*

**preposition** : for *proposition*

**particle** : for *article*

**hydrostatics** : for *hysterics*

**persisted** : for *desisted*

**interceded** : for *intercepted*

**reprehend** : for *apprehend*

**oracular** : for *vernacular*

**derangement** : for *arrangement*

**epitaphs** : for *epithets*

**allegory** : for *alligator*

#### **Act III. Sc iv**

**monkeyrony** : a mispronunciation of macaroni, a dandy or fop.

**Clod Hall** : Acres' home in Devonshire. (A clod is a lump of clay, suggestive of Acres' stupidity).

**at twelve years...** : It was the custom in rich families to buy a commission for the eldest son, but Sir Anthony may be exaggerating when he says he sent his son into the army at the age of twelve.

**oons** : same as Zounds (see before)

**balancing and chasing and boring** : various movements in dance (these are dancing terms from French *balancer*, *chasser* and *bourrie* respectively)

**sink, slide—confuse** : dance movements

**od's Jigs and tabors** : an oath characteristic of Acres : a jig is a lively country dance, and a tabor is a small drum.

**outlandish healthen allemandes** : fantastic foreign dances introduced into England from Germany.

**paws** : the French word *pas* is pronounced like *paws* by Acres.

**anti-gallican** : anti-French.

**Jack-a-lantern** : will-o'-the-wisp or mirage that misleads travellers; Acres thinks that love has misled him.

**Od's flints, pans and triggers** : This oath is intended to show the Acres' fighting instincts are aroused.

**The thunder.....breast** : Your thundering words have turned the milk of human kindness in me sour.



**I would the ink were red** : I wish the ink were of the colour of blood to suit the ferocity of this challenge.

**that's too civil by half** : that is excessively polite

**Act IV. Sc. i**

**cormorant** : a large bird, proverbial for its voracity

**sharps and snaps** : swords and pistols

**phillis** : Aeres' hound

**Crop** : Acres' horse

**Act IV. Sc. ii**

**caparisons** : for *comparisons*

**His physiognomy so grammatical** : she means either *his physiognomy so symmetrical* or *his phraseology so grammatical*.

**affluence** : for *influence*

**like a frog in a quinsy** : like a frog with an inflamed throat

**Bedlam** : The hospital of St. Mary of Bethlehem, the well-known lunatic asylum in London

**Varlet** : rogue

**Compilation** : for *appellation*

**anticipate** : for view in *retrospect*

**retrospection** : for *anticipation*

**Youth's.....joy** : a song from *The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay

**in Cupid's calendar** : in the history of love

**billing and cooing** : exchange of tender caresses by lovers

**analysed** : for *paralysed*

**Carberus** : the three-headed dog which, according to Greek mythology guards the gate of Hades.

**Act IV. Sc. iii**

**the old serpent** : Satan who tempted Eve in the shape of a serpent

**red cloth** : just as the snake called viper was said to be first attracted by a red cloth, and then caught, so these women were attracted by the red uniform of the soldiers. [‘Vipers are said to attack a piece of red cloth with such fury that they expend all their venom on it, and can then be handled without danger.’ (Balston)]

**‘not unsought be won’** : from *Milton's Paradise Lost*, VIII, 502-503.

**Act V. Sc. i**

**made a mere Smithfield bargain of** : bought and sold like dattle in the cattle market

which used to be held at Smithfield, London; she means that hers is going to be a conventional marriage.

**Scotch parson** : she has been fondly dreaming of an elopement to Scotland where, as the laws are not so rigorous as in England, she could have got secretly married with a Scotch parson officiating.

**cried three times** : put up the banns (i.e. notice of intended marriage read out in the church three times before marriage)

**ask the consent of every butcher** : when the banns are published, anyone in the parish can object to the marriage

**paracide** : for *parricide*

**antistrophe** : for *catastrophe*

**enveloped** : for *disclosed*

**perpendiculars** : for *particulars*

**participate** : for *precipitate*

**Derbyshire petrifications** : the stalactites and stalagmites in the ancient caves of Derbyshire

**falicity** : for *velocity*

**exhort** : for *escort*

**envoy** : for *convoy*

**precede** : for *proceed*

### **Act V. Sc. iii**

**field pieces** : light artillery carried on wheels

**the gentleman's friend** : i.e. his second

**quietus** : death

**as lieve be shot** : as soon be shot

**I serve His Majesty** : being one of the King's officers, he cannot ignore a challenge.

**Vandyke** : for *Vandal* ; Van Dyck or Vandyke was a seventeenth century Flemish painter.

**Od's wrinkles** : here he thinks of old age and so swears by wrinkles.

### **Epilogue**

**The Cit** : the citizen : the common man

**John Trot** : a common name for an unsophisticated citizen

**the vaquished victor** : the defeated conqueror. See *Alexander's Feast* line 115

**toper** : drunkard

**blade** : gay fellow

**kisses Chloe etc** : as his lips touch the brim of the cup he imagines he is kissing his sweet heart, Chloe.

**tar** : sailor

**widowed partner** : the sailor's wife, separated from him for long is as good as a widow.

**his Nancy** : the soldier's wife

**Would gladly... Love** : their admiration would be all the more worthy if it were founded on a combination of wisdom and love inspired by intelligent women.

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## 1.12 Questions

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- a) What characteristics of the Comedy of Humours do you find in *The Rivals*?
- b) *The Rivals* is a comedy of incident and intrigue. Discuss.
- c) Bring out the appropriateness of the title of *The Rivals*.
- d) Attempt a character sketch of Lydia Languish. Do you think her portrayal is meant to be satirical?
- e) How far does the Julia—Faulkland episode contribute to Sheridan's satirical purpose?
- f) Consider *The Rivals* as a blend of the Comedy of Humours, Comedy of Manners and Sentimental comedy.
- g) Write a short Essay on :
  - i) The farcical element in *The Rivals*
  - ii) Eighteenth Century Bath
  - iii) Faulkland's Sentimentality
  - iv) Circulating libraries
- h) Comment on :
  - i) the role of Lucy
  - ii) the rivalries in the play
  - iii) the abortive duel in *The Rivals*
  - iv) Fag and David
- i) Write short notes on :
  - i) Sir Anthony Absolute
  - ii) Bob Acres
  - iii) Sir Lucius O'Trigger

- iv) Malapropism
- v) The encounter between Capt. Absolute and his father in Act II.
- j) In what sense is *The Rivals* an artificial comedy?
- k) What ideas on women's education are reflected in *The Rivals*?

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## 1.13 Recommended Reading

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*Read the text carefully; it is essential*

*Plays of Sheridan* ed. Joseph Knight. Oxford University Press, 1913

*The Rivals* ed C. J. L. Price, Oxford University Press, 1968

*Sheridan*, Lewis Gills, 1947

*Eighteenth Century Literature*, Edmund Gosse

*An Introduction to Eighteenth Century Drama*, F. S. Boas, 1953

*The Rivals* ed. R. L. Purdy, Oxford 1935

*Sheridan's Plays* ed. Lewis Gibbs

*The peace of the Augustans*, George Saintsbury.

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## **UNIT 2 □ Oscar Wilde : The Importance of Being Earnest**

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### **STRUCTURE**

**2.0 Background : The English Drama Before Oscar Wilde**

**2.1 Problem Drama**

**2.2 Life of Wilde**

**2.3 Wilde as Playwright**

**2.4 Fracical Element**

**2.5 The Play as Social Satire**

**2.6 Characters In The Comedy**

**2.7 A Comedy of Manners**

**2.8 Wildean Wit**

**2.9 Conclusion**

**2.10 Annotation**

**2.11 Questions**

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### **UNIT 2.0 Background : The English Drama Before Oscar Wilde**

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English drama of the early nineteenth century was on the whole deplorable. While poetry and fiction were drawing upon the genius of the romantics, the theatre was the home mainly of irregular spectacle, melodrama and farce. Even the revivals of the more creditable drama of earlier ages were presented with but little taste or understanding. Most of the romantic poets attempted drama, but with little success.

The decline of the drama cannot be assigned to any single cause. The prosperous middle-class society had not genuine appreciation of drama as an art, and the actor, with

a few notable exceptions, remained a member of a profession without honour. The audiences that gathered in the nineteenth-century theatre had not the intelligence, nor the imagination of the Elizabethan audiences. The State certainly looked on with bleak unconcern.

Neither the court, nor the Queen, had the talent to encourage drama, and so commercialism which was infecting England in many other ways, dominated the drama.

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## 2.1 'Problem' Drama

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The danger in the nineteenth-century theatre was, above all, that it was unrelated to the life of the time. In England, the most valiant attempt to bring the drama closer to life is found in the comedies of T. W. Robertson of which the best remembered is *Caste*. When read, the play seems crude and vulgar, but on the stage, the whole comes to life. The characters live, the action seems real and often veery moving.

Much has been written of the influence of Ibsen on the English drama, but apart from G. B. Shaw it is difficult to find anyone deeply affected by the great Norwegian. His work towers over all that the English stage has produced in the Modern period. The descent from Ibsen to Henry Arthur Jones and Sir A. W. Pinero is a steep one. Both combined a keen estimate of what would constitute a commercial success with a touch of the real and the problematic. It is true that Jones's most popular paly was a melodrama, but he did attempt 'problem' themes in such plays as *Saints and Sinners*. Compared with Ibsen, these are the works of an amateur. Pinero was more adroit in handling the mechanism of the stage, though, again compared with Ibsen, he is a bungler. He attempts to deal with real situations, though most of them have an odd air of theatricality. His best-known play, and one of the most effective, is the once notorious *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*, which treats of the marriage of 'a woman with a past'. It can at least be urged that it was far superior to most plays of the period and it has borne the test of revival on the modern stage. Their work seems to prepare the audience for the comedy of Oscar Wilde and G. B. Shaw.

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## 2.2 Life of Wilde

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Born in 1854 in Dublin Wilde studied at Trinity College. Later he went on to Oxford when he became a leader of the 'aesthetic movement'. There the influence of Matthew Arnold with his crusade against philistinism, of Ruskin with his revolt against ugliness, and of Walter Pater with his defence of hedonism was to be reflected in Wilde's extravagant costumes and attitudes and more seriously mirrored in his writings. He attempted poetry

(*Poems*, 1881), short stories, fairy tales (*The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, 1888) essay (*The soul of man under Socialism*, 1891) Platonic dialogues (*Intentions*, 1891), a novel (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1890) and plays. But it is as a playwright that he has had his greatest success and significance.

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## 2.3 Wilde As Playwright

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Wilde's contribution to drama was to restore to it the spirit of comedy. He brought to the dull moralistic Victorian stage a wit reminiscent of the Restoration comedy of manners and a genuine sense of the dramatic. *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), his first success, catered to a middle-class taste with a plot centering on a woman with a past. In *A Woman of No Importance* the superficial situations of the frivolous dinner party seem to overshadow the more serious problems of the fallen woman Mrs Arbuthnot, her son Gerald, and the young puritanical Hester with her experiences in sophisticated English society. It would be more accurate to say that Wilde in spite of his desire to mirror the manners and not to reform the morals of its day, has blended serious and trivial implications into a composite whole. *An Ideal Husband* is an attempt at social satire. The plot centres on the exposure of a cabinet member's past and the deflation of his wife's smug morality. *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) is probably his best play and in it he has not abandoned the serious to the trivial and witty. The situation is overwhelmingly funny, almost a Gilbertian absurdity. Jack Worthing has created for him a fictitious brother. Ernest, to conceal his rakish activities from his ward Cecily. Just when he decides to do away with Ernest, his foppish friend Algernon appears in the guise of the infamous Ernest so that he may meet and make overtures to Cecily. The confusion of mistaken identities continues until it is resolved through the explanations of Lady Bracknell and Miss Prism. Everything ends happily when Jack is revealed as a genuine Ernest, a long-lost infant who had been misplaced by his nurse in a handbag, when she absent-mindedly confused him with the manuscript of her three-volume novel 'of more than usually revolting sentimentality'. If it is, as Shaw described it 'a heartless play' it is also a masterpiece of the worldly and the cynical blended superbly with laughter.

Wilde's chequered career, with his flamboyant tour of America, his trial for sexual perversion and subsequent imprisonment, is movingly reflected in *De Profundis* (1897) and *the Ballad of the Reading Gaol* (1898). Finally his death (1900) in poverty in France, has made him one of the most picturesque figures in English literature.

The plot of play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is absurd. Jack who has a young ward named Cecily, invents a brother, Ernest, to account for his visits to London, when he courts Gwendolen. Algernon, Gwendolen's cousin, likewise has an imaginary invalid



friend named Bunbury to get him out of boring engagements. Gwendolen and Cecily both dream of marrying a man called Ernest. Jack decides to 'kill' his brother, but simultaneously Algy decides to impersonate him, and falls in love with Cecily. When the two girls meet, the double deception is revealed, Gwendolen's mother, Lady Bracknell, wishes Algernon to marry Cecily because she is wealthy, but Jack forbids this unless he himself is permitted to marry Gwendolen. After a series of unlikely coincidences, it turns out that Jack's name really is Ernest after all, and that Algy is his brother, and the couples are free to marry.

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## 2.4 Farcical Element

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*The Importance of Being Earnest* is often described as a farce. Indeed it is so consistently farcical in tone, characterization and plot that very few readers care to examine whether it has any kind of meaning. The tendency of critics has been to regard the play as trivial, decorated with flippant wit.

The plot, Wilde confessed is 'slight' but he thought it was 'adequate'. One sees immediately the pun on the name of 'Earnest' which Jack Worthing's serio-comic statement underlines :

*Lady Bracknell*: My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of triviality.

*Jack* : On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital importance of Being Earnest.

One gradually perceives the game played with double meanings of words, such as *Ernest* and *earnest*: this determines not only the plot but also the minor details of the dialogue. Cecily tells Algernon whom she mistakes for the 'wicked' Ernest : 'I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time.' Then there is the concept of 'Bunburying'— the adoption of two identities. When Jack is recognized as Algernon's elder brother, the need and rationale for Bunburying disappears. Jack turns out to be the nephew of Lady Bracknell and his new status enhances his social importance; his earnest playing of the role of a fictitious Ernest is rewarded in the end. When Jack and Algernon adopt the mask of Ernest the true lineage of Jack Worthing is eventually made clear. Lady Bracknell tells him that he is Algernon's elder brother; he was actually christened Ernest after his father. He had all along been Ernest without realizing it.

The play may easily be interpreted as a farce. It is farcical in its delicate symmetry of plot, in its balanced characters, and in its balanced presentation of parallel situations. If Jack invents a brother in London, Algernon invents an imaginary invalid friend named Bunbury in the country. Cecily and Gwendolen both dream of marrying a man called Ernest. Lady Bracknell permits Algernon to marry Cecily, but Jack forbids this unless he

himself is allowed to marry Gwendolen; when Jack decides to kill his brother, Algernon decides to impersonate him.

Another respect of the non-serious approach to life is reflected throughout the play. There is no pressure of reality. The pairs of lovers are united at last in an ‘and-they-lived-happily-ever-after’ ending. The bewildering abundance of wish-fulfillments strains credulity. The passions of the characters have been idealized; instead of the lust for flesh we have childish lust for food. Algernon forbids Jack to touch the cucumber sandwiches. Even the petty vexations of life cannot ruffle Algernon’s composure as he sits down to eat his muffins. Cecily is also very much of a child, taking German lessons from her governess, Miss Prism and referring frequently to her diary. Jack and Algernon quarrel as children do. Jack is determined to be christened as Ernest. Baptism is a ceremony of great importance in the life of a child. To make it a matter of great consequence in the life of an adult is to achieve an inversion of values totally disproportionate to the occasion.

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## 2.5 The Play as Social Satire

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Some down to earth awareness of the tensions and weaknesses of humanity can serve a useful purpose, and it is here that social satire has its place in an apparently farcical representation of life. True, Wilde does not have the dramatic structure that underlies *Major Barbara or Candida*. Yet it would be careless to disregard its content. Wilde himself cherished the play as a serious effort : “How I used to toy with that tiger, Life!” And subsequently he described the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* as “a trivial comedy for serious people”. He elaborated saying that “we should treat all trivial things of life seriously, and all serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.”

Throughout the play one can observe the operation of Wilde’s bifocal vision. It is possible to show that Wilde is as much of a moralist as Shaw, but instead of presenting the problems of modern society directly, he flits around them. His wit does not seem to cut beneath the surface of life; it is a flickering light intermittently revealing weaknesses of character and obliquities of judgment.

Wilde’s satire is not embedded in plot and character as in traditional comedy. For him social criticism is a running accompaniment to the play. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is one of those Gilbertian absurdities; it contains premises of make-believe material which are mathematically demonstrated in the formula of stock situations : mistaken identities, the twin brothers, concealed information about birth and lineage and so forth Yet the dialogue

which sustains the fragile plot is a running commentary on all important aspects of life which the plot seems to ignore deliberately. The Wildean comment is a “pseudo-irresponsible” attack on all the serious problems of life—birth, baptism, love, marriage, literature, economics, beauty, truth, death, the decline of aristocracy, nineteenth century, morals and the class system. Consider the opening of the play :

*Algernon* : Did you hear what I was playing, Lane ?

*Lane* : I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

*Algernon* : I'm sorry for that for your sake. I don't play accurately—anyone can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for life.

*Lane* : Yes, sir.

*Algernon* : And, speaking of the science of life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell ?

*Lane* : Yes, sir. (Hands them on a salver.)

*Algernon* : (*Inspects, them, takes two and sits down on the sofa*)

Oh !... by the way, Lane, I see from your book on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreman and Mr Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.

*Lane* : Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.

*Algernon* : Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne ? I ask merely for information.

*Lane* : I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

*Algernon* : Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralizing as that ?

*Lane* : I believe it is a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

*Algernon* : (*languidly*) I don't know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane.

*Lane* : No, sir, it is not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself.

*Algernon* : Very natural, I am sure. That will do Lane, thank you.

*Lane* : Thank you sir. (Lane goes out.)

*Algernon* : Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility.



Oh! it is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read.

.....

The Truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility.

.....

The anarchic mood of Algernon's opinion wants us to believe that most speculations about life have very little reference at all to the actual facts of existence. Wilde, through his dandies, skilfully cloaks truisms beneath an appearance of casualness.

Wilde's social criticism usually dwells on the relations of gentlemen and ladies and specially on the violations of decorum. Through Gwendolen Fairfax the ideals of Lady Windermere and Mabel Chiltern have been parodied, Gwendolen despises the Victorian ideals of purity and steadfastness. She is clearly the product of the age of the New Woman. We were taught that female submissiveness was one of the bulwarks of Victorian upper middle-class society. In Gwendolen that article of faith is being mocked at. She could have been a legitimate leader of the Women's Lib movement today.

The satire on society is also represented by the figure of Lady Bracknell. She has determined ideas on all subjects and she recalls the energetic wit of Wilde's dowagers : Mrs Allonby, the Duchess of Berwick, Lady Carolin and Lady Hunstanton. Consider the following :

*Lady Bracknell* : Do you smoke?

*Jack* : Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.

*Lady Bracknell* : I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. I here are far too many idle men in London as it is. How old are you ?.

*Jack* : Twenty-nine.

*Lady Bracknell* : A very good age to be married at, I have always been of a opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?

*Jack* : (after some hesitation) I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

*Lady Bracknell* : I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately, in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square. What is your income ?

*Jack* : Between seven and eight thousand a year.

*Lady Bracknell* : What are your politics ?

*Jack* : Well, I am afraid I really have none. I am a liberal Unionist.

*Lady Bracknell* : ..... Are your parents living ?

*Jack* : I have lost both my parents.

*Lady Bracknell* : To lose one parent, Mr Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness. Who was your father?....

*Jack* : I am afraid I really don't know. The fact is Lady Bracknell, I said I had lost my parents. It would be nearer the truth to say that my parents seem to have lost me I don't actually know who I am by birth. I was....well, I was found.

*Lady Bracknell* : Found !

*Jack* : The late Mr. Thomas Cardew, an old gentleman of a very charitable and kindly disposition, found me, and gave me the name of Worthing, because he happened to have a first class ticket for Worthing in his pocket at that time. Worthing is a place in Sussex. It is a seaside resort.

*Lady Bracknell*: Where did the charitable gentleman who had a first class ticket for this seaside resort find you ?

*Jack* : (*gravely*) : In a hand-bag.

*Lady Bracknell* : A hand-bag!

*Jack* (*very seriously*) : Yes, Lady Bracknell. I was in a hand-bag—somewhat large, black leather hand-bag, with handles to it—an ordinary hand-bag in fact.

The order of the questions asked by Lady Bracknell is deliberately reversed —does he smoke ? how old is he ? What does he know ? What are his politics ? What are his parents ? and so so on. The expected scale of values is headed by birth and income and education; but Lady Bracknell's scale begins with minor vices, and leads to age, education and parentage. We miss the undertones of malice and contempt but the laughter is assuredly directed towards social insincerities.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde's purpose is to expose and elucidate situations with an eye to attributing just proportion or value to each. And his earnest dandies—Algernon and Jack —purge the serious hypocritical tendencies of men and restore to them the balance of life that comes from a recognition of their limitations.

Even Miss Prism helps in the understanding of Wilde's satiric vision. Her character, in fact, represents the duplicity of things that pervades the whole play. What happened to her in the past directly contradicts her ethical posture in the present. She hates merriment and triviality : yet she once wrote a three volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality. Canon Chasuble's reference to Miss Prism as 'Egeria' with its connotations

of public wisdom, of discipline and control contradicts her real name Laetitia which means 'joy'.

Although Wilde has no serious plot and no really vital character, the playwright achieves a peculiar effect in counterpointing lively criticism with the absurdities of action.

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## 2.6 Characters In The Comedy

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Wilde's characters are just appropriate to the flowering of sophisticated manners, the very rhythm of their elegant life. The successors of Wilde — Priestley, Maugham, Noel Coward, Ben Traversi — almost all of them invariably lack the indesirable charm and grace of his characters.

In serious comedies characters are types of social folly ; in high comedies the interest is in characters, and in low comedies the interest is in physical distortions. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde presents sophisticated versions of the rogues, scoundrels or gulls we find in Jonson for example. Even Lane Algernon's butler, is anything but the scheming servant of the comic tradition. If he conforms to a type, it is Wildean one reminiscent of Phipps in *An Ideal Husband*. Lane is a mask with a manner representing the dominance of form. In Wilde the whole air, to borrow a phrase from Hazlitt, is "perfumed with affectation".

The inane conventionality of Lady Hunstanton (*A Woman of No Importance*), the wasteful exuberance of Lord Alfred (*A Woman etc.*), the insolent flippancy of Mrs Allonby (*A Woman etc.*) and the socialite Lord Illingworth (*A Woman etc.*) are seemingly presented to project attitudes. The world of these men and women is a philandering world which holds that "the Book of life begins with a man and woman in a garden", and that "it ends with Revelations".

The Wildean dandy refuses to be involved in life; he is a detached observer; he sees life objectively and is amused by it. He dresses differently and his ideas and standards are different from those of the community he lives in. He thoroughly despises everything conventional Algernon, the Wildean dandy, is a deviation from the social norm. He seems to be less earnest than Jack and, therefore more clear-sighted about life. An aspect of the play's meaning as Wilde states it—"We should treat all the trivial things of life seriously and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality"—is established through him. The anarchic energy of his opinions is appropriately displayed through his radical and paradoxical formulations on life, morals and art.

The characteristics that identify Jack and Algernon as well-to-do bachelors are few : drinking champagne, the restaurant meals; the location of the apartment and the list of



amusements at the end of Act. I. Jack is serious, Algernon is a man of mode. Jack is compliant Algernon is aggressive. They complement each other. So do the young ladies in the play. Cecily diverges from type; she is more knowledgeable than the *ingenues* she is based on. She coaxes and cajoles and even her governess is outwitted, Gwendolen is clever and independent. She talks glibly of “metaphysical speculations” and “German scepticism”, and her sophistication distinguishes her from the common image of the faddish intellectual women of her time.

Miss Prism and Dr Chasuble are characterized by carefully selected details. Their cultural backgrounds are suggestive of the mid-Victorian era. The canon is well-meaning but his candour often leads him into ridiculous self-exposure. His fussy precision of language evokes an elegant surface but conceals a vacuum within. Miss Prism is appropriately called Egeria, the grave humourless counsellor of Numa. She recommends Jack’s “gravity of demeanour” but contradicts her ethical posture by producing a three-volume novel full of revolting sentimentality.

Lady Bracknell reminds us of the sophisticated dowagers of Wilde. Her talent is best observed in her neat verbal configurations and her sententious judgments. Faintly reminiscent of Mrs Malaprop, she delivers her delicious severities in a Johnsonian manner, as when she asks Jack kneeling before Gwendolen : “Rise, Sir, from this semi-recumbent posture. It is most indecorous”. She has determined ideas on all subjects—eligible bachelors, advantages of ignorance, modern education and mercenary marriage. Though she has been drawn brilliantly, she lacks depth or subtlety.

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## 2.7 A Comedy of Manners

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The Restoration Comedy of Manners resulted from conditions when a keen observation of life was allied to an intellectual mood of disillusionment and biting satiric treatment of social follies.

Lamb called the Comedy of Manners ‘artificial’ because it dealt with superficial characteristics and trivialities, rather than permanent human qualities, for example, fans lace, handkerchiefs, snuff-boxes, and frills. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde has cucumber sandwiches wine, German lessons, cigarette cases and fans. He helped to establish the taste for the mannered gesture and the emphatic projection of social attitudes. Wilde’s intention was to free comedy from the squalid domesticities of middle-class existence.

In high comedies the interest is in character like Rosalind and Orlando or Beatrice and Benedick. Mirabel and Millamant to some extent, share the qualities of the romantic comedies. Such comedies illuminate significant aspects of life. But in a Comedy of

Manners, characters are elegant and sophisticated; Gwendolen, Lady Bracknell and Algernon are different from Rosalind and Orlando. Even Miss Prism evokes elegant surfaces and varnished appearances. Jack and Algernon are dandies; they are evangelists of sensuous perfectionism. They display exuberance rather than a serious understanding of life. They are sophisticated improvements on their prototypes among the pleasant rogues scoundrels or gulls. The impish passions of Wilde's character, their petulance, hunger and impatience together with their lack of moral concern create an atmosphere congenial to the flowering of mannered gesture. The perfection of elegance is best achieved in the absence of strong human emotion or of moral intensity.

However, the Comedy of Manners is often coarse and vulgar; *The Importance of Being Earnest* is not. There is neither the stark opposition between town and country, between gallant and citizen as in the Comedy of Manners. The male reluctance to marry the wives' dissatisfaction with husband and realistic portrayals of some of the unpleasant aspects of life have been discarded in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The indecent China scene in Wycherley's *Country Wife* is inconceivable in the Wildean comedy. Lamb enjoyed the Comedy of Manners because he was "glad for a season to take an airing beyond the diocese of the strict conscience", he loved to sojourn in a "Utopia of gallantry". Macaulay dismissed the Comedy of Manners as "ugly Philistinism" and L.C. Knights rejected them as "trivial, gross and dull". The Wildean comedy is refreshingly free from the taint of immorality; it is rather characterized by an element of fantasy—its delicate symmetry of plot, lost infants, recovered brothers, balanced situations and similar other sublime absurdities of dialogue. Instead of the lust for flesh, we have the lust for food. Even the quarrel scenes of the play are inoffensive childish petulance. All serious issues have been treated in a Peter Pannish manner. The conjunction of mild satire and fantasy in fact represents a fairly basic piece of literary tact. The action takes place in the delightful never-never-land of Woolton where Bunburyism can thrive. The dominant mood in Restoration Comedy is cynicism; in Wilde it merges into sentimentality. Instead of presenting the problems of modern society directly, he flits around them, declining to grapple with them.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* has faint touches of the Comedy of Manners. Perhaps it is a belated specimen of that type of play and has changed much through the ages. It is best enjoyed as a stylized sybaritic dance.

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## 2.8 Wildean Wit

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If Oscar Wilde was given a raw deal as a man, he was given a worse deal as a writer.

The mere fact that he was brilliant in conversation, leaving others at the dinner parties in the aristocratic countryside homes in England feeling moronic, was a sin never forgiven. Honing him out of society was one aspect of the revenge, ostracizing him as a literary pariah who was ever-so-clever without ever meaning a thing, was another. Bernard Shaw was allowed to get away with it, not Oscar Wilde. There was admittedly a difference — Shaw invariably claimed to speak the word of wisdom; the incorrigible Wilde went wild with his wit. Perhaps it is ironical that even during the trial, when he was going out of his way to antagonize the judges he was warned by Shaw that he was “simply putting a noose around his own neck, “since wit, wisdom and humour was completely lost on an English judge.”

*The Importance of Being Earnest* is artistically the most serious work that Wilde produced for the theatre. It is impossible to read almost any scene whatever in the play without recognizing that for sheer brilliance of Wit this play may fairly be ranked with the very greatest of English comedies; The success of the whole play is dependent on the sparkling dialogue, and it is interesting to examine the subtle variations in the method of his wit. There is, for instance, the way in which characters say things which are just the opposite to what normal people normally say, but they turn out to have a basis of truth in them. When Miss Prism says—And you do not seem to realize, dear Doctor that by persistently remaining single a man converts himself into a permanent temptation—she is clearly alluding to the weaknesses of celibacy, Cecily hides her diary saying:

You see, it is simply a very young girl’s record of her own thoughts and impressions and consequently meant for publication.

She is referring to the unsoundness of the popular belief that diaries are often unsuitable for publication, Jack asks his friend why he cannot recollect what his father’s Christian name was and Algernon replies :

My dear boy, we were never even on speaking terms. He died before I was a year old.

The explanation follows before we have fully recovered ourselves from the shock of the first part of the utterance.

Another form of wit in the play is its concern with conventional ideas and emotions, but they are often overstated and carried into the realms of the absurd. Wilde’s wit may be dismissed as insignificant because it is not thoughtful enough to pass Meredith’s test of comedy. One may think that it is no better than a form of exquisite speech appropriate to one who had never loved facts in themselves. Hazlitt says of Congreve that his workmanship overlays the materials. Wilde too seems to overlay base materials with fine workman-

ship. And yet his wit is often a series of shocks to normal responses intended to offer the delight of emancipation, culminating in the delight of expended insight. Consider the following :

For heaven's sake, don't try to be cynical. It's perfectly easy to be cynical.

Well, in the first place, girls never marry the man they flirt with. Girls don't think it right.

.....

Relations are simply a tedious pack of people, who haven't got the remotest knowledge of how to live, nor the smallest instinct about when to die.

.....

London society is full of women of the highest birth who have of their free choice, remained thirty-five for years.

*Jack* : Algy, you never talk anything but nonsense.

*Alg* : Nobody ever does.

.....

*Cecily* : I am really eighteen, but I always admit to twenty when I go to evening parties.

*L. Bracknell* : You are perfectly right in making some slight alteration. Indeed, no woman should ever be quite accurate about her age. It looks so calculating.

Such wit provides 'not comic, but serious relief. They are in ironic counterpoint with the absurdities of action. This counterpoint is Wilde's method.'

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## 2.9 Conclusion

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*The Importance of Being Earnest* may be regarded as a pure sort of the mind. Its wit is free from the undertones of malice and contempt, a recurring feature of the wit in Restoration Comedy. Wilde delights in the perception of incongruities. The tone is carefree and gay; even the most absurd utterances of the characters seem to have an impossible appropriateness. When Algernon says 'The very essence of romance is uncertainty' or Truth is rarely pure and never simple', we realize that truths are being revealed to us with a piquant epigrammatic turn.

*Lady Windermere's Fan* applies elegant conversation of Congreve to nineteenth century domestic drama. *A Woman of No Importance* is enlivened by inpatient paradoxes. The characters of *An Ideal Husband* express abundant polemic vivacity.

But *The Importance of Being Earnest* is very close to iridescent filaments of fantasy; its gaiety dissolves itself in apparent flippancies that are repeated, developed and elaborated almost into a system. It is, as Auden calls it, “the only pure verbal opera in English.”

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## 2.10 Annotation

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### Act I

*I believe it is a very pleasant state etc* : Lane is honest, but alarmingly matter-of-fact about his married life. Algernon’s reactions is dismissive but Lane is not to be outdone in off-handedness.

*Lane’s views on marriage* : The topics of marriage and class are followed up later in the play. It would be wrong to say that Wilde did not care for morality or social problems. His ideas on both do not crystallize into a philosophy, but they are indicative of a good deal more than flipant scepticism. Wilde did try in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* to reconcile socialist utopianism with the cultivation of the individual.

*Scotland Yard* : In Whitehall near Charing Cross, London. It is now the head-quarters of the Metropolitan police and is known as New Scotland Yard.

*Enter Lane with Cigarette case etc* : Cigarettes were a favourite Wildean prop, both in life and his works. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Lord Henry says to Basil, “I can’t allow you to smoke cigars. You must have a cigarette. A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure.”

*the cigarette case was given to me in the country* : In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Lord Henry Wotton says, “My dear boy, anybody can be good in the country. There are no temptations there. That is the reason why people who live out of town are so absolutely uncivilized”. The contrast between town and country, one of the minor themes of the Comedy of Manners, has been inverted in Wilde.

*Tunbridge Wells* : A watering place in Kent, fashionable since the seventeenth century. This expensive resort was much favoured by the upper classes.

*Willis’s* : a fashionable restaurant in King Street, near St James Theatre. It was much frequented by Wilde.

*flirts with her own husband* : of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* : “It’s most dangerous now-a-days for a husband to pay any attention to his wife in public. It always makes people think that he beats her when they’re alone. The world has grown suspicious of anything, that looks like a happy married life.”

*The corrupt French Drama* : The plays of Dumas *films*, Scribe Augier and others were very popular in Britain. Their treatment of sexual misconduct was considered to be very frank and amoral.

*Wagnerian manner* : The operas of Richard Wagner (1813-1883) specially *Tristan and Isolde* (1865) and *Parsifal* (1882) were popular in England. Wilde exploits the popular joke of the loudness of the music.

*Lady Bracknell* : Lord Alfred Douglas's mother lived at Bracknell in Berkshire.

*Bloxham* : is a village in Oxfordshire, but Wilde might have had in mind John Francis Bloxham, the editor of *The Chameleon*.

*Liberal Unionists* : They were originally members of Gladstone's Liberal Party, who vote against his 1886 Bill for Home Rule in Ireland, but Jack uses the term as if it were the equivalent of 'I don't know'.

*the Wedding March* : Mendelssohn's music to *A Midsummer – Nights Dream* usually played at weddings.

*Gorgon* : The Gorgons were three sisters. Of these two were immortal the third Medusa, was mortal and is the most well-known. According to Greek mythology their hair was entwined with serpents, their hands were of brass, their body covered with impenetrable scales and they turned to stone all on whom they fixed their eyes.

## **Act II**

*Miss Prism* : Arthur Nethercot has traced (*Modern Drama*, VI, 1963, 112-16) the likely source for this name in a maxim uttered by the governess in Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1857) : "Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes, and prism are all very good words for the lips : specially prunes and prism." The phrase 'prunes and prism' has come to be applied to a prim or mincing manner of speech and to superficial accomplishments.

*As a man sows so let him reap* : from the Bible "for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Galatians : VI. 7.)

*Mudie* : subscribers to Mudie's circulating library could arrange to be sent a monthly box of the latest-publications.

*Canon Chasuble* : A priest with the title *the Rev canon* is one of a group with duties in a cathedral, A chasuble is 'the outermost garment worn by bishops and priests in celebrating the Eucharist, and rarely at other times', it had gone out of use in the Church of England until its revival in the High Church in the mid-19th century. This suggests that the rector of Wootton has High Church leanings.

*Egeria* : According to Roman legend, she was the counsellor and wife of King Numa, who, in order that he might commend his laws to the people, declared that they were previously sanctified and approved by the nymph. Ovid says that she was disconsolate at the death of Numa, that she melted into tears, and was. changed into a fountain by Diana.

*Laetitia* : the word in Latin means 'joy delight or exuberance'.

*the Fall of the Rupee* : About 1873 the value of the Indian rupee began to fall and in 1893 the government of India decided to close the mints in an attempt to check this fall.

*Quixotic* : the impulsive, impractical and chivalrous idealism of Cervantes' hero in Don Quixote (1605).

*Marechal Niel* : Kind of climbing rose named after Adolphe Niel, Marshal of France (d. 1869). It is said to have been first introduced in England in the 1860's.

*dog-cart* : two-wheeled driving-cart with cross seats back to back (C.O.D). It derives its name from the fact that it was originally adapted as a lightly-made sporting vehicle with a box for carrying pointers. (Cassell's Domestic Dictionary)

*Morning-Post* : For many years this was the chief source of fashionable gossip and the proper place to announce engagements and marriages. Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband* says that he never reads *The Times*. He only reads the *Morning post*.

### **Act III**

*Perrier-jouet, Brut '89* : a variety of unsweetened champagne bottled by Perrier Jouet in 1889. This was one of Wilde's favourite drinks.

*a three-volume novel* : Refer to Gilbert's remarks in *The Critic as Artist* : "Anybody can write a three-volume novel, It merely requires a complete ignorance of both life and literature."

*Leamington* : a genteel and thoroughly respectable watering-place in Warwickshire.

*cast a stone* : When the Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman taken in adultery and wanted to stone her to death, according to the Mosaic Law, Jesus said to them. : 'He that is without sin among you, Let him first cast a stone at her.' (John, VIII. 7)

**Recommendedl Reading** : [*The text must be read very carefully.*]

*Plays* : Oscar Wilde, Penguin Books. (Contains all plays in one volume; very useful)

*The Importance of Being Earnest* : Oxford University Press (Contains the text and an *elaborate and useful* Commentary and Notes.)

*The Importance of Being Earnest* : ed. A Hartcup B. L. Publications (Contains only text and a three-page life sketch of Oscar Wilde)

*Complete Works* : ed. Vyvyan Holland (Text only)

*Oscar Wilde : The Critical Heritage* (contains a few pages on the play)



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## 2.11 Questions

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1. Bring out the comic elements in *The importance of Being Earnest*.
2. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is “a trivial comedy for serious people” : Discuss.
3. *The Importance of Being Earnest* amuses, shocks and stimulates even today. Give reasons for your answer.
4. The characters in the play lack psychological subtlety. Discuss.
5. The play is effective because of its witty dialogue and ‘absurd’ situations. Discuss.
6. Would you describe *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a comedy of manners? Give reasons for your answer.
7. *The Importance of Being Earnest* ridicules the trivia of contemporary social life. Discuss.
8. Consider the play as a serious comedy.
9. Would you describe *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a heartless comedy of manners? Give reasons for your answer.
10. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is compounded of witty dialogue and absurd situations. Discuss.

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## **UNIT 3 □ Bernard Shaw : Man and Superman**

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### **STRUCTURE**

- 3.0 Life and Works**
- 3.1 Works**
- 3.2 Ideas**
- 3.3 Characters**
- 3.4 Style**
- 3.5 Shaw as Critic**
- 3.6 Man and Superman : The Text**
- 3.7 Outline of Act I**
- 3.8 Outline of Act II**
- 3.9 Outline of Act III**
- 3.10 Shaw's Don Juan**
- 3.11 Outline of Act IV**
- 3.12 Shaw's Philosophy : Creative Evolution**
- 3.13 Characters**
- 3.14 The Hell Scene : the new religion**
- 3.15 Annotations**
- 3.16 Questions**
- 3.17 Recommended Reading**

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### **3.0 Life and Works**

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In the history of English drama Shaw may well claim the greater achievement, for where Shakespeare had in Marlowe, Kyd and Lyly notable English forerunners, Shaw built up his own new drama. True, Shaw followed the inspiration of Ibsen, but he would seem to have seen himself ready to be the English Ibsen. But in so far as Shaw's drama relies predominately on ideas it is less universal in its appeal than Shakespeare's. Again, the modern dramatist has so stamped his personality upon his plays that it must for ever be impossible to disregard it, and whereas the fluid and elusive personality of Shakespeare

flows into his creations, the shade of Shaw stands by us as an extra dramatist personae in nearly every play. Thus by virtue both of his ideas and his personality Shaw is always likely to divide his audiences while Shakespeare unites his. Perhaps the difference is only, that between kinds of genius and not one of greater and lesser genius, and yet one thought suggests that Shakespeare outtopped Shaw in sheer creative genius.

Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin in 1856. His father's family had been small landowners in Ireland since the late 17th century and they had intermarried with the Irish. But previously they had lived in Hampshire, and they claimed an ancient Scottish origin. His father, after employment at the law courts, became in middle life a grain merchant. His mother was the daughter of an Irish country gentleman. She was twenty years younger than her husband and she lived largely for her art, that of an opera singer. Shaw's schooling was ordinary enough, but as a boy he loved to frequent the Irish National Gallery to study the pictures there and by the time he was fifteen he had a sound knowledge of some of the great composers too. Shaw was largely left to a great extent to find his own way, and he spoke of his early years as "rich only in dreams". Religiously the family background was protestant, but Shaw rejected the Christian faith.

At fifteen his mother left for London and Shaw was left with his father and he worked as clerk in an estate agent's office in Dublin where his efficiency soon promoted him to the position of cashier. Determined to be a writer he resigned and in 1876 he joined his mother in London. He tried journalism, but in the ten years up to the age of 29 he earned only £6 by that means. His inner confidence, however, sustained him through those hard years till his writing began to bring him in a small income about 1885. Between 1879 and 1882 he wrote four novels. The first *Immaturity* dealt with the problem of marriage. The second, *The Irrational Knot*, appeared serially in 1885-87. The third, *Love Among the Artists* was also serialised in 1887-88. It was the fourth novel *Cashel Byron's Profession* that was his first published book and it was decidedly the best of his novels. Nobody would suggest that Shaw would have won success as a novelist that he achieved as a dramatist, but these novels anticipate many of the themes and ideas he was no express in his plays.

In 1882 he went to a meeting addressed by Henry George, of whose speech he later declared that it "changed the whole current of my life". He then began to study Socialism and economics, and he read Marx's *Capital* in the British Museum. He became acquainted with leading Socialists—Henry Scott and Edwar Carpenter. He already knew Sidney Webb to whose ideas he owed much and of whom he said "Sidney Webb was of more use to me than any other man I have ever met". His outstanding aptitude for

debate showed itself, and he became a public speaker on platforms and at street corners where his tall figure, red beard, clear and self-assured mind mastered his audiences.

By 1890 indeed his knowledge of contemporary economic matters was considerable, and it was controlled by a comprehensive outlook. Like his friends he envisaged a better world to be brought into being. This lofty moral idealism had at first no religious basis on Shaw's part, but it was not long before he found a belief which lent it for him a strong support. In the writings of Samuel Butler he saw an escape from the Darwinian theory of evolution which made chance, not purpose, the determining factor, and when in 1891 he came to know the thought of Nietzsche he realised that he had already been thinking in terms of a purposive Life Force behind the workings of the universe. The Life Force he, moreover, perceived to explain the place of woman in the world, for it accounted for woman's ruthless pursuit of man. Men like himself must therefore, by intelligent co-operation with the Life Force, use all their endeavours to hasten the evolution of mankind to higher moral, intellectual, economic and social standards. To this stage in his thinking he had practically come when turned to the drama as his medium of Expression.

It may well seem now a destined coincidence that, just when Shaw was approaching the time when he must find a channel for his enormous vitality, the plays of Ibsen became known to him. It was also a result of chance that, when he had finished his *Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), he had by him the first draft on a play. Perhaps the predominating influence in making him turn to drama was the example of Ibsen; perhaps his love of debating, in which he had shown how important it was for him to counter his own arguments if no one else would prompt him to write the kind of play in which the characters undertake this dual task of proposer and opposer. In 1892, he wrote *Widowers' Houses*, and thereafter for nearly sixty years, with unflagging energy, he made the drama his own province. He was already a popular playwright; but it was not till after *Saint Joan* (1924) that he became the revered elder playwright. But then, the world having been transformed by the war, a new generation had grown up to accept him supreme though he had been publicising his own ideas; the parallel preaching of H.G. Wells and others had further helped to make his Socialism and his general attitude to ideas and society acceptable to his age. But Socialists, as well as others, could still be amazed as the old man with the energy and the unpredictable originality of his genius, produced such plays as *The Apple Cart* (1929). *Too True to be Good*, (1934); *Geneva*, (1938) *In Good King Charles' Golden Days* (1939).

It is hard, however, to discern any clear trends in his development. At most there is a change of theme from the particular to the general, from the contemporary scene to the future, and from the satiric and destructive to the philosophic and constructive,

from the materialistic to the mystic. Indeed if there is any real division to be found in Shaw's dramatic development it is with the First World War. He was unable to produce any new work in those four years, and when he resumed with *Heartbreak House*, he was on the whole as a dramatist more philosophic than before, and more concerned with the future. But even the gigantic *Back to Methselah* (1921) had behind it the same Shaw who had earlier dealt with the Life Force in *Man and Superman* at the beginning of the century. As Shaw himself said, he had decorated the earlier play "too brilliantly and lavishly" with the result that "nobody noticed the new religion in the centre of the intellectual whirlpool." In his own account, Shaw refers to *Man and Superman* as marking the emergence of what he himself aimed to be "dramatist, one of the artist prophets" in the line of Goethe and Ibsen.

In his own works, the fashionable theatre prescribed one serious subject : Clandestine adultery : the dullest of subjects for a serious author.... "I tried slum-landlordism, doctrinaire Free Love (pseudo-Ibsenism), prostitution, militarism, marriage, history, current politics, natural Christianity, national and individual character,, paradoxes of conventional society, husband-hunting, questions of conscience, professional delusions and impostures, all worked into a series of comedies of manners in the classic fashion, which was then very much out of fashion, the mechanical tricks of parisian 'construction' being held obligatory in the theatre."

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### 3.1 Works

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This account covers his work as far as 1914. *Widowers' Houses* was his attack on Slum-landlordism. *The Philanderer* dealt with 'pseudo Ibsenism'. Prostitution lay behind *Mrs Warren's Profession*, for Mrs Warren's quite considerable wealth was derived from brothels. *Arms and the Man* gaily demolished the romantic glory of soldiering. *Candida* was an Ibsen-like consideration of marriage. *The Man of Destiny* and *Caesar and Cleopatra* were adventures in history. Husband-hunting was the comic aspect of *Man and Superman*. *John Bulls Other Island* dealt with current politics and national character. Christianity was examined in relation to moral, economic and social problems through the presentation of an office of the Salvation Army in *Major Barbara* and in a broader way in the later *Androcles and the Lion*. "Professional delusions and impostures" and questions of conscience make up *The Doctors' Dilemma*. *Misalliance* has as its theme education, which is more extensively discussed in its preface, "Of Parents and Children." In two plays at least, however, Shaw largely let the wicked foolish world go by, namely in *You Never Can Tell* and *Pygmalion*, to which might be added *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets*, *The Man of Destiny* and *Caesar and Cleopatra*, for they too all escape the direct pressure of the modern world.

The exuberant high spirits of his plays before 1914, often bringing into his comedy a lively element of farce, was replaced by grandeur. Some famous passages of *Saint Joan* and *Back to Methuselah*, were poetic though his comic vision still played freely and variously, through his wit and humour.

No play could be more serious in its general intention than *Back to Methuselah*. In writing it Shaw said, he “threw over all economic considerations, and faced the apparent impossibility of a performance during [his] lifetime.” Its fine parts, indeed demand days to perform, as the cycle proceeds from *In the Beginning in the Garden of Eden*, through the *Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas*, A.D. 1920, and two intermediate stages of the future in A.D. 2170 and A.D. 3000; until the last play presents *As Far As Thought can Reach*, AD 31. 920. Yet it was soon acted, first in New York in 1922, and then by the Birmingham Repertory theatre in 1923. In this cycle Shaw, felt himself to be cooperating with the Life Force, for through his drama he was declaring that, if only mankind had the will to control his evolution, it could in time achieve perfection, and his “metabiological pentateuch” therefore became part of this purposive process.

When he had thus fulfilled his great wish to express his fundamental religious faith as a Creative Evolutionist, Shaw returned in *Saint Joan* to a drama of his normal scope and manner. Portrayed “as a sane and shrewd country girl of extraordinary strength, of mind and hardihood of body.....a thorough daughter of the soil in her peasantlike matter. of-factness and doggedness”, she was however, in her creator’s mind an instrument like himself of the Life Force. In the *Apple Cart* (1929) he turned again to the future, and to the dismay of those who had regarded him as an advanced advocate of democracy showed that the highest ability could be found as well in a king as in a peasant.

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## 3.2 Ideas

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Shaw’s ideas can never cease to form an important part of his dramatic legacy. In his own day Shaw’s command over audiences which by no means consisted only of those who shared his ideas was an obvious fact. That this was so suggests that it was the dramatist and not the preacher who exerted the real power, though it must be admitted that no small part of the pleasure felt by contemporaries lay in the stimulus given both to disciples and opponents by the sparkling irreverence of the wit. But this wit was always subservient to the total working of the genius of the comic playwright. His dramatic instinct, indeed, was altogether transcendent and so wilfully fashioned its own play that the audience almost forget in its delight the seriousness of the lesson it had been offered. Shaw himself wrote to Ellen Terry : “On my honour *Arms and the Man* was a serious play— a play to cry over if you could only have helped laughing”. Those who saw

*Man and Superman* at a performance in which the third Act of Juan in Hell was omitted were quite justified in not realizing how much lay behind the farcical comedy of John Tanner trying to flee from the pursuing Ann. Hence, the Prefaces, which not only took advantage of the success of a play to make a more comprehensive and detailed attack but which had often to make the public fully conscious of matters which the inspired Comic Muse had transmuted into laughter. Shaw once spoke of the “lightness of heart, without which nothing can succeed in the theatre”, and in his own paradoxical union of the prophet and the jester lies the assurance of his dramatic survival.

Shaw’s plays, as a whole, give the impression of his creative powers working in a spontaneous unity. We can well believe that, when he told Ellen Terry that “*Candida* came easily enough”, he was expressing a general truth about his work. The component elements of plot, stagecraft, characterization and dialogue grew into one natural unforced creation. Shaw himself in the Postscript to *Back to Methuselah* declared : “When I am writing a play I never invent a plot : I let the play write itself and shape itself, which it always does even when up to the last moment I do not foresee the way out. Sometimes I do not see what the play was driving at until quite a long time after I have finished it.” Certainly his method of developing a play often involves a turn which takes the audience half by surprise, as it may, from his own account, have taken the dramatist himself. Thus his success lies partly in the command of stagecraft which instinctively knows how to turn stage situation to profit.

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### 3.3 Characters

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Shaw’s characterization sometimes lacks the power of fully convincing us, because it does not always arise from such immediate creative insight as does the general idea of the play, but is to some extent dependent on that idea for the nature and variety of its figures. But once started on their career, his people share the vitality of the whole even when that is a vitality not of action but of talk. They may, indeed, be carried away by the zest of the argument and talk too much like Shaw and not enough as individuals but this only enhances the unity of the play and its dramatic effectiveness. Of outstanding individual characters Shaw has fewer than Shakespeare, but many surely have that individuality which lives in its own right — a Bluntschili, or a Father Keegan, or a Shotover or Saint Joan. Women, above all, he read and presented with a cunning unromantic realism which suggests that, like the novelist Richardson, he understood women even better than men : to Saint Joan may be added among his many acutely and vividly realised,



women, Raina Cleopatra, Candida, Ann Whitefield, Major Barbara, Jennifer, Dubedat, and Eleiza Doolittle, to name only a few.

In two directions his characterization possessed special power—in evoking our sympathetic interest in unattractive people like Mrs Warren and Louis Dubedat, and in creating beings of broad comedy of a Dickenson vitality like Candida’s father, Straker and Alfred Doolittle. Other gifts affecting characterization included his ability to allow for the existence in a character of the intuitive, that ‘sort of sixth sense’ which, when it is possessed, gives an extra dimension to personality, and his understanding of good simple souls, as pre-eminently in the Saint. Indeed his creative power and psychological insight in the matter of character are very great, and when as from time to time, he relied on stock figures of angry parents of the rebellious young or amusing servants he gave them a fresh experience as Sheridan had done with stock figures in his plays.

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### 3.4 Style

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As for Shaw’s style, it never failed from the earliest plays to the last, or in his pamphlets, prefaces or letters. No doubt the previous writing of novels and criticism had already made it second nature by the time it was put to the service of his dramatic muse. Shaw himself refused to admit the existence of style apart from matter. Style arose, he held, from having something to say. “Effectiveness of assertion is the Alpha and Omega of style. He who has nothing to assert has no style and can have none; he who has something to assert will go as far in power of style as its momentousness and his conviction will carry him. Disprove his assertion after it is made yet his style remains.” But in his opinion this was not all : he who has something to say should give the edge of provocation to his assertion. “In this world, if you do not say a thing in an irritating way you may as well not say it all, since nobody will trouble themselves about anything that does not trouble them. The attention given to a criticism is in direct proportion to its indigestibility.”

With this union of assertion and provocation his style is never dull. In the plays it rarely has a chance to be dull, for there is the further animation given by the dramatic clash of dialogue; the dialogue indeed shares the general effect of spontaneity. In the prefaces, too, he is always arguing a case, and by separating the many heads of the argument into fairly short sections he keeps the pace brisk; they are a born debater’s prefaces. Nearly always one seems to hear the talking voice behind the prose even when the writing is not for the stage. If he is ever dull, it is not in the plays. What he could do without any aim of initiating is shown many a time in the serious parts of his plays, as in Caesar’s meditation by the Sphinx, and the speech of Joan immediately before

her execution and Lilith's long soliloquy concluding *Back to Methuselah*. In such passages the poet replaces the debater, and a style which in general combines the virtues of his two great Irish predecessors, Swift and Congreve, takes on a power beyond theirs.

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### 3.5 Shaw as Critic

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After a journalistic beginning as a critic of painting and a book reviewer Shaw was given in 1888 a weekly column to write on music in the recently founded evening newspaper *The Star*, and in 1890 he gave this up to write a weekly musical article for *The World*. These criticisms were later published in two volumes, *London Music in 1888-1889* and *Music in London 1890-1894*, which are full of lively and stimulating appreciations. There had been no such musical criticism in England before. In *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1895) he was more concerned with revolutionary ideas in the spheres of politics, economics and sociology than with music. As dramatic critic, too, he displayed a penetrating personal judgement and his collected notices of Shakespearian performances in particular abound in stimulating remarks. Further, there is the wide range of his pamphlets and newspaper articles, in many of which he never hesitated to express an unpopular attitude. Among his writings on religion there stands out *The Adventures of the Black girl in her Search for God* (1932), in which he presented ironically how the conventional teaching of orthodox Christianity in all its varieties was likely to appear to an unsophisticated mind. It displays attractively both what Shaw felt was wrong with the attitude of the churches and his own yearning for the enlightenment of humanity.

To sum up his attitude, he loved humanity, though perhaps too detached and impartial a love. He thought mankind very weak and foolish and in need of a leadership which might even be ruthless to individuals and classes. Yet far from despairing of humanity he believed it could be brought to higher and better things. Men must, however, follow reason, and control their emotions. At times, he propounded different panaceas for humanity's ills, now socialism; now eugenics, now dictatorship. Like anybody else he was inconsistent. But as he was primarily an artist; it is not his particular ideas but the free play of his spirit that matters, and that is manifested in the joyous vitality that is the over-all impression of his life's work. No doubt he half-meant what he said, but posterity may well come to prefer the genius of the theatre to the once influential but outmoded prophet.

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### 3.6 Man and Superman : The Text

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In 1901 Shaw took the legend of Don Juan in its Mozartian form and made it "a dramatic parable" of Creative Evolution. But being then at the height of his invention and comedic talent he decorated it too brilliantly and lavishly. 'The effect was so

vertiginous, apparently, that nobody noticed the new religion in the centre of the intellectual whirlpool.” He protested that he “did not cut these cerebral capers in mere inconsiderate exuberance.” He did that because theatre criteria current at that time felt that the theatre was a place of shallow amusement, and that a playwrights’ business was “to make unwholesome confectionery out of cheap emotions.” There was no place for intellectual business. His answer to this was “to put all his intellectual goods in the shop window under the sign of the Man and Superman.” That part of his design succeeded. By good luck and acting the comedy triumphed on the stage. But as its “tale of a husband huntress obscured its evolutionary doctrine”, he abandoned the legend of Don Juan and went back to the Garden of Eden.

H. L. Mencken writing in 1905 stressed these aspects in his characteristic exuberant manner :

*Man and Superman* is easily Shaw’s *Magnum opus*. It is Brobdingnagian in bulk; in scope it is stupendous; in purpose it is one with the *Odyssey*... It has a preface as long as a campaign speech, an interlude in three scenes, with music and red fire; and a complete digest of the German philosophers as an appendix.....Its epigrams, quips, jests and quirks are multitudinous; it preaches treason to all the schools; its hero has one speech of 350 words. No one but a circus press agent could rise to an adequate description of its innumerable marvels. It is a three-ring circus, whither Ibsen doing running high jumps, Schopenhauer playing Callipe and Nietzsche selling peanuts in the reserved seats. (*George Bernard Shaw*, p. 70)

Indeed, the plot involves a love story played in a comic style with episodes of melodramatic extravagance and a more or less conventional conclusion. The heart of the play is the dream sequence, a lens through which the love story is magnified to comic proportions.

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### **3.7 Outline of Act I**

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The play opens with Roebuck Ramsden consoling his young friend Octavius on the death of a common friend. The deadly banality of the cliché’s of condolence is essentially a satiric vision of life and all its timebound rituals. Ramsden embodies the bankruptcy of nineteenth century liberalism where professed advancement on the subject of religion and politics have no practical realization in matters of sex and morality. Ramsden’s first shock is to find that he has been named co-guardian of the deadman’s daughter with the ‘immoral’ Tanner who calls in at the most inappropriate moment. Tanner looks like Jupiter and hurls Jovian thunderbolts with wild exuberance. He capitulates temporarily to Ann’s persuasions, but mercilessly impugns her hypocrisy and uncontrollable nature with remarkable insight. But Tanner’s basic fallacy is his inability to identify himself as

the biologically superior male needed for a vital woman like Ann. As a philosopher Tanner is right in his major premises and wrong in his minor ones. He strikes one as the Puritan libertine, a revolutionary thinker and not a reprobate as in Tirso da Molina.

To Octavius, Ann is an enchantingly beautiful woman, in whose presence the world becomes transfigured. He feels the freezing of his soul, the abolition of time and place and the etherealization of his blood in her presence. His love is the appropriate stuff of the traditional love poetry of Dante and Petrarch. Tanner warns Octavins and says that Ann exemplifies female cannibalism : 'Bite one Ricky; Bite to Ticky; Bite three Tavy and down you go.' Shaw makes us laugh at love in its passionate follies and discounts, the widely held belief that married love is an invaluable prop to social morality. Tanner tells Octavius that woman's purpose "is neither her happiness nor yours, but Nature's. Vitality in a woman is a blind fury of creation." She sacrifices herself to it. A man to her is nothing but an instrument of that purpose.

Thus from the very beginning Tanner is first and foremost the philosopher of love and sex. And the love comedy through Tanner's philosophizing becomes a critique of romantic love. Schopenhauer's essay "The Metaphysics of the Love of the Sexes" begins by asking whether the apparently obsessive preoccupation with love in life and literature is not merely the symptom of man's inveterate triviality. He thinks that the reason is the imperiousness of the sex impulse. "Noble minds may object to this apparently materialistic interpretation, but in reality the ultimate end of all love affairs is more important than all other ends of human life—the composition of the next generation. This is according to Schopenhauer, of the greatest metaphysical significance, since it elevates love above the exuberant feelings and supersensible soapbubbles of love poetry." To Shaw also, the; purpose of sex is not the lover's bliss, or aphrodisiac pleasures, but the creation of new life in collaboration with the Life Force which seeks "to promote a superpersonal and supersensual social aim." The brief encounter between Tanner and Ann shows that Tanner has something of the great man who incarnates the philosophic consciousness of life, while Ann is the woman who incarnates its fecundity. Each contributes towards the improvement of the human species; the instinctive will of Ann asserts itself in a blind manner, the intellectual will of Tanner asserts itself in a clear-sighted manner.

A little later, Ramsden returns with a very serious piece of news about Octavius's sister, Violet. She has just visited a strange doctor and is apparently expecting a child. Ramsden and Octavius react to the news with shame and embarrassment; and through them Shaw satirizes the Victorian dramatic convention which dealt with such crises summarily by killing the woman off. The law of the stage was that no fallen female should survive the last curtain. There is just enough shuffling in his manner to provoke from

Tanner an impassioned defence of illicit pregnancies. Love, Tanner suggests, is sacred and holy not as popular writers have maintained, but for eugenic rather than moral and sentimental reasons. Tanner's radicalism demands that love should be freed from the restraints of marriage. A woman's noblest purpose in life should be to increase, multiply and replenish the earth. Tanner behaves like a perfect knight in a world of giants and distressed damsels, not a country gentleman in a land of innkeepers and farm wenches. He is exasperated since he has found that everybody is luxuriating in an orgy of grief and sentiment that regularly accompanies funerals in society. But a civilisation that makes a high festival of death and shrinks from illegitimacy as from a horrible crime is perverse. Tanner, however, cowers before the wedding ring and the cup of his ignominy is full. Like Don Quixote he has tried to be chivalrous only to find that he has committed an outrageous *faux pas*.

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### **3.8 Outline of Act II**

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Straker is Shaw's New Man, a very momentous social phenomenon, destined to inherit the earth. He is not yet a Superman, but he has all the essential qualities which with intellect could breed a Superman. He is keenly aware of his superiority to his tutelary master. Ann lies about Rhoda and tells Tanner that she cannot go with him in his car. Shaw is not at all censorious of the hypocrisy Ann employs; he merely exploits its comic side; she is allowed to steal every peach in the Garden of Eden. Behind a facade of bland propriety Ann uses all her sexual attractiveness to entice her prey; and Shaw dramatizes the super-personal power of sex without vulgar titillation. In an impassioned tirade against her tyrannical mother Tanner asks Ann to Assert her independence and come with him to Marseilles, and across to Algiers and to Biskra. Tanner does not realize that he is inviting personal annihilation and is fulfilling his own prescription for the survival of humanity. Ann immediately consents. She professes to be surrendering her will, while in fact, she is cunningly asserting it. Oedipus has been caught in Apollo's snare. Straker tells Tanner that Ann has positive designs on him and that he is the marked down victim. Terrified at the prospect of marriage with Ann, Tanner makes off in a high powered car with Ann in pursuit. The cosmic will has begun to assert its biological choice through the female.

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### **3.9 Outline of Act III**

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In *Act III* the scene shifts to Sierra Nevada and its picturesque landscape that has served as backgrounds for innumerable desperado romances like Schiller's *Robbers*, Verdi's *Ernani*, Bizet's *Carmen* and Offenbach's *Les Brigands*. *Man and Superman* seems to be concerned with the shoddy romanticism of revolution presented in the

burlesque of the brigand group. Despite the opinions they profess, and though it is motor-cars of the rich that they ambush, Mendoza's band caricatures capitalist society, as Brassbound's does. The meeting with Tanner makes the point :

*Mendoza* : I am a brigand : I live by robbing the rich.

*Tanner* : (promptly) I am a gentleman : I live by robbing the poor.

The anarchist member of Mendoza's parliament wears the Tophat which Shaw commonly employs as the badge of capitalist respectability. The identification is clinched by the eventual absorption of the band in a commercial enterprise with the plutocrat Malone. The romantic background of the Sierra is satirically appropriate to the unreality of the whole pretence of civilisation.

Mendoza himself is a parody of the melodramatic type of broken-hearted lover. Though his speech-making and his concern with politics give him a pointed relevance to Tanner himself, he seems most obviously reflective of Octavius. Octavius is like a nightingale which must press its breast against a thorn before it can sing. Mendoza is the frustrated lover in his poetic guise. It is possible to judge the quality of his poetry since we are favoured with a sample. He is evidently fated to be a brigand, for he writes such doggerel. While Octavius's Ann never existed on land and sea, Mendoza's Louisa is an amazingly real spitfire. Octavius's love is the aching love of lyric poetry, Mendoza's is the passionate love of operatic melodrama. The doggerels put Tanner to sleep and Shaw prepares us tactfully for the dream scene that follows.

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### **3.10 Shaw's Don Juan**

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Despite Shaw's characterization of *Man and Superman* as a Don Juan play it is only in the dream fantasy, the Hell Scene that he enters into direct competition with the playwrights, novelists and poets who have written on Don Juan. Shaw made a list of plays, stories and essays among books to look up at the British Museum and it included the tale by Tirso de Molina, Moliere and Byron, De Musset's poem and the stories of Hoffman and Merimee and essays by Manuel de La Revilla, Francisco Margall, Antione de Latour and Maurice Barres. In the Epistle Dedicatory Shaw says that Tirso's prototypic Don Juan is the enemy of God, articulate in wooing and issuing challenges, far too remote from his prophetic thinker. Shaw's Juan shares his pride, but it is intellectual pride, not the pride of a dashing cavalier. Moliere's Don Juan, far more sophisticated than Tirso's is clever ready-witted, and sceptical in matters of faith and reason, and is closer to Shaw's. Mozart's Don Giovanni is a brave, resourceful scamp planning his intrigues carefully. Shaw's Don Juan after a career as a philanderer has fled his mistresses and become an austere contemplative philosopher and social reformer.

It is interesting that Shaw should select Don Juan to represent a modern revolutionary with a puritanical temper. Of course Milton and Bucer were early examples and the Oneida Perfectionists more recent ones. It is interesting to remember that Shaw's nickname in the Fabian circle was Don Giovanni, for his enthusiasm for Mozart's opera and for his numerous philanderings. Shaw's story "Don Giovanni Explains Himself" was based on his own real life seduction by Jenny Patterson. The Don Juan in *Man and Superman* simply carries the cryptobiography a stage further. But the Hell scene, in the ultimate analysis, is a statement of Shaw's theology of salvation. Shaw wrote in 1907 :

The world itself may be made a hell by a society in a state of stagnation; that is a society so lacking in the higher order of energy that it is given wholly to the pursuit of immediate individual pleasure and cannot even conceive the passion of the divine will

Shaw's hell is not the house of thieves, murderers and ravishers, but of happiness seekers, despairing cynics and the self-indulgent. The hellish spirit fosters connoisseurship in art, dilettantism in literature and sentimental love in personal relations :

Here (in Hell) you call your appearance beauty, your emotions, love, your sentiments heroism, your aspirations virtue, just as you did on earth.

Hell dwellers are obsessed with glamour, youth, beauty and love — the preoccupation of the London stage in 1890's and they remain the preoccupation of Hollywood and television in our day. Shaw's hell is his revenge upon the English theatre for the years of ennui and disgust he suffered as a critic. For Shaw's religion of struggle and reform, the devil has substituted a religion of love and beauty. The devil has made up his creed out of the neo pagan lucubrations of men like Swinburne, Symonds and Wilde in England and Gautier and Anatole France in the continent. Shaw's Devil is simultaneously the spokesman for a specifically *fin de siècle* despair and the representative of a line of writers diverse as Shakespeare, Swift, Thackeray and Hemingway all of whom have taken as their text *Vanitas Vanitatum*.

Ann's arrival in hell is a satire on conventional piety. She has rigorously repressed her natural inclinations and lived by the moral code of her day. She had not sacrificed her desires out of any real passion for virtue but in the hope of a substantial reward after death. Ann is Everywoman in her unreflecting piety. The Commander is Montaigne's *l'homme moyen sensuel* who takes his pleasures for granted. Juan strips off the sentimental veils cast over his sexual escapades. His temporary sojourn in heaven is merely the consequence of a pretended interest in serious questions.

The heaven the Commander has left out of disgust is hailed by Don Juan as "the home of the masters of reality." As a member of the St Pancras Borough Council Shaw said, "I love the vestry and its dustcarts, after the silly visionary fashion-ridden, theatre."



Metaphysically, Shaw's heaven is the sum of all values—social, political, intellectual and aesthetic. Rembrandt and Mozart arrived there because their art was a stimulus to life, not art for art's sake.

The great Lucianic-Platonic debate between the Devil and Don Juan is at the centre of the dream scene. The Lucianic element is evident in the use of legendary characters and comic irreverence. The Platonic character is evident in the dialectical structure of the dialogue and the seriousness of the themes, namely creative and destructive forces in human society and the function of woman and sex. To Juan's argument that man's mission is to help life in its struggle forward, the Devil replies that man is not the vitalist Juan makes him, but a mortalist in live with death. In a long and eloquent speech, parallel in many ways to the diatribe of the king of Brobdingnag in *Gulliver's Travels*, the Devil argues that man finds his keenest delight not in creative activity but in sensational tragedies and destructive wars. Man is "the inventor of the rack, the stake, the gallows, the electric chair; of sword and gun and poison gas; above all, of justice, duty, patriotism and all other isms by which even those who are clever enough to be humanly disposed are persuaded to become the most destructive of all the destroyers." It is, therefore reasonable to withdraw from political life and seek romantic asylum in the garden of Venus, since such an existence is relatively harmless.

Juan objects that the purpose of sex is not personal gratification, but the eventual creation of a race that will be godlike in power in knowledge and in self-awareness :

The great central purpose of breeding the race;  
ay, breeding it to heights now deemed superhuman.

Juan explains that "sexually, Woman is Nature's contrivance for perpetuating its highest achievement. Sexually, Man is Woman's contrivance for fulfilling Nature's behest in the most economical way." Life force cannot work unaided ; men and women are required to act as willing agents for the furtherance of its great work. It leads towards a state of existence far more abundantly vital than anything yet experienced by mankind. Unfortunately, the existing race of man is too mean-spirited and too self-centered to serve the Life Force. It would consequently be compelled to supersede man by a more effective instrument of its will—the Superman strong enough to establish the Earthly Paradise. Juan concedes that the Life Force is stupid, but it is not so stupid as the forces of death and degeneration. He is full of reverence for the human intellect and considers the human will as simply the highest embodiment of Nature's intention :

I sing, not arms and the hero, but the philosophic man :  
he who seeks in contemplation to discover the inner  
will of the world, in invention to discover the means

of fulfilling that will, and in action to do that will  
by the so-discovered means.

The intellect is to be used as a prophylaxis to the contamination of amorphous vitality. Then Juan analyses his experiences with the cold clarity of a Stendhal or a Schopenhauer and tells Ana that the racial urge sweeps man irresistibly on propelling him into mating in spite of himself. When Ana protests that such conduct is immoral because it interferes with fidelity Juan retorts that the Life Force cares nothing for chastity at all :

Twelve children by twelve different husbands would have replenished the earth more effectively.....

\* \* \*

The Life Force respects marriage only because marriage is a contrivance of its own to secure the greatest number of Children.....Marriage is the most licentious of human institutions....that is the secret of its popularity. And a woman seeking a husband is the most unscrupulous of all beasts of prey.

\* \* \*

The sex relation is not a personal or friendly relation at all.....Your relation to God is sacred and holy ; dare you call it personally friendly ? In the sex relation the universal creative energy, of which the parties are both helpless agents, overrides and sweeps away all personal considerations, and dispenses with all personal relations.

Ana Shaw tells us “is incapable both of the devil’s utter damnation and Don Juan’s complete supersensuality.” She cannot like the devil use love as mere sentiment nor like the saint put love aside. But where her intellect cannot save her, her womanly procreative instinct can, and it is as Woman Immortal she pursues Don Juan to heaven demanding, with the compelling urgency of one who realizes that her work is not yet done, a father for the Superman. The exhortation of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra to women was : “Let the beam of a star shine on your love! Let your hope say : May I bear the Superman!” The thrilling climax combines biology with mystical yearning. The dream scene comes to a close at the appropriate moment as the play’s meaning has been clearly established.

Ana who has been tracking Tanner with “the relentless implacability of a Professor Moriarty at last turns up with an armed escort and all the panoply of Eros, the police force and the Life Force.”

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### 3.11 Outline of Act IV

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In the *Fourth Act* the Hector-Violet subplot has the acrid flavour of philosophical comedies regularly take on when they touch on economic matters. Both Violet and Ann

are utterly unromantic, unscrupulous and efficient. Ann's pursuit of Tanner is no less determined than Violet's pursuit of money. Ann represents the instinct of the race working towards the creation of the next generation. Violet, as the symbol of the dead bird in her hat warns us, is a kind of predator, Blanche Sartorius adds gentility to money through marriage; Violet adds money to gentility. Hector's absurd moral idealism merely blinds him to the realities of life. His moral muscle-flexing before his father is a totally irrelevant gesture and Malone Senior reminds him that the idealization of poverty is one of the worst spiritual snobberies.

However, Malone Senior's love is both demanding and protective and his paternal longings deliver him helpless into Violet's hands. Shaw seems to approve of the very scepticism of Mrs Whitefield as healthier and socially more desirable than the sugared feelings of Malone Senior. The playwright looks just as sceptically at familial love as he does at sexual love.

Shaw has been frequently accused of writing sexless drama. What this means is that he has not stooped to vulgar titillation. But surely no playwright has dramatized the power of the sex impulse more directly or with more respect. When Tanner seizes Ann in his arms and says.

I love you. The Life Force enchants me : I have whole world in my arms  
when I clasp you....

we hear the accents of Antony's speech

Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch  
Of the rang'd empire fall! (*Ant & Cleop* I. i.)

Shaw evidently builds on Schopenhauer's belief that the unborn child as Idea presides over each sexual union and the child's insistence on being brought into being is the source of the urgency and intensity of the lover's passion. Beatrice is an ineffable abstraction majestically enthroned beyond the bounds of human thought. Ann's divinity is not easily discernible; she too has been fashioned as a goddess who nevertheless has not been beyond humanity's reach. At the end when Tanner says that he is not a happy man, Shaw warns us that one never can tell whether one will be happy or not after marriage; so the philosopher of sex refuses to accept felicitations and promises to follow the banner of life not joyously but austerely. Shaw has not closed all the doors of the human mind and in this respect he is more an artist than a philosopher. *Man and Superman* is the crowning work of his later and more constructive period, the only work in which he attempted to state his ultimate and cosmic vision, his absolute faith in the perfectibility of man.

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### **3.12 Shaw's Philosophy : Creative Evolution**

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By the time Shaw began to write *Man and Superman* he ceased to have any faith in progress in the ordinary sense of the word. "I do not know", he says in the Epistle

Dedicatory to A.B. Walkley, “whether you have any illusions left on the subject of education, progress and so forth. I have none.” But as Shaw lost his faith in the conventional doctrine of progress, he developed a faith that real progress means an evolution in the inner quality of the species. Mere change in politics, science, education or arts cannot improve the quality of mankind. Man can achieve it only if he can procreate a better race. “Our only hope” says Tanner in the *Revolutionist’s Handbook*, “then, is in evolution. We must replace the man by the superman.”

Darwinism helped to banish god and throw away the old religion but it brought nothing constructive to replace them. He therefore put forward his religion of Creative Evolution. Darwin had postulated that owing to the struggle for existence, individuals of a species vary among themselves and the variant types that are weaker than their fellows perish, while the more efficient ones, survive and pass their qualities on to the next generation. This principle of Natural Selection or the Survival of the Fittest, according to its author, accounts for the whole spectacle of evolution.

Lamarck had advanced the view that species were not unalterable and that the higher and more complex forms of life were derived from lower and simpler forms. Changes in environment led to new wants, new wants to new habits, and new habits to new organs. According to Darwin long-necked giraffes were born by chance much as children with freckles are born by chance. According to Lamarck giraffes were under the necessity of either growing long necks or of perishing of hunger. He starts from the consideration that animals choose by an exertion of the will. He used the term “effort”. Butler also said that it was intelligent striving of the organism which caused variations. Shaw championed both Lamarck and Butler, but it was in the work of the latter that he found the essential clue to his doctrine of Creative Evaluation.

Shaw has been believer in Creative Evolution. But it was in the *Dream Interlude in Act III of Man and Superman* that he made a conscious and consistent statement of it. This Act, together with the preface, the *Revolutionist’s Handbook* and collection of aphorisms, embodies the essence of Shaw’s Philosophy. Don Juan, who is Shaw’s spokesman, has discovered that happiness does not count in life. He is bored with his existence in Hell—the home of the unreal and the seekers for happiness. Life is the only reality and he declares his intention of going to Heaven, the home of the masters of reality and thus escape from the vulgar pursuit of happiness. In Heaven he would spend his aeons in the service of life. The Devil is contemptuous about the “Life Worshipers” and he is too cynical to accept any eulogy of man. “The power that governs the earth is not the power of Life but of Death”. Don Juan, therefore sets forth the idea of the Life Force in opposition to the devilish pessimism about man and his future.

Shaw’s Life Force is comparable to a Supreme Spirit but is different from God. He

believes that the universe is driven by a mysterious power which is immanent, a creative power behind evolution and called it the Life Force. The Life Force is not an omnipotent and omniscient perfection but is striving to be so. This is the creative power behind the universe. Don Juan argues that progressive development of species discloses intelligence. The Life Force has a purpose; only its ultimate aim is yet unknown. The Life Force has a passion for betterment, and strives after perfection. It is indifferent to everything except creation. Don Juan has learnt that it is impossible to impose any conditions, such as honour, virtue, chastity on the Life Force. It is as callous to happiness and beauty as it is to morality. Don Juan prefers arduous striving in Heaven to eternal happiness in Hell. "Beauty worshipping and happiness hunting are not worth a dump as a philosophy of life."

Man is superior to all other species so far evolved by Life Force in this respect that he has a mind with which he can try to understand the purpose of life. But man is not the last stage in the scale of evolution. Evolution is creative and man may be replaced by some new and higher species.

Shaw looks upon woman as the Life Force incarnate. An embodiment of the creative power behind the universe, she has an irresistible impulse not only to perpetuate the species but to procreate a better race. To her man has no utility except as father to her children. She is ordained to be mother and is in desperate need of a man who can beget a child for her. Hence, it is the woman who takes initiative in sex affairs; hence woman is the pursuer and man the pursued. Ann is Everywoman though every woman is not Ann. She ignores Octavius who adores her; she knows by instinct that the poetic temperament is barren. The same instinct leads her to mark down Tanner. By fraud or force she secures Tanner. He makes an attempt to escape her but no obstacle is too strong for her to overcome. Ultimately he surrenders to her purpose which is the purpose of the Life Force. She must seduce him, for without her travail the race must perish. She does this not for her happiness, nor for the gratification of her amorous sentiments. Her one aim is to carry out "Nature's behest", she must do it even though it may mean death to her. Although Tanner knows that for him marriage means apostasy, loss of liberty and peace of mind, and although he defies it to the last he ultimately yields; he becomes the agent of the Life Force.

The fundamental point of Shawian philosophy is that Life evolves from unconsciousness to consciousness, from blind instinctiveness to self-understanding. The evolution of species discloses plan, purpose, and creation and there cannot be any plan, purpose, effort and creation without consciousness. Life's evolution means progress from less acute to more acute consciousness.

Shaw would like man to be a rebel against Nature, refusing to be blindly guided by it. But man, as he is, is not capable of such rebellion. Hence the Superman is a

necessity. Tanner surrenders to the ‘boa constrictor’, but Don Juan turns a deaf ear to Ana’s request to accompany him and proceeds towards heaven.

The philosopher, says Don Juan, is “Nature’s Pilot”, and Don Juan is the nearest approach to Shaw’s philosophic man, one who “seeks in contemplation to discover the inner will of the world, in invention to discover the means of fulfilling that will, and in action to do that will. Woman is an embodiment of the creativeness of the Life Force while the philosopher symbolizes its intellectual consciousness. Woman perpetuates the species while the man of genius improves its quality by conceiving something better. Both are essential for the Life Force to organise itself into higher and higher individuals and ultimately into omnipotent, omniscient and intensely self-conscious god-like beings. The purpose of each is the purpose of the Life Force, woman breeding the race and the man of genius trying to raise it to heights now deemed superhuman. Shaw says, “We are not in the hands of god but God is in our hands” (*Everybody’s Political What’s What*). Man must make an effort to evolve into superman and assume control of the forces of evolution.

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### 3.13 Characters

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What more amusing approach to the subject of marriage could Shaw have found than a Don Juan play in which his Don Juan, protesting to the last, acquiesces knowledgeably to marriage? Don Juan is the archetypal promiscuous male, the foremost enemy of the bonds and restrictions of marriage. But Shaw is careful to explain in his Preface, Don Juan is not synonymous with Casanova, the mere philanderer. He is a nobler, a more heroic figure, a heretic, an enemy of God, fitted to be a subject for great artists like Moliere and Mozart. He is necessarily a philosopher, a thinker, or he would be unsuited to the role of God’s adversary.

*Jack Tanner*, like Shaw himself is a thinker; and a talker, but also a doer; he did after all commit himself to the production of *The Revolutionist’s Handbook* which is appended to the play. But even allowing for his philosophizing, in what sense can this fugitive from women’s attentions be regarded as a descendant of Don Juan ? Shaw himself tells us that he means no usual embodiment of the Don Juan figure. To begin with the most basic of links, his name is an inheritance — John Tanner — Juan Tenorio, reduced to its diminutive, Jack. He is no chaser after women, but we are left in no doubt of the effect woman can have on him — Ann in particular, despite his enials and resistance. He is unquestionably a prey to the attractions of women. And he participates in his ancestor’s heroic grandeur in several ways : his rejection of conventions, rejection of the propriety only of legal marriage and the dominance of men over women, his ostensible rejection of permanent attachments to women, his challenge to the conventional view of God. But in Jack, the heroic grandeur, while deeply rooted intellectually, is largely,

though not entirely, reduced to mere futile gesture, unlike his great ancestor, who maintains his liberty and is dragged defiantly to hell.

The antecedents of *Man and Superman* are the sixteenth century Spanish prototype which Shaw discusses in his Preface Moliere's seventeenth-century version, Mozart's in the eighteenth century, and Byron's in the nineteenth century. The major source of Shaw's play is Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.

Tanner is a comic Prometheus. Promethean types in literature have been singularly humourless, but Tanner looks like Jove and hurls Jovian thunderbolts with wild exuberance. He is a fighting Prometheus, not a suffering one. We smile at the mad-bull element in his character. Impetuous generosity marks his defence of Violet and impassioned defence of illicit pregnancies. With remarkable insight he analyses Ann's pursuit of a husband remains brilliant, though he himself is the destined prey. Tanner is a philosopher right in all his major premises and amusingly wrong in his minor ones.

Tanner is first and foremost the philosopher of love and sex. He believes that the end of marriage is not the lover's bliss but the creation of new life, not the marriage bed, but the cradle. Throughout *Man and Superman* Tanner proclaims that a woman's real aim in life is to find the man Nature tells her is the right father for her children. What is funny is the way the defiant orator and Promethean rebel of the first part of the play becomes the defensive feeble-vehement protester of the second. There is nothing less than the classical struggle between the male impulse to think and improve the world and the female desire to propagate the species and he provided for. Even the depths of the Spanish Sierras are not obscure enough to hide him. The philosopher of the Life Force finds himself hopelessly enmeshed in its toils. Having played out the comedy of courtship, Tanner now turns to face the tragi-comedy of marriage.

Tirso's seventeenth century melodrama is full of wooing and duelling. Nothing could be farther from a prophet thinker. Tirso's hero demonstrates the class pride of the dashing *coballero*, not the intellectual pride of Tanner. Moliere's Don Juan is closer to Shaw's. He is a far more sophisticated person than Tirso's reprobate. Moliere's hero is clever and ready-witted in debate, sceptical in matters of faith and religion. In Mozart's *Don Giovanni* he is a brave and resourceful scamp whose mental energies go first of all into planning his intrigues and then into extricating himself from them. Mozart's Don is a pursued and harassed husband, a comic figure. In Shaw he is Saint Juan, a member of the heavenly host forced into the company of the redeemed by his own vital will and his boredom with the world's pleasures amorous and otherwise.

*Henry Straker* like his ancestor *Leporello* in *Don Giovanni*, serves a noble master, spends endless time waiting for him, complaining about both master and servitude, and



generally disapproving of him. But, reversing the original situation Shaw makes Henry more daring and adventurous than his master, and far better versed in women's arts. Henry is the lynch-pin in the play's discussion of Fabian socialism, with regard to labour, class and wealth. Octavius pronounces on the 'dignity of labour' with Henry surdonically reporting "That's because you never done any." Hector, to the disgust of Violet, wants to work to support his wife. Jack, who is a Fabian Socialist, is conscious of the inadequacies of the idle rich, but just as conscious of the inverse snobbery of Henry's concern with his accent. Jack says "I have never met anybody more swollen with the pride of class that Enry is, his Board School and his Polytechnic, where a man learns to be something useful, an engineer or such like, not uselessly a 'gentlemen'." He is the New Man, destined perhaps to inherit the earth; but he is not yet a Superman. He does, however, have essential qualities which in conjunction with qualities of intellect could breed a Superman, and thus, as we are told in *The Revolutionist's Handbook* should not be excluded by class from breeding with a woman of a different class.

The names of his characters underline Shaw's satirizing of the conventional drawing-room comedy form by being in some instances more reminiscent of seventeenth and eighteenth-century satiric comedy than of nineteenth-century comedy. The name *Roebuck Ramsden*, with the emphasis on roe, buck and ram implies a wholly masculine role, the perfect Victorian English gentleman who dislikes the things he is supposed to dislike. He has principles which he does not act upon; because he was an advanced thinker before Jack was born, he believes he is still an advanced thinker. He is also, ironically, unmarried, childless, and effortlessly, reduced by Ann to simpering childishness which he embraces eagerly, becoming "Annie's Granny", impotent to act against her will.

Young Hector *Malone's* forename aptly mocks his unheroic subservient uxoriousness in contrast to his great Homeric forebear. He says, "we think in America that a woman's moral number is higher than a man's." In the same way his father who bears the same name, is simply acquiescent, for all his bluster so that Tanner quite accurately remarks, "And that poor devil is a billionaire! One of the master spirits of the age! Led on a string like a pug by the first girl who takes the trouble to despise him!" The surname 'Malone' is Irish, perhaps indicating the pugnacity of both men, and a shorthand way of suggesting through the stereotype of the Irishman that male mastery is only apparent, while the woman wears the trousers. Malone senior adds the dimension of class prejudice in inversion as does Tanner's chauffeur Straker. Malone junior represents not class, but national prejudice—his sense of superior American morality and 'fineness of feeling.'

The love of the father for his son points to another side of the psychology of Shaw's

comedy. Shaw ironically contrast the elder Malone's attachment to Hector with Mrs Whitefield's maternal feelings. Malone Senior's love is both demanding and protective. Finally his paternal longings deliver him helpless into Vislet's hands. Shaw looks just as sceptically at familial love in his play as he does at sexual amorism. Shaw approves, it seems, the very complaints of Mrs Whitefield as healthier and more socially desirable than the sincere feelings of the elder Malone.

*Violet* is hardly the shrinking flower her name ironically suggests; nor does she possess a shred of that sentimental romanticism which characterizes her brother. On the contrary, she is all hard-headed materialistic good sense. Violet, as the symbol of the dead bird in her hat warns us, is a kind of predator. Violet regards Jack's chivalry as a deadly insult. She equates gentility with idleness. In sincere naivete she asks what is the use of having a husband if he has to work. Hector is for Violet of no more moral significance than a watch or door key. His schoolboy pose of manliness and his moral muscle-flexing are totally irrelevant gestures to her.

*Ann* is meant to be a contrast to Violet. She is a well-formed creature, perfectly ladylike and graceful with ensnaring eyes and hair. Shaw calls her "one of the vital geniuses" not at all, an oversexed person : that would be a "vital defect", for Shaw's comedy. Raina has to be cured of her foolish romanticism; Cleopatra was skittish; Candida appears to be a little devitalized Barbara is too polemical. Ann is a person who will do nothing she does not mean to do. How with apparent naivete she imposes her will on both Tanner and Ramsden. And how intelligently she tries to disabuse his mind of romantic love. Tanner has something of the great man who incarnates the philosophic consciousness of life, while Ann is the woman who incarnates its fecundity. Each contributes towards the improvement of the human species; Tanner represents the intellectual way, the contribution of the philosopher. Ann represents the instinctive way; the instinctive will asserts itself blindly; the intellectual will asserts-itself in a clear-sighted manner. She tells Tanner "You seem to understand all the things I don't understand; but you are a perfect baby in the things I do understand."

As a matter of fact the Cosmic Will asserts its biologic choices through the female. Ann is therefore presented as a seductive Eve in the Garden of Eden. To the comedy of Ann's manoeuvres to capture Jack, Shaw adds the comedy of Jack's efforts to escape. What is laughable is the way Ann works behind a facade of bland propriety while she uses all her sexual attractiveness to entice and every social convention to entrap her prey. Shaw views with irony the pleasure a spectator at a comedy takes in the happy ending. He resolutely refuses to sound the happily ever-after note at the end of his comedy. Instead, he makes Ann tell us that she will risk her life in childbirth and has Jack cry out in sympathy "Is there a father's heart as well as a mother's?" Ana, Shaw tells us, is incapable both of the Devil's utter damnation and of Juan's complete supersensuality.

She cannot, Like the male devil, use love as mere sentiment and pleasure, nor can she like the saint hut love aside when it has once done its work as a developing and enlightening experience. Where her intellect cannot save her, her womanly procreative instinct can, and it is as Woman Immortal that she pusues Don Juan to heaven.

*Octavius* loves poetically; he sees his beloved as an image of high romance. His suffering is the appropriate stuff of traditional love poetry. Mendoza's self-dramatizing tendencies produce laughter; he is as foolishly obsessed with his beloved as Octavius. But he is at least more clear sighted about the object of his affections. While Octavius's Ann never existed on sea or land, Mendoza's Louisa is an amusingly real spitfire. Both Octavius and Mendoza are failed Romeos. Octavius's love is the aching love of lyric poetry. Mendoza's love is the passionate love of operatic melodrama. Hector's virtuous love is of the hero of the popular magazine story for the respectable young heroine. For this love Shaw has nothing but withering scorn; the Octavius-Mendoza love is treated by Shaw with humorous detachment. Ann's love represents the instinct of the race working towards the creation of the next generation. In his famous essay "The Metaphysics of the Love of the Sexes" Schopenhauer Says that obsessive preoccupation with love in life and literature is a symptom of man's inveterate triviality. It is rather absurd that such a trifle should so largely monopolize the attention of poets and dramatists. It can be explained only by the remarkable imperiousness of the sex impulse which according to Schopenhauer underlies all expressions of human love. Schopenhauer thinks that lofty sentimental souls will cry out against his apparently materialistic interpretation of the facts. He protests that the ultimate end of all love affairs is quite serious "the composition of the next generation". Such a theory, far from being mere materialism, Schopenhauer contends, is of the greatest metaphysical significance, since it raises love far above the exuberant feelings and supersensible snap bubbles of the love poets.

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### **3.14 The Hell Scene : the 'new religion'**

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The Hell Scene is a statement of Shaw's theology of salvation. In 1907 he wrote: "the world itself may be a made a hell by a society in a state of damnation : that is a society so lacking in the higher orders of energy that it is given wholly to the pursuit of immediate individual pleasure and cannot even conceive the passion of the divine will."

Shaw's hell is not the home of thieves, murderers, and ravishers but of happiness seekers, despairing cynics, and the self-indulgent. The hellish spirit is the spirit that fosters connoisseurship in art, dilettantism in literature and sentimental amorism in personal relations. Hell dwellers are obsessed with glamour and youth, beauty and love—the

preoccupations of the London stage in the 1990s, and they remain the preoccupation of Hollywood and television in our own day. Shaw's hell is his revenge upon the English stage for the years of ennui and disgust he suffered as a critic. In the Preface he indicts the stage for attempting to substitute "sensuous ecstasy" for "intellectual activity and honesty."

For Shaw's religion of struggle and reform, the devil has substituted a religion of love and beauty. He has made up his creed out of the neopagan lucubrations of men like Swinburne, Symonds and Wilde in England and Gautier and Anatole France on the Continent.

Heaven, Don Juan hails as the home of "the masters of reality." It is the sum of all true values, social, political, intellectual and aesthetic. To Juan's contention that man's mission is to help 'Life in its struggle upward.' the devil replies that man is not the vitalist Juan makes him but a mortalist in love with death. He says that man finds his keenest delight not in creation, but in funerals sensational tragedies and destructive wars. It is therefore better to withdraw from political life in favour of the pursuit of private pleasure, since such an existence is at least relatively harmless. Life is after all vanity of vanities.

For Juan the purpose of life is the eventual creation of a race that will be godlike in knowledge, in power and in self-awareness. He rejects any kind of stasis, even an idyllic-erotic one. Juan believes that Nature has a purpose and the human will itself is simply the highest embodiment of nature's intention.

The hell scene is often treated as a mere literary *jeu d'esprit*. But any one who is willing to think seriously about these matters will find himself challenged. As to the present day relevance of Shaw's hell, aesthetic hedonism as an avowed and philosophically held creed is no longer fashionable. Yet as a lived rather than a professed way of life can anyone doubt that it is the real religion of our cultivated middle classes and specially of those university teachers who are not philistines? Shaw's statement is a profession of faith and a call to action, intended to summon us from the art gallery, the concert hall, the cinema and the cocktail party to deal with the awkward and difficult problems of the real world.

Shaw regrets that "the new religion" was not noticed by most spectators : in 1901, I took the legend of Don Juan in its Mozartian form and made it a dramatic parable of Creative Evolution. But being then at the height of my invention and comedic talent, I decorated it too brilliantly and lavishly... The effect was so vertiginous, apparently, that nobody noticed the new religion in the centre of the intellectual whirlpool. Now I protest I did not cut these cerebral capers in mere inconsiderate exuberance. I did it because the worst convention of the criticism of the theatre current at that time was that intellectual seriousness is out of place on the stage; that the theatre is a place of

shallow amusement; that people go there to be soothed after the enormous intellectual strain of a day in the city; in short, that a playwright is a person whose business it is to make unwholesome confectionery out of cheap emotions. My answer to this was to put all my intellectual goods in the shop window under the sign of Man and Superman.”

The Hell Scene is the “centre of the intellectual whirlpool,” for it is concerned solely with the philosophical aspects of Shaw’s ideas on Creative Evaluation, specially Shaw’s ideas on love and marriage. Much of talk about love and sex in the Hell scene and the Revolutionists’ Handbook is illustrated in the comedy.

Structurally the Hell Scene and *The Revolutionist’s Handbook* are integrated with the comedy by the device of making the former Tanner’s dream and the latter his manifesto. The central theme of the Hell Scene is referred to in all the other there acts of the comedy. Moreover the two parts of the play are unified by parallels between Tanner and Don Juan, Ann and Ana, Ramsden and the Statue, Mendoza and the Devil. (See P.W.Mcdowell on *Man and Superman in Dramatic Survey II*, 1962, pp. 245-68)

The Transition from the Hell Scene to the real world is neat: the final words are Ana’s cry “A father, a father for the Superman!” and the first event on the return to the real world is Ann’s capture to Tanner.

The Hell Scene saves the play from degenerating into a force displaying a marathon manhunt on the part of a woman, the picture of a liar and a gossip, a concealed marriage between two young people and a collection of discomfited elders. It is not an incoherent farrago of ideas; the Hell Scene has a symbiotic relationship with the play.

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### 3.15 Annotations

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(Words explained in a good dictionary have been omitted)

#### **Epistle Dedicatory**

*Arthur Bingham Walkley* : English dramatic critic and essayist.

Don Juan : The name first appeared in literature in *El Burlador de Sevilla* (The Trickster of Seville) by Tirso de Molina, a seventeenth century monk whose real name was Gabriel Tellez. Juan is a great lover and deceiver of women, among them is Donna Anna whose father he kills in a duel. In mockery Juan invites the statue of the dead man to supper and, the invitation having been accepted Juan is afterwards dragged down to hell. In *Man and Superman* Shaw treats the legend in a different way.

*qui facit per alium facit per se* : He who creates for other creates for himself.

*epater le bourgeois* : ‘shocking the narrow-minded’.

*Plays for Puritans : The Devils' Disciple, Caesar and Cleopatra and Captain Brassbound's Conversion.*

*William Archer* : (1856-1924) English dramatic critic, playwright and Translator of Ibsen.

*Juliets..... Tristans* : Romeo and Juliet, hero and heroine of Shakespeare's tragedy; Tristan and Isolde, hero and heroine of the famous Teutonic legends.

*Moliere* : French comic playwright (1622-73). Among his works is *Don Juan or the Statue at the Feast*.

*Mozart* : (1756-91) Austrian composer : his *Don Givanni* is the greatest musical treatment of the Don Juan story.

*Casanova* : (1725-98) Italian adventurer and libertine.

*Sganarelle-Leporello* : Sganarelle, Don Juan's servant in Moliere's play; Leporello, his servant in Mozart's opera.

*Hogarth* : (1697-1764) English painter and engraver.

*Guizot* : (1787-1874) Francois Guizot, French Protestant historian and politician.

*Stendhal* : (1783-1842) Famous French novelist, author of *The Red and the Black*.

*Doll's House* : A play by Ibsen, an important landmark in the European movement for the emancipation of women.

*Gunod* : (1818-93) French composer.

*marchesane.....cittadine* : Shaw uses the words for the different ranks of Italian female society.

*Protegga il ginusto cielo* : "May just heaven protect us."

*Schopenhauer* : (1788-1860) German philosopher, author of *The World as Will and Idea*.

*Nietzsche* : (1844-1900) : German philosopher who prophesied the eventual coming of the Superman.

*Pecksniff* : a hypocritical character in Dickens's novel *Martin chuzzlewi't*.

*dissoluto purito* : Mozart's opera, *The Dissolute One Punished*.

*Scallawag* : A worthless person

*Mantalinis* : characters in Dickens's novel *Nicholas Nickleby*.

*Dobbins* : Dobbin is the devoted admirer of Amelia Sedley in Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair*.

*George Sand* : (1804-76) French woman novelist.

*hors d'aeuvres* : a course served at the beginning of a meal.

*amorism* : excessive concern with love affairs.

*Philistine* : uncultured people regarded as intellecutal barbarians.

*flunkeyism* : mean-spirited humility.

*Algys and Bobbies* : names given sarcastically to rich young men who lived frivolously in expensive idleness.

*You cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear* : a good article cannot be made from inferior material.

*panem et circenses* : bread and circuses. The phrase is applied to any nation that cared for nothing but food and entertainment.

*Talma* : (1763-1826) French actor.

*Fabian Three Musketeers* : Shaw, Sidney Webb and Sidney Olivier.

*Saribe* : (1791-1861) French playwright.

*the Charterhouse* : A 14th century monastery near London.

*Zauberflote* : The original German title of Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*.

*Tappertitan* : Simon Tappertit, a character in Dickens's novel *Barnaby Rudge*.

*the Pentateuch* : the first five books of the Old Testament.

*Bradlaugh* : (1833-91) English advocate of free thought, free speech and freedom of the press.

*Handel* : (1685-1759) German composer.

*Giotto* : Italian painter who lived from 1266 to 1336.

*Bumbledonian* : Bumble, the parish officer in Dickens's *Olive Twist*.

## **Act I**

*elbow-grease* : to use elbow grease means to rub hard when polishing metal or wood.

*isinglass* : A kind of gelatin which hardens into milky-white glassy material.

*Evolutionist* : One who accepts the theory that there is a continuous line of development from the lowest forms of animate life up to the highest in Man.

*Portland Place* : headquarters of the British Broadcasting Corporation.

*Delaroche's Beaux Arts hemicycle* : A large semicircular painting by Delaroche (1797-1856) in the Parish School of Fine Arts.

*Tavy* : affectionate abbreviation of Octavins.

*a cat* : a woman whose nature is considered feline— crafty, spiteful or unscrupulously alluring to men.

*Ricky-ticky-tavy* : a story called "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" in *The Jungle-Book* (1894) by Kipling.

*Grieg* : (1843-1907) Norwegian composer.

*Brahms* : (1833-97) German Composer.

*'Unto us a child is born : unto us a son is given'* : from Isaiah. IX. 6. Regarded by Christians as a prophecy of the coming of Christ.

*merry as grigs* : grigs = grasshoppers; the phrase means a state of gay light heartedness.

## Act II

*Aw rawt nah* : all right now.

*Regent Street ! Chelsen ! the Borough* : Three of the London districts in which there are well-known Polytechnics.

*Garn !* : go on ! a Cockney expression.

*Beaumarchais* : (1732-99) French playwright and satirist.

*arf" a mo!* I half a minute

## Act III

*Sierra Nevada* : a mountain district in the south of Spain.

the Kantian test: The moral law of the universe as conceived by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) German philosopher.

*Je demande la parole. C'est absolument faux. C'est faux ! faux* : I ask to be allowed to speak. That is absolutely false. It is false ! false !

*Sheeny* : An abusive slang word for 'Jew'.

*Fumiste* : Humbug

*ahnces* : Cockney pronunciation of ounces

*Angliche* : .....n'est-ce-pas? Duval speaks a mixture of bad French and bad

English. *He means* : 'English ! Oh yes. Swine ! We'll have to fire, won't we?

*Fandez ..... de Dieu !* Rush on them in God's name !

*Jamais de la vie ! Miserable menteur* : Not on your life ! Miserable liar !

*foie gras* : a preparation from goose livers; esteemed as a delicacy by epicures.

*a six shillin novel sort of woman* : A typical heroine of an English novel, the normal price of which at that time was six shillings.

*Whitsum week* : The week beginning with Whit Sunday, the next day whit Monday. Whit Sunday falls on the seventh Sunday after Easter.

*Purgatory* : the state midway between heaven and bell.

*Vivan la femmine ! Viva il buon ! Sostegno e gloria D'umanita* : Hail, women! Hail, good wine ! Support and glory of Mankind !

*megatherium.....ichthyosaurus* : huge prehistoric creatures, extinct before recored history began and known only through fossilized remains.

*Mugwump* : applied contemptuously to a person who refuses to take an adtive interest in politics.

*Koheleth* : Ecclesiastes in the Greek form of the Hebrew word Koheleth.

*Vanitas vanitatum* : Vanity, vanity, all is Vanity !

## Act IV

*the Alhambra* : The royal palace built at Granada by the Moors in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.



Professor Tyndall: John Tyndall (1820-93), English scientist and mountaineer.  
Patmore's, Angel in the house : A poem on married love by the English poet Coventry Patmore (1823-96).

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### 3.16 Questions

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1. "The two chief concerns of prosaic people are money and marriage". How does Shaw present the interrelationship between these two themes in *Man and Superman*?
2. "The Character of Anna combines biology with mystical yearning. "Discuss.
3. Ann and Tanner are two different ways of serving the Life Force.
4. Discuss the relevance of the Hell Scene.
5. What ideal of the Superman does Shaw present in his play ? Does not his conception err by being too intellectual ?
6. *Man and Superman* is a tale of a husband huntress obscured by the theme of biological evolution. Discuss.
7. Why does Shaw describe *Man and Superman* as "a dramatic parable of Creative Evolution" ?
8. Shaw regrets that in *Man and Superman* "nobody noticed the new religion in the centre of the intellectual whirlpool." What is this 'new religion'?
9. "Shaw is least dramatic when dealing directly with large philosophical themes". Is this a just comment on *Man and Superman* ?
10. "My Don Juan is the quarry instead of the huntsman." Discuss.
11. Why does Shaw call Straker 'the New Man'? Sketch his character.
12. "Every woman is not Ann ; but Ann is Every woman." Discuss.

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### 3.17 Recommended Reading

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- G K. Chesterton. *George Bernard Shaw*, London 1935. (Not a detailed study of M & S, but a worthwhile book)
- A. Henderson. *Bernard Shaw*, London 1932 (the standard biography, authorized by Shaw.)
- E. Bentley. *Bernard Shaw*, Methuen, London 1967 (comments on M & S in ch. 6)
- D. MacCarthy. *Shaw : The Plays*, London, 1951 (useful, contains an interesting personal memoir of Shaw. Treats M & S)
- Colin Wilson. *Bernard Shaw : A Reassessment*, London 1969, (Shaw's general thinking about the Life Force & Comments on M & S.)

C.A. Berst. *Bernard Shaw and the Art of Drama*, Urbana, 1973. (Concentrates on the Philosophical background of M & S.)

Leon Hugo. *Bernard Shaw*, Methuen, 1971 (parallels between M & S and Don Giovanni : analysis of Jack-Ann relationship.)

Maurice Valency. *The Cart and the Trumpet* London 1973. (Considers M & S in the light of literary movements of the time.)

Dan H. Laurence. *Bernard Shaw : A Bibliography* 2 Vols. O.U.P. 1983.

### **Journals :**

*The Shaw Review* (Pennsylvania State University, U.S.A.)

*The Shavian* : The Journal of the Shaw Society (London)

*Text* : Read Man and Superman ed by A.C. Ward. Orient Longman.

*(A Close firsthand experience of the text is essential)*

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## UNIT 4 □ T. S. Eliot : Murder in the Cathedral

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### STRUCTURE

#### 4.0 Background

#### 4.1 Murder in the Cathedral – An Approach

#### 4.2 Themes and Some Observations

#### 4.3 Medieval Martyr and the Nature of Martyrdom

#### 4.4 Plot and Structure

#### 4.5 The Language of Drama (Helen Gardner)

#### 4.6 Characterisation

#### 4.7 Verse Drama

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### 4.0 Background

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Verse drama reached its most popular and its most highly developed form during the Renaissance. Although some verse drama has been written since that time, little of it has had any lasting significance on the stage. In the Eighteenth century, Dryden and others continued to write verse drama, which was acted upon the stage, but the form of the heroic couplet, commonly employed by Eighteenth century writers, tended to make the form stilted. During the Eighteenth century, the ballad opera became a fairly popular form, verse drama moved more and more in the direction of musical comedy and light theatre. During the Nineteenth century, poets like Tennyson attempted to write serious verse dramas, but for the most part these were closet dramas; that is, they were rarely or never acted on the stage. In the early Twentieth century verse drama was “rediscovered”, as is apparent through the tremendous number of Shakespearean companies performing throughout the United States and England every summer. As the century wore on, other writers took up the form. Sherwood Anderson and Christopher Fry appear to have had the broadest success, although others have employed the form.

T.S. Eliot was one of the most important verse dramatists of the period. His career as a dramatist divides his productive life into three periods; the *Waste Land* period, from 1917 to 1932; the dramatic period, from 1932 to 1943; and the final period, from 1943 to his death in 1965. The dramatic period provided an apprenticeship in versification,

which took Eliot out of the conventional forms he had employed during the *Waste Land* period and prepared him for the verse experiments and achievement of the *Four Quartets*.

By 1933, in *The Use of Poetry*, Eliot was remarking that “the ideal medium for poetry... is the theatre.” By 1936 he had come to the conclusion that poetry was “the natural and complete medium for the drama.” He felt that poetry provided, under the action, the advantage of a pattern of music which could intensify the viewer’s excitement through reinforcement from the deeper level derived out of song and incantation. With this idea in mind, he carefully sought to recreate in the verse of his drama, the incantatory rhythms of liturgy, with a modern vocabulary and a cadence common to ordinary speech.

In “The Rock” (1934), Eliot mixed seven or eight different types of verse, ranging from the effects of comic song, derived from Kipling, through imitation of clumsy and unmusical free verse in the lines ascribed to the Redshirts, through a regular, heavy, footstamping, jazzy beat in the lines of the Blackshirts, to the Swinburnean lyricism of the final chorus. In general, in this play, the verse is still iambic pentameter, but this meter gives way repeatedly, in passages of excitement or incantation, to a poetic prose having highly irregular stress patterns and a fairly large number of anapestic substitutions.

In *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) the verse is not so miscellaneous, and this tends to give the play a greater structural unity. Eliot has said that he had in mind the versification of *Everyman*, a 15<sup>th</sup> century morality play of Dutch origin, written in English in a medieval accentual verse form. The plays, and particularly the Tempters’ dialogues with Becket, are marked by the sharp, irregularly assorted stresses, four to a line, which closely mimic the medieval predecessor. To some extent, Eliot even introduces alliteration into the verse.

Basically, with small variation, this verse form constitutes the metrical base for both *The Family Reunion* and the *Cocktail Party*, although in these plays the verse appears to be more artificial than it was in *Murder in the Cathedral*. Even Eliot was aware of this deficiency, for he once remarked that the verse in *The Family Reunion* seemed to him to be “remote from the necessity of Action”.

Verse drama is an exceedingly difficult form to write, because reality is often at odds with the limitations of verse form. The drama strives normally for a certain amount of verisimilitude to life. If the characters do not speak and react according to the dictates of reality, the viewer is likely to lose the drama in the language. In order for verse drama to be successful, the verse must be written in such a way that on the one hand it is believable as dialogue while at the same time on the other hand it conforms to the rigid requirements of verse form. If the language loses the rigidity of verse patterns, then it

is no longer verse, or at least it is no longer successful verse. On the contrary, no matter how good the verse is, if the dialogue is not believable as dialogue, the play loses its validity as drama. The genius of Shakespeare lies in his ability “to use blank verse, unrhymed iambic pentameter lines, to create a dialogue, which sounds as though it might have been spoken by a living human being. Relatively few dramatists have been able to accomplish this effect. The failure of most Eighteenth century drama may be traced in part at least to a defect in the verse. The extreme rigidity of the heroic couplet does not allow the flexibility in line structure, which is necessary to a believable dialogue. The failure of most closet drama also exemplifies this problem. Closet drama is often fine verse but unactable drama because while the ideas are interesting, the dramatic effects of interaction between characters are hampered by the very excellence of the verse.

Another fact must be taken into consideration. In theatrical terms, some acts are pretty tough to follow. After Milton’s *Paradise Lost* no one has seriously attempted to write an epic in English, because Milton had wrung from the form all that it had to give. After Shakespeare, very little new is left for other writers. While verse dramas have been written in English since the high point of the Renaissance, no one has been able to approach the effects that Shakespeare seemed to achieve with such ease. Anyone writing verse drama today must realize that his product will be compared with Shakespeare’s and that only a work of genius will be able to compete to any degree. One must admire anyone who attempts to write verse drama today for sheer courage if nothing else. Eliot’s verse drama, while it does not approach Shakespeare’s, is certainly creditable.

It is exactly because the verse form itself is so vastly important in the evaluation of any verse drama that the section of Modern Poetry has been included and that some discussion of verse form in the various plays by Eliot has been inserted into this section. Eliot’s major achievement in verse drama has been the creation of a verse form in the modern idiom, which is capable of being both verse and believable dialogue at the same time. While Eliot’s drama is interesting in its own right, the major reason for its inclusion in these Notes consists in its transitional importance between Eliot’s verse of the *Waste Land* period and his verse in the *Four Quartets*. It was the experience of writing for the stage and of trying to create a verse form that would be believable as dialogue that enabled Eliot to devise the form which dominates the *Quartets* and which may constitute his most important single contribution to modern verse and to the growth of Anglo-American literature. In general, the same kinds of themes are explored in the drama that have already been explored in the verse. As drama, these plays are not likely to have an important or lasting effect on the history or development of the theatre.

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## 4.1 MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL — AN APPROACH

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*Murder in the Cathedral* was written for the Canterbury Festival of June 1935. There are six separate and different published versions of this play: the abbreviated version of 1935, the complete version of 1935, revisions in 1936, 1937; and 1938, and a film version printed in 1952. The second edition, issued in the United States in 1936, is probably the best of these, since some of the others omit certain speeches reassign others, and generally simplify the knights' speeches and the sermon. Only the film version adds entirely new material, namely a preliminary speech spoken by Becket to the Ecclesiastics of Canterbury, several new speeches for the chorus, a prose trial scene in which Becket confronts King Henry, an address by the Prior to the people of Canterbury delivered in front of the Cathedral, and a total revision of the Knights' prose speeches at the end of the play. These Notes are based upon the second edition, 1936, but in general the remarks are applicable to any of the versions except the film script.

The basic plot concerns the death and martyrdom of Thomas a Becket. Thomas was born probably in 1118, the son of a Norman aristocratic family. He was educated in London and Paris where he received degrees in Canon Law. He became the personal friend and confidant of Henry II who subsequently appointed him Chancellor of England. Throughout his early career, Thomas was known as a high living fellow completely devoted to the every whim of his royal friend. In 1162, Henry II, involved in a battle with the clergy over the question of whether the King had legal authority over clergy, appointed Thomas Archbishop of Canterbury in the mistaken conviction that Thomas would continue his loyalty to the King. Thomas accepted the post reluctantly. Once he became Archbishop, Thomas reversed his position and opposed the king's measures against the special privileges of the clergy. The struggle between Henry and Thomas was a long and bitter one, and Thomas was finally forced into exile. He lived in Europe for seven years. Because a reconciliation with the king had been effected, he returned to England, but the peace was of short duration. The king, in a fit of anger, made use of hasty words, which led four knights to murder Becket in the false assumption that they were acting in accord with the King's wishes. Thomas was murdered in his own cathedral on December 29, 1170. It is said that he met his death with splendid courage. His grave became the most famous shrine in Christendom, and Henry himself did penance there. Thomas was canonized in 1173, and his official festival is observed on July 7<sup>th</sup>.

The story of Becket's life would seem to hold great dramatic and tragic potentialities. The horrible deed, which culminated his life, involves persons who, though not direct, related by blood ties, were certainly bound by old ties of friendship and honor.

Furthermore, the deed has a peculiar horror contributed to it by the addition of sacrilege to murder. While the conflict of church and state is implicit in the play, it is kept in the background. Eliot also carefully avoided the drama of personal conflict: so carefully, in fact, that Henry does not even appear in the play. The knights who perform the murder are not persons; rather, at first they are a mob, and later they are a personified set of attitudes. In the play, they lack any sort of personal motives or personal passions.

The central theme of the play is martyrdom in the strictest, oldest sense of the word. In this sense, the martyr is not the sufferer, but rather the witness to the awesome reality of the supernatural. The murder of Thomas is, in this play, and on one level, unimportant. Certainly it is not important as a dramatic climax toward which all that has happened earlier inevitably leads. Eliot himself has several times stated that the sequence of events in the play lacks the normal dramatic logic of motive-act-result. This sequence of events depends exclusively upon the will of God. Becket says so in the speech that serves as a bridge for the entrance of the Tempters:

For a little time the hungry hawk  
Will only soar and hover, circling lower,  
Waiting excuse, pretence, opportunity.  
End will be simple, sudden, God-given.

But in the long scene which follows, Thomas can hardly be said to be tempted. The play opens so near its dramatic climax, temporally speaking, that any inner development in Thomas is quite impossible. In fact, except for the last temptation, the Tempters provide little more than a recapitulation of what has already ceased to tempt. They do not represent a present trial, and that is why Thomas can so easily dismiss them. The last temptation is so subtle that it is really impossible to judge whether or not Thomas succumbs to it. Though Thomas actually says, at the conclusion of the scene, "Now is the way clear, now is the meaning plain :/Temptation shall not come in this kind again", a question has been raised that cannot be answered dramatically and that must, in terms of the play, simply be set aside. It may be assumed that Thomas dies with a pure will.

The second act of the play, following the interlude, has no strife at all. The martyr's sermon, which constitutes the interlude, flatly states that "a martyrdom is never the design of man", that martyrdom cannot be "the effect of a man's will to become a saint." Thomas has only to await the action when the knights rush in, the momentary drama and shock of their eruption breaks against the static calm of Thomas, and the murder itself takes place as a kind of ritual slaughter of an unresisting victim; a necessary act, not in itself exciting or significant.

In most of his serious work, Eliot has been concerned with quest for vision and the despair of attaining it. This quest has been pointed out in various contexts in the Notes

concerning every poem included in this book. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Thomas Becket, the protagonist, seeks a way to live up to his great mission, martyrdom, by divorcing his awareness of it from his own ambition for fame and for canonization. But, in terms of the play, Thomas is less a man than the embodiment of an attitude. There is, in the play, a contempt for personality and its expression through acts. Normally, in an effective dramatic situation, the protagonist of a play must be conscious and aware of what is happening to him. That is, by definition, part of his function as protagonist. It is through him that the situation is made clear to the audience and often to the other characters as well. It is in him that the implications of the drama which are hidden from the other persons involved in the action are revealed. But if there is no action, in the normal sense of the word, if the center of the play is a state of mind, then the protagonist can be only self-aware. That is exactly the situation in *Murder in the Cathedral*. Thomas is only self-aware, but in terms of what Eliot is attempting to accomplish, that is adequate to the “message” of the play. Whether or not it is sufficient to the drama of the play is another question.

To put it in another way, in *Murder in the Cathedral*, the focus of interest is egocentric. The hero's character is not analyzed, as it is in *Hamlet*; in fact, the hero's character is irrelevant. Instead, the hero's martyrdom is analyzed. And it is analyzed not to show how it was actuated by a positive love of God and man, but rather to show how Thomas resisted the temptation to be martyred for the wrong reason. The wrong reason, obviously, is spiritual pride.

The chorus, which represents ordinary people, the people of Canterbury, consists of onlookers, of persons who are only passively concerned with the futility of time and change. Thomas is not related to them in any way; he is isolated from the community. His isolation is in part the result of the fact that they cannot understand what is happening to him except in the most obvious sense. That he is in some physical danger is apparent even to them, but the idea that he might be on the verge of martyrdom, or even of death, is an idea, which has no reality for them. They are of a different order than he is. In one sense, of course, he is an aristocrat and they are ordinary, but in quite another sense he is spiritually prepared for his experience, and they, not having renounced carnality, are in no sense prepared even to witness, let alone to participate. Thus, under these circumstances Thomas' superiority can be expounded only to himself. The other characters in the drama – the priests, the tempters, and even the knights, are really extension, not of the personality of Thomas, but rather of the idea of which he is the personification.

In spite of these deficiencies, *Murder in the Cathedral* is a successful play of enormous emotional power. For all its lack of action and its unconvincing protagonist the play is intensely moving. The real drama of the play is to be found, in fact where its greatest



poetry lies—in the choruses. The change which is the nature of drama is there; from the terror of the supernatural expressed at the opening of the play—“Some presage of an act / Which our eyes are compelled to witness, has compelled our feet / Towards the cathedral...”—to the rapturous recognition of the “glory displayed in all creatures of the earth.” The fluctuations of the chorus, temporal changes which reflect the theme, are the real measure of Thomas’ spiritual conquest. While Thomas is the chief protagonist in the drama, perhaps the chorus is the hero of the drama, but an unconventional hero—one who does not physically participate in the action, one who is only an observer isolated from the action.

*Murder in the Cathedral* is most like *Ash Wednesday* in its choice of a Christian theme, in its employment of liturgical material, and in its contrasts between the ideal of sanctity and the reality of the common experience of ordinary unsanctified humanity. The problems that the play poses are very similar to the problems posed in the poem, and the solution offered in the play is also similar to the one offered in the poem. It is a negative mysticism, which permits Thomas to be martyred for the right reason. The solution is most clearly expressed in the closing chorus :

...Thy glory is declared even in that which denies  
Thee, the darkness declares the glory of light.  
Those who deny Thee could not deny Thee, if Thou didst  
not exist; and their denial is never complete,  
for if it were so, they would not exist...

Indeed, as Eliot has shown in *Ash Wednesday*, the quest for salvation may require as a discipline the loss of spiritual certainty.

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## 4.2 Themes and Some Observations

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### A Process of Awareness

In the play we are faced with a heroic denial of the primacy of the material world, a stance that culminates in a violent murder. Different views of this central event are portrayed in contrast. Thomas’ own interpretation of his death is that it serves God’s purpose. The Knights grapple with their own non-comprehension, and argue that the death is suicide, the failure to seize the opportunities life offers. It is significant that when the time comes to react to the murder the hour speaks the language of the *Te Deum*; the knight speaks in terms of the latest thriller, a form reflected in the ironic title of the play. The Chorus have moved from tentative weakness and failure to a consciousness of power and a far greater reality.

At first Becket, himself under the temptation is subject to the Wheel, only vaguely aware of the perfection at the still point and of its possibilities. When he is face to face with his own pride, he realizes his limitations imposed on him by his human nature :

The last temptation is the greatest treason :  
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.  
The natural vigour in the venial sin  
Is the way in which our lives begin? (I. 667-70)

The speech demonstrates how difficult it is for us to be aware of this different order of being. The martyr loses his will in that of God. Beyond human limitations Thomas has glimpsed divine perfection. At the conclusion of the play there are levels of awareness; the Chorus who assent to Thomas' sacrifice and are emotionally aware of what has happened; the Knights who represent everyday interpretation of life, lacking a spiritual dimension of their understanding.

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### **4.3 Medieval Martyr and the Nature of Martyrdom**

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The clash between Henry II and his former Chancellor and Arch Bishop, Thomas Becket, provides an historical framework for the drama. Other dramatists have exploited this story, which has the exciting elements of a broken friendship and the irreconcilable demands of Church and State. In this Eliot largely ignores the potential force of this worldly action, and uses it primarily to provide a context for the study of martyrdom. The study concerns Thomas Becket's struggle to achieve Christian humility without falling victim to pride. The focus is not what happened in history but what meaning the event has for Thomas, for the women of Canterbury, and for us. Thomas has to overcome the desire for self-assertion in order to subject himself to the will of God, He sets aside increasingly complex temptation until confronted by the most insidious one, the attraction of triumphant self-gratification which assured to a martyr, "a vision of eternal grandeur", Becket as Arch Bishop of Canterbury to fulfill the demands of his role in life, but martyrdom comes as a result of acquiescence in what sees as God's plan, and he has to purify before he is fit for that martyrdom. Fear and courage do not enter into Thomas' reckoning, for these are the emotions of everyday life. The martyr's doom is foreseen by himself, and he forges that destiny, but he acts only when he is convinced that the sequence of events is divinely inspired.

Although causes and confrontations may characterize the situations in which martyrdom occurs, the martyr is not sacrificed to a cause. Steadfast to his belief in a higher order of being, the martyr repeats the scapegoat death of Christ, thereby bearing witness afresh. A few months before the play was first produced Eliot quoted, "The Ascent Of Mount Carmel" by the medieval mystic Saint John of the cross : "to follow Christ to deny self". American critic Francis Ferguson attacked this aspect of Eliot's theme, the theological viewpoint that sees nothing of a human scale in our love for the divine, that season link between Eros (human love) and Agape (the love of God for us). The things

Thomas loved in his youth, as portrayed in *The First Temptation*, are not seen as evidence of God's bounty but as obstruction to a higher understanding. At its most extreme this view might be seen as suggesting that we are in Hell while we live according to this world's ways, and that only saint's total rejection will reveal the path to heaven. But Eliot always argued that his plays were aimed at stressing the isolation of the saint but at exploring the significance of the saint for the rest of us. The existence of the saint does not invalidate the lives and aspirations of the ordinary folks. The play does not argue that we must all be saints; it does not argue that a view of destiny and history must encompass unhappiness, deprivation, misery, death, and loss in the mass of suffering humanity as well as its pleasures, happiness and triumphs.

Eliot's Christian viewpoint is that the world is incomplete without God. The martyr re-enacts Christ's atonement for a world, which lacks God. The martyr refuses to compromise and renounces the demands of this world, while the world in its turn cannot tolerate one who does not conform. Indeed, the symbolism of the Wheel with its "still point" indicates that Thomas' sacrifice is "out of time". For Eliot the moving wheel symbolizes living in time, while at its center movement disappears into the "still" center, which symbolizes God. The two images combine to represent the divine intersection with human, the point where God enters history. Thomas identifies with the still center :

I give my life

To the Law of God above the law of man, (II. 343-4)

The subjective self must become an object within the will of God : submission to that other dimension releases the potential saints from human self and its motivation by this world and its ways :

It is not in time that my death shall be known;

It is out of time that my decision is taken. (II. 339-40)

The saint doesn't achieve his triumph for himself; he provides an opportunity for people to look at themselves anew. Chorus and audience are reluctant, but they witness and they accept.

To link the medieval story to its modern witness, Eliot imposed a contemporary surface upon his twelfth century content. The references mix medieval and modern experiences; the Catherine Wheel, the Pantomime Cat, prizes at children's party, tilt-yard skill, milk-stream, watchman, and the strategy of chess. Heaven and Hell were real to the medieval mind; Eliot's vision of the fragmented horrors creates a modern equivalent for the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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## 4.4 Plot and Structure

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### **Exposition and story :**

The play describes the final phase of Thomas' life. His past, his relationship with the King, and the conflict between Church and State are largely sketched into the contributions from the Tempters, although the tense opening Choruses do stress the struggle between Archbishop and the King. The hint of crisis comes very early, and despite criticisms of the play which stress the ritual and static impression, it solves problems of narrative exposition and developing action very economically, while the theme is given extensive treatment. For his exposition Eliot was able to assume that most people who went to see the play knew the story in its basic elements.

The story is simple enough. The Archbishop returns from France to lead his Church, determined to face the possibility of conflict with the King, despite advice to the contrary from his attendant Priests and despite the evident fears of the ordinary Women of Canterbury. He preaches a Christmas Day sermon on the martyrdom, and after further vain attempts by his Priests to prevent his death he is killed by four drunken Knights.

Instead of widening the narrative span, the dramatist chose to concern his action with a very narrow point of decision, an interior action with a very powerful impact. The story embodies the theme without moralising; Part I and II are not didactic, and the Sermon is only partly so. Eliot relied on minimal stage directions, and the whole presentation has universality beyond its historical setting.

### **Formal Structure :**

The play's dramatic effect is quite different from that of situation plays, and its form is important in organizing the response of the audience; a simple line of action without digression, parallel plot or sub-plot is graced with the ceremonial grandeur of a ritual. The pattern of the play is one of development, of contrast and balance, and like a church service the various phases contain true action of the play. Like the Eucharist, Communion or Mass, the play provides a symbolic pattern of dynamic emotional changes. A process of purgation leads to a state in which Thomas may "make perfect his will" and the chorus may identify with the event.

The parallels between the play and service were increased by the inclusion of the sermon at the mid-way point, the Cathedral setting, and the use of great liturgical passages as links and accompaniments. The emotional structure of the play may be traced in the Choruses, which move from terror and doubts to rapture and a recognition of God's glory. The choices for Thomas and for us are seen from different angles throughout the play. Thomas' moments of decision in part II and I are crucial points, which cannot be fully presented on stage. In naturalistic terms we have to take Thomas' word for

his achievement of true martyrdom; Thomas discovers the impurity of his motives in Part I, while Part II proves that Thomas has virtuously and correctly made his submission to destiny.

## **The Parts of the Play**

### **Part One :**

This part is constructed in the fashion of a Greek *agon*, or “verbal conflict”, consisting largely of dialogues with contributions from a chorus with a focus on four Temptations. The most dramatic passage presents the surprise Fourth Temptation when Thomas’ decision is threatened by self-will and pride. The dramatic center of the play starts, at 1.665, ‘Now is my way clear’ the moment of *peripeteia* when the drama makes a fundamental change in direction. The action of part I is primarily a matter of mind, the Women of Canterbury full of doubts and fears, while Thomas, having rejected the past, is tempted by his own forward-looking ambitions.

### **Interlude :**

The Sermon is a direct, prosaic exposition of the awareness Thomas has attained towards the end of part I, and it makes clear the nature of his triumph over the Fourth tempter. It expresses a view that martyrdom cannot be achieved by man’s will alone. It therefore establishes the theme of the play by means of a different dramatic mode. When the future martyr has subdued his own ambitions and will to God’s will he becomes a fit instrument for God’s purpose. Further, the interlude links the poetic sequences of the parts on either side. Thomas’ telling his congregation that he will not preach to them again prepares the way for the events of Part II.

### **Part Two :**

The action of this part contrasts with part I, where we have an internal, intellectual problem followed by a sequence of action and comment. In part II the focus is on murder, and the play generates preparatory emotions: apprehension (Chorus), accusation (Knights), and protection (Priests). The balance of responsibility now becomes important in Thomas’ refusal to seek sanctuary. Later, the Knights are to claim that his failure to run amounts to ‘suicide’, thereby ignoring their own independence as agents of death. In the end the charge is that Thomas should have compromised between political and religious demands placed upon him; the limited scope of these charges reflect the limitations of the earthly, non-spiritual view-point.

Part II expands and embodies the conclusions Thomas himself came to in Part I. Action becomes suffering as he foresaw. If dramatically it lacks development, theatrically it uses bold strokes: priests in procession with banners, the angry intrusion of murderous

outsiders, a ritual, killing, the great liturgies of *Dies iring* and *Te Deum*, and the knights' 'Shavian Apology in the fashion of the last act of *Saint Joan*.

### **Linking the Parts :**

Without strict adherence to the Unities of Time and Place, the play presents a feeling of concise Unity of Action. Part II and I are respectively concerned with the Return and the Murder, but there is a theme common to both parts, the perception of God's purpose working through an individual and through History. In Part I Thomas the Saint comes painfully to this decision; in Part II the time for decision concerns the audience.

Tension is maintained by concentration upon the two phases of Temptation and Murder. In the first, the drama concerns Thomas' reappearance at Canterbury, followed by a sequence of culminating in the final unexpected temptation. The second phase deals with the expected violence, while the real action traces the Chorus' fear and then the affirmation of their involvement. A second surprise, the Knight's Apology, is reserved for the final movement of the play. Each verse sequence is thus concluded with a prose summary, Sermon and Apology. The humorous tone of the messenger is balanced by the humour of the Knights, and the four Tempters grow into and are mirrored by the Four Knights. The tone of the Apology and of the Herald is not the only relief from tension. Other characters beside these examples offer moments of humour throughout the play.

### **Tragic Pattern :**

The play has the inner structure of a Greek tragedy, and Louis Martz traced this in an essay entitled 'The Saint As Tragic Hero'. He saw the transfiguration, suffering, wondering phase, the assertion that the hero will seek no more, and the achievement of the peace, acceptance and death in one and the same sanctuary as being derived from the similar elements found in Sophocles' *Oedipus At Colonus*, a play used again by Eliot as the starting point for his last drama 'The Elder Statesman'. But the Christian Triumph in the play takes us beyond the tragedy. There is a three-fold sequence in Christian self-sacrifice: the Saint first suffers the temptation, *pathema*; then detects and resists this temptation, *poiema*; and ultimately gains understanding, *mathema*. The saint derives awareness from his trial sufficient to equip himself for martyrdom.

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## **4.5 The Language of Drama. {Helen Gardner}**

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The martyrdom of Becket was an obvious choice for a Canterbury play, made more attractive no doubt by the association of the saint's name. The theme of the conflict of the spiritual and the secular powers, the relation of church and state, was topical,

and is a subject on which Eliot has spoken much in prose. The story of Beckett's life would seem to hold great dramatic and tragic potentialities, for the "deed of horror" takes place between persons who, though not closely related as Aristotle thought best, are at least closely bound by old ties of friendship; and the deed has the peculiar horror by the addition of sacrilege to the guilt of murder. But although the conflict of Church and state is present in the play, it is subordinated to another theme, and the drama of personal relationships Mr. Eliot deliberately avoids. The king does not appear and the Knights are not persons, but a gang, and then a set of attitudes. They murder for an idea, or for various ideas, and are not shown as individuals, disturbed by personal passions and personal motives. The central theme of the play is Martyrdom, and martyrdom in its strict ancient sense. For the word martyr means witness, and the Church did not at first the words to those who sealed their witness with their blood; it was a later distinction that separated the martyrs from the confessors. We are not to think of martyr as primarily one who suffers for a cause, or who gives up his life for truth, but as a witness to the awful reality of the supernatural. The actual deed by which Thomas is stuck down is in a sense unimportant. It is not important as a dramatic climax towards which all that has happened leads. We are warned again and again that we are not watching a sequence of events that has the normal dramatic logic of motive, act, result, but an action which depends on the will of god and on the wills of men :

For a little time the hungry hawk  
Will not soar and hover, circling lower,  
Waiting excuse, pretence, and opportunity.  
End will be simple, sudden, God-given.

Nothing prepares us for the consummation. We are told rightly that  
The substance of our act  
Will be shadows, and the strife with shadows.

Thomas can hardly be said to be tempted, for the play opens so near its climax that at any inner development is impossible. Except for the last, the temptations are hardly more than recapitulations of what had now ceased to tempt, an exposition of what has happened rather than a present trial; and the last temptation is so subtle and interior that no audience can judge whether it is truly overcome or not. What spiritual pride lurks in a martyr's heart, even in his last agony, it is not to be measured by the most subtle and scrupulous self-analyst, far less by any by-stander.

Though Thomas may say

Now is my way clear; now is the meaning plain :  
Temptation shall not come in this kind again,

A question has been raised that cannot be answered dramatically and that has simply to be set aside. We have to take it for granted that Thomas dies with a pure will, or else, more properly, ignore the whole problem of motives as beyond our competence and accept the fact of his death. If in the first act the strife is with shadows, in the second there is no strife at all. The martyr's sermon warns, us that "a martyrdom is never a design of man," and the Christian martyrdom is neither an accident nor "the effect of man's will to become a saint." He has only to wait for his murderers to appear :

All my life they have been coming, these feet. All my life  
I have waited. Death will come only when I am worthy,  
And if I am worthy there is no danger.  
I have therefore only to make perfect my will.

When the Knights rush in their momentary rush of irruption breaks against the calm of Thomas, and the murder takes place as a kind of ritual slaughter of an unresisting victim, unnecessary act not in itself exciting or significant.

The attempt to present in Thomas the martyr in will and deed, with mind and heart purified to be made the instrument of the divine purpose, is a blood one. Success is hardly to be expected. There more than a trace in the Archbishop of the "Classic prig" who disconcerts us so deeply in Milton's presentation of the tempted Christ in *Paradise Regained*. There is a taint of professionalism about his sanctity; the note of complacency is always creeping into his self-conscious presentation of himself. He holds, of course, the pastoral commission, and it is right that he should teach his flock, but his dramatic function comes to seem less to be a martyr or witness, then to improve the occasion, to give an Addisonian demonstration of "how a Christian can die." Thomas is indeed less a man than an embodied attitude, for there is in this play an almost Gnostic contempt for personality and its expression in acts. When Thomas declares with some scorn.

You argue by results, as this world does,  
To settle if an act be good or bad.  
You defer to the fact,

He seems to have forgotten that the rest of fruits is not only the world's test; it is deeply in the Gospels. When he announces, "I have only to make perfect my will," he speaks more as a Gnostic Sage than as a Christian Saint. Sanctity here appears too near to self-culture. The difficulty lies partly in the nature of dramatic presentation. The protagonist of any play must be conscious and aware; that is part of his function as protagonist. It is through him that the situation is made clear to us, and we recognize implications hidden from other in the drama. But if there is no true action, if the center



of the play is a state of mind, the protagonist can only be self-aware and self-conscious, and self-consciousness is incompatible with sanctity. Mr. Eliot has conceived his hero as a superior person. The nature of his superiority can be expounded dramatically only by himself, for the play assumes a gulf between the saint and the ordinary man. Inevitably in the expounding the protagonist appears superior in the pejorative sense.

But for all its lack of action and its unconvincing protagonist, *Murder In The Cathedral* is intensely moving and at times exciting when performed. The real drama of the play is to be found in fact where its greatest poetry lies—in the choruses. The change which is the life of drama is there : from the terror of the supernatural expressed at the opening to the rapturous recognition of the “glory displayed in all the creatures of the earth” in the last. The fluctuations of the chorus are the true measure of Thomas’ spiritual conquest. They feel his failure of the faith after the last temptation. They know obscurely that if sanctity is nothing in the end but a higher egoism, there is no value in any human goodness. Only if the heroic has meaning can the ordinary have dignity. They “know and do not know”; for they feel the danger but mistake where safety lies :

God is leaving us, God is leaving us more pang, more pain,  
Than birth or death,  
Sweet and cloying through the dark air  
Falls the stifling sense of despair;  
The forms take shape in the dark air:  
Puss-purr of leopard, footfall of padding bear,  
Palm-pat of nodding ape, square hyena waiting  
For laughter, laughter, laughter. The lords of Hell are here.

If he is safe, they are safe too; if he is destroyed, they are destroyed. They implore him to save himself for their sake, but the safety he and they find is of another kind. They have to learn that there is no safety in flight, and escape in obscurity from evil and death. They have to accept their share in the “eternal burden, the perpetual glory”: the burden of sin, the glory of redemption. In the great chorus before the martyrdom they identify themselves with a whole world groaning and travelling. The monstrous they are about to witness is not an aberration, an eccentricity; it is an expression of the universal malice and corruption, which it is man’s burden glory to be conscious of. It is not something of which the common man is innocent. The evil plotted by potentates is the same evil as is met :

In the kitchen, in the passage,  
In the mews in the barn in the byre in the market place  
In our veins our bowels our skulls.

They have to pierce deeper, beyond all agents and forms of evil, beyond death and judgement to

Emptiness, absence, separation from God.

In face of the intensity of the Dies Irae chorus, the ecstasy of penitence and shame that breaks with the cry :

Clear the air ! Clean the sky ! Wash the wind ! Take some stone from  
Stone and wash them,

And the final chorus of praise, criticism of the presentation of the hero seems irrelevant; it is only a mirror blemish. Although we may not get from *Murder in the Cathedral* the experience we normally look for in the play, the experience we do get cannot be called anything but dramatic. We identify ourselves with the women of the chorus; their experience communicates itself to us, and gives us the feeling we have been not spectators but sharers in a mystery. We live through a peripeitia, we experience a great discovery. We pass with them through horror, out of boredom into glory. Once again Mr. Eliot has in fact gone back in order to go forward. He has returned to the most primitive form of tragedy. The model is the earlier plays of Aeschylus in which as Prof. Murray says,

There is one great situation, in which the poet steepers our  
Minds, with at most one or two sudden flashes of action  
Passing over it. Woman perused by the lust of unloved man,  
The Savior of mankind nailed eternally to rock, the suspense  
Of a great people expecting and receiving the news of  
Defeat in war, the agony of a besieged city—these are all the  
Kind of subject that might be treated in a simple choral dance  
With nothing but words and music. At most Aeschylus,  
Transforming the *Molpe* into drama adds a brief flash of action:  
In the *Supplies* the rescue of the woman, in the Prometheus  
The binding in the prologue and the casting into Hell at the  
End, in the *Seven* the scene where Eteocles goes out to kill his  
Brother and to die. In the *Persae* there is a steady tension  
Throughout, diversified by the entrance of the Messenger,  
The evocation of Darius, and the entry of Xerxes, but the  
But true situation is never changed, only seen from different angles.

When prof. Murray sums up Greek Tragedy in a sentence his words could be applied to *Murder in the Cathedral* : “normally the play portrayed some traditional story which was treated as the *Aition* or origin of some exciting religious practice.” Mr. Eliot invited to write a play for Canterbury, have begun where the earliest Greek Dramatist would have begun, with the present fact: the veneration paid to the martyr by the church for

which he died. His play leads to his last words : “Blessed Thomas pray for us”. The poor women of the Chorus are prototypes of all those who, throughout the ages, will come to implore help from the hero-saint. They are the worshipers at the shrine, the pilgrims to Canterbury, the Christian equivalent of the ritual mourners weeping for the dead God or Hero. But the play transcends its origin and occasion, and the chorus becomes humanity, confronted by the mystery of iniquity and the mystery of holiness.

*Murder in the Cathedral* is like *Ash Wednesday* in its choice of Christian theme, its employment of liturgical material: the introits and vesicles for the three days after Christmas, Dies Irae, the TeDeum; and most of all in the contrast between the idea of sanctity, which is at the center, and the reality of experience of common unsanctified humanity out of which both poem and play arise. But the symbolic figures of *Ash Wednesday*, by whom the idea of blessedness is communicated—the lady of Silences and the veiled sisters, existing in a world of dream and vision—are more satisfying to the imagination than Thomas, who has to endure the hard, clear light of the stage. Perhaps Mr. Eliot tried too much with Thomas, and more simple and conventional treatment of the central figure would have been less discordant with the truth and grandeur of the choruses.

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## 4.6 Characterisation

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Some critics have claimed that the almost total focus on one main character brought a concentration more suited to a poem than a play. The other ‘lives’, it is argued, have no real motivation or individuality, subordinated as they are to Thomas, some speaking only by virtue of his ventriloquism. This line of argument leads to a fundamental rejection of the play as lacking dramatic vitality. To answer such criticism it is appropriate to bear in mind one of the influences suggested by the form of part I of the play. In the mortality play tradition, universal heroes were common, and personalised forces from within themselves often beset these. But all Eliot’s characters have more intrinsic interest than some critics have allowed.

The groups in *Murder in the Cathedral* are partly medieval common people, clergy and nobility; they are also reminders of the power groups of 1935, with the ordinary folk squeezed by the confrontation. The characters therefore represent social patterns, each interdependent and in conflict.

All the characters retain an essentially human aspect : the Women Of The Chorus bear the burden of the age and experience; the priests are terrified and protective; the Tempters-knights join in a hideous fellowship; and we enter the thoughts and hearts of Thomas at the climax of his life. As people the characters intensify Thomas’ spiritual dilemma in a convincingly naturalistic way: the priest insist on his being their pastoral

leader, while the women react emotionally to his disturbing presence.

The women and Thomas are linked but are contrasted in their response to the assertion of God's purpose; the heroic and extra-ordinary saint set off against everyday; suffering humanity. The twin poles of sensibility are revealed one aware of the spiritual dimension of life, the other unaware and needing enlightenment. In spiritual awareness in lowest level is inhabited by the Tempters and the Knights; the Chorus achieves personal awareness; and Thomas attains full understanding.

The Tempters and Knights linked in a significance: Four Tempters tempt Thomas in part I, while in part II Four Knights tempted the audience to deny the spiritual truth of Thomas' sacrifice. The representatives of worldly pleasure and political power never understand the central protagonist, and the close of the play is reiterating their normal everyday life to their own satisfaction. Their function relation to martyrdom, leading to it, trying to protect, or carrying out the murder, largely defines all indeed the minor characters of the play, the Messengers, the Tempters, the Priests and the Knights. Nevertheless, the characters between each group are carefully individualized.

#### **Thomas :**

Thomas' earlier life of political power and the fruits of office are presented in retrospect as present of his present spiritual development. The playwright's concentration upon Thomas' internal debate during his last days brought freshness to what had become a legend. The character of the disappointed some critics who saw the characterization as "thin" or too symbolic. The spiritual predicament was sometimes appreciated while the personality was rejected as 'flat' or even unconvincing. Others point out Thomas' lack of human commitment. Some have called Thomas a 'pig', but such mistakenly underestimate the intensity of Thomas' challenge. Conflicts do not necessarily lack force because we have no personal relationship to sustain our interest. Thomas struggle to overcome his spiritual pride may be an exceptional human experience, but it is seen in dramatic terms, moving through complacency, surprise, humility and courage before the final triumph. Further, the dramatic effectiveness of the play does not diminish when our attention is transferred from the hero's choice to the response of the chorus. The play is not about the loneliness of the hero; it is about the impact of the hero on everyday life. There is a risk in any character to explore the virtue of his own choices, but Thomas' proud confidence is less priggishness than articulate self-awareness.

Thomas' first Temptation involves a rejection of that sensual enjoyment of life, which in some measure would seem a normal human indulgence. The second and third temptations are recognized historical and political possibilities facing Thomas then and

many people since. But his deliberate setting aside of worldly rewards does not endear him to audiences of materialistic persuasion.

Thomas' confident mockery of the intruders dramatically builds his confidence to the point where the Fourth temptation becomes personally as well as theatrically real. The emotions in Thomas, the Priests and the Knights are real too. If the Wheel symbolizes the world of everyday cares and ambition, then Thomas at the beginning of the action is still subject to its movement. Before the action ends he comes to the 'still point' at the center of the Wheel, at one with God. Identification with God is a martyr saint's prerogative, to escape beyond ordinary existence and the compromises of 'living and partly living'. Love, the gratification of senses, power, politics, and the intellectual are superfluous to the single-minded martyr.

The critic Francis Ferguson sees Thomas as a version of the scapegoat of ancient religions, combined with the Sophoclean tragic hero and the Christian martyr-saint. He also sees Thomas as a sort of Stage manager, a director of all climaxes and stage effects central to the play. Thomas is also lecturer, philosopher, the theologian and Teacher, interpreting reality as vanity in order to achieve a higher plane of understanding.

Lastly, it is impossible that the author finds some affinity with his protagonist with their common Christian name. The poet had reaffirmed his Christianity in the Anglican Church only a few years before, and his celebration of the saint confirmed his allegiance. Both poet and hero experienced an absence from their home countries for a number of years, and in both there is a sense of lonely but triumphant struggle.

### **The Chorus :**

The play proves what a useful device the Chorus can be in the modern theatre. In subsequent plays Eliot attempted more concealed version of the Chorus less successfully. The chorus has several functions. It contrasts with Thomas's elevated concerns, represents humanity, embodies the theme, acts as commentator and observer creates mood and atmosphere and sustain much of the narrative. The affirmative transfiguration of the chorus in part II is the true thematic climax of the play.

The chorus is Greek in form and function, adding to the ritualistic element in the play but its prominent role as intermediators makes it seem less than stylized. The emotions expressed by the chorus are a 'Barometer of Thomas' progress. In the end the women of Canterbury recognize their weakness as a sin, and realize that evil exists but that it may be defeated. Their responses parallel Thomas' experience without his awareness and courage but without them Thomas would not work out his own crucial decisions. Without Thomas they would put up with tyrannical oppression and settle for a quite

life. At the opening we see that the women of Canterbury are reluctant to be involved, preferring unobtrusive acceptance of their limited daily round. But the saint compels them to a commitment to faith. The early fears and vacillations make them more human and not less sympathetic. The seasons, the harvest, the problems of everyday life are preferable to the grander challenges involved in the conflict of Archbishop and King. Ultimately they are brought to recognition that they too are an integral part of the design of human and divine relationships. Their salvation is achieved by witnessing, by nothing more dynamic by being there and saying 'Yes'. Thomas' knowledge for the need for God is transferred to them.

Critics have argued that the women do not do enough to gain this wisdom for themselves, and do not illuminate their experience with real understanding. Then even use Thomas' own language to express their enlightenment at the end. But their joint anonymity enables them to cross the century, medieval and modern, representative of the modern human level of reality, as well as acting as observers in the fashion of a Greek Chorus. They constitute the touchstone of the play, the past, present, future witness of the event. We live through their reactions and participate in the drama through them. In history they represent all humanity faced with an unpalatable and unlooked-for contemporary situation, and in religious terms a development from the compromises of accepting second-best to some identification with Thomas' vision. The journey is conveyed in six long Choruses, and their experience is expressed in non-Christian, non-theological terms. It seems excessive to ask for even more dramatically from the chorus, as if it were possible to incorporate developments more proper to an individual character.

### **The Priests :**

The Priests represent an element more contemporarily medieval than the Chorus. They have a role to play in Church affairs, subordinate to the archbishop from whom they get some understanding of profounder spiritual levels. Their behaviour suggests a partial role, and sensing dangers attendant upon the situation they are prepared to take avoiding action.

At the start the priests are filled with fear, and view their Archbishop challenging return with caution rather than with zeal. They are closest to Thomas, yet even they are striving for they know not what. They are slow to respond to Thomas' guidance and example, but they come to learn the way forward.

Characterization, though limited, nevertheless differentiates the three priests quite clearly. The first priest is the oldest of the three, equable, easy-going and kindly. The second priest is more assertive and eager, a younger cleric anxious to prove his loyalty. The Third Priest is quietest of the three, meditative, more profound in his religion commitment, and it is he who assesses the Knights for us.

## **Tempters and Knights :**

Becket realizes his divine destiny at the expense of human identity, and the further he moves away by resisting temptation the more remote he apparently becomes in the eyes of the ordinary people. But his temptations give way to *ours* so that the Knights amusingly and powerfully embody first by the Tempters and the necessities of this world subsequently. Their shared impulse to challenge and tempt makes the two quartets by the same actors sensible and meaningful. The Knights recapitulate the spirit and logic of the Tempters, and the two groups are linked by tone and motivation. The first tempter has a commitment to life at its immediate and physical level, and offering no reasons beyond sensual enjoyment and the good things of life he can only act as Chairman for the Knights. The Second Tempters offer temporal power on behalf of good causes, and has no wish to alter the social pattern, being quite willing to make his way within the established order; as Knight he justifies the murder securing 'social justice'. The Third argues for rebellion to defeat the King's autocracy, and sets out to achieve a radical restructuring and subsequent change; as King then he is able to argue his own individual disinterestedness. The Fourth Tempter is different in kind from the others, an egoistical assertion of Thomas' own spiritual pride; he will embrace martyrdom to achieve spiritual power over mankind forever. As a Knight he argues that Thomas embraces his own fate, and that this constituted suicide.

## **The Tempters :**

Thematically the first three Tempters represents a denial of the life of the spirit and so they stress Thomas' personal and political status. In their eyes the Church is power, not spirit and the Knights continue this pressure on the hero, demanding that he accepts *this* world's sovereignty. The first three Temptations, worldly pleasures alliance with the King, and alliance against the King, constitute an exposition of the past, and it has been argued that because they retell what has happened already their contributions lack dramatic force. Stephen Spender in his Fontana Modern Masters book on Eliot has also commented on the ease with which Thomas dismisses the first three Tempters, and he sees them more as embarrassing ghosts in the fashion of the figures from the past in *The Elder Statesman*. Thomas is haunted by these 'urgings', as well as tempted, and this makes the interaction between hero and Tempters highly dramatic.

Drama uses many methods of revealing a characters' heart-searching *Hamlet* has a series of soliloquies; Arthur Miller uses flashbacks in *Death of a Salesman*; Eliot creates allegorical impersonations in the medieval fashion to project the Four Temptations. It is mistaken to make too much of E.Martin Browne's comment that we should see the Temptations as 'figments' of Thomas' imaginations. They are imagined in one sense, but

morality play figures have a complex life, combining both inner and outer characteristics. The Tempters mark then stages of Thomas' purification with challenges of great variety and enjoyable vivacity.

**The First Tempter :** The favouritism of the King had ensured Thomas' full indulgence in the good life, the sweets of office, the perquisites of being one of the important people. *L'homme moyen sensuel* comes into his own. The Tempter urges Thomas to take what the world offers to those blessed with favour. At worst sensuality or at best high living would be attractive to most of the audience, but they are also forced to realize that the First Tempter is telling Thomas to take the easy way out and to mind responsibilities. Denial is made easy for Thomas because this temptation looks back to a life he has long left behind.

**The Second Tempter :** This temptation is more cunningly provoking to Thomas than is often considered. The renewal of friendship with the King and assumption of Chancellorship would allow Thomas to do a great deal for suffering humanity. It is the subtlest of the first Three Temptations, since the wielding of Temporal power is given a Christian twist :

Rule for the good of the better cause.

This is carefully judged challenge; for the Tempter is arguing that Thomas has only to give way on a minor point in order to achieve virtuous objectives :

Real power

Is purchased at price of a certain submission

Several twentieth century problems are hinted at here : the relationship of the individual to the State, the balance between Church and Government power and, above all, the need to undertake dubious projects for laudable ends.

**The Third Tempter :** The Third Tempter offers another version of temporal power, a combination of Church and People to overthrow tyranny. Thomas still speaks as a loyal subject and condemns an alliance of factions, against central authority, however 'popular' the rebellion may be. This, then, the least engaging of the Temptations, since it offers only political maneuvers in a struggle for power. If Thomas has overcome the temptation of a worldly power for he is hardly likely to ally himself with the self-interested barons. A man who has accepted the higher authority of God rejects the machination of the new coalition leading to insurrection against the King.

**The Fourth Tempter :** The Fourth Tempter is less a shadowy from external forces, a haunting from the past, than a Mephistopheles working through a man's most vulnerable weakness to gain evil possession. Seemingly the would-be martyr cannot achieve glory without sin. This temptation is terrifying mirror image of Thomas himself, a creature relishing the consequences of martyrdom. The Fourth Tempter is the False Thomas. Spiritual aspiration confronts him insidiously with a sinful version of his own desires. Thomas'



celebration of his own superior knowledge of suffering and action is revealed as tainted by the Tempter's mockery. Spiritual pride is now seen to be trap. The elucidation of this Temptation is found in Thomas' Sermon.

### **The Knights :**

The knights have a group identity, a comic burlesque act. Each has an individual style rather than differentiation of character. They are a gang of murderers, killing out of policy, which gives them a bloodthirsty drive without personal motivation. They do not matter as people, revealing the dedicated brutality of a totalitarian state of 1930s. The deed seems less the murder of a man by other men than a symbolic, ritual act, although Eliot does give them names in the Apology. Their lack of personality and of personal feelings their subjugation to ideas make a point about the possibility of men losing their humanity.

One of the great novelities of the play is the introduction of a clever satire after a stylized murder. Ashley Dukes of the Mercury theatre warned against the Knights' Apology to become comic in an obvious way. They take themselves seriously, and for all their unconscious humour they are still instruments of evil.

The Knights, in effect, argue that the Church should subordinate itself to the secular powers of the State. In advancing their various arguments in the Apology the Knights reveal their dramatic and thematic link to the Tempters in Part I. It is the audience who are being tempted now, asked to accept the worldly viewpoint implicit in the knights' version of Thomas' death. Ironically, despite their belief in their course of action they too serve God's purpose; taking 'action' they 'suffer' an all-powerful design.

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## **4.7 Verse Drama**

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### **(a) The Choice of Verse :**

The prime justification for using verse in drama is that it will achieve more than prose. In 1936 Eliot claimed that verse drama gave more complete experience than the 'abstraction of prose implying that the dialogue of the latter communicated only at a simple level. The playwright shouldn't think of poetry as something added. Verse enabled him to orchestrate the drama like a piece of music. Action and plot captivate audiences, but a pattern-underlying plot should also move them where deeper, non-articulated levels of feeling may be tapped. Verse forms, rhythms, language and imagery intensify dramatic situation, dialogue and motivation.

Another poet Christopher Hassall noted later in 1948 that playwrights have become dissatisfied with the surface of things, and so realistic character and action were seen as inadequate pictures. Verse and Language were to provide the means for deeper

interpretation of life. Eliot reviewed in 1935 choices in his essay 'Poetry And Drama' (1951). Obviously in *Murder in the Cathedral* he could not use language of the twelfth century, either Anglo-Saxon or Norman French. The language had to be lively enough to concentrate the attention of a modern audience and yet convincing enough to take them back to a distance historical event. Since he wanted to draw a contemporary moral for the material the last effect he wanted was an archaic distancing. Eliot felt he had to avoid the Shakespearean echo, which had dogged nineteenth-century verse-dramatists, largely attributable in Eliot's view to the use of iambic pentameter blank verse. The basic verse form Eliot adopted was that of *Everyman*, the English Morality play, which offered the additionally useful effects of alliteration and occasional rhyme. The most prominent meter in Eliot's play is a four-stress line, building up through similar, parallel units of contrasting or balanced phrasing bound together by alliteration (I. 364-7).

This effect is a development of one employed by Eliot in his earlier poems like 'The Wasteland'. The colloquial and poetic are interwoven to create tension between spiritual awareness and everyday realities.

Changes of rhythm prepare listeners for each new kind of response or variation in emotion. The First Tempter's lightly tripling abstractions contrast with the heavier kind found in Thomas' anticipatory. 'For a little time the hungry hawk' speech (I. 255-9). Couplets with double rhymes produce emphasis, derision and aggression. A different kind of emphasis comes from the Third Tempter's removal of the definite article from his summary of the political situation, giving it the air of an irrefutable proposition, which is quite spurious. The tetrameters are forceful and insistent.

Long lines precede shorter ones, as in the opening contrast between the broad poetic movements of the Chorus' questioning of their unease, and the agitated repetitions of the Priests' (I. 42-8, 51-2).

The play is enriched by the development of echoes and repetitions which bind and advance interpretative meaning in a challenging way. The most significant and extended example of the technique is found in the Fourth Tempter's parody of Thomas' centrally important First speech (I. 207-17 and 591-9). In contrast to the Tempter's mockery of Thomas' confident abstractions the Chorus use longer lines descriptive everyday reality given a nightmare quality (I. 600-1).

The intellectual challenge of the Tempter is intensified by the sensuous vividness of the alarm of the Women, by the simple, direct language and flatness of tone; a thoughtful formality is immediately matched by images from daily life. Yet even the key profundities of the 'You know and do not know' passage becomes a refrain that catches the ear because of and in spite of the intricated phrasing. The variously exciting modes of verse are interesting in themselves, but they are also significantly appropriate to speaker and

subjectmatter. Eliot makes verse and imagery serve his dramatis purpose. The simple doggerel of the Knights in unison presents their united intension and their lack of separate personalities (II.353-6).

Like Old Vice, a farcical attendant upon the devil in the medieval morality plays, the vulgar Knights at times are presented humourously in the exaggerated forms of comic variety theatre; at other times they assume the spurious *bonhomie* of the political rally. The colloquial Apologoy deliberately breaks the surface of the play, and this seems to have posed problems for some critics. The Apology acts in the fashion of Brechtian 'alientation', shocking for a purpose, to distance the audience from their emotional response to the preceding action.

Rhyming tetrameters are used to pose Thomas' retorts to the Tempters' taunts, and couplets abound (I. 461-4). Thomas responds to the agonized Chorus with the resolute prepositions rhymed neatly in couplets :

Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain ;  
Temptation shall not come in this kind again.  
The last temptation is the greatest treason :  
To do the right deed for the wrong reason. (I. 665-8)

The verse of the Chorus is most verified, reflecting its many purposes. Free flowing lines of different lengths build atmospheric description (I. 9-11). A more insistent rhythm emphasizes the natures of the daily round (I. 31-3). Beneath the familiar there is unease. The longest lines reflect panic, the repetition of power of powerful verbs adding to the terror (II. 422). Passages of powerful emotions are counter pointed with liturgy, The *TeDeum* (II. 628-50) and the *Dies Irae* (II. 279-309), while introits accompany the processional opening of Part II.

In such a variety of effects lay a part of Eliot's hope that verse would achieve more than prose. He showed too that he could differentiate character in verse. The Tempters for instance use a kind of clipped economy of expression, which gives their lines a common challenging tone, and yet they are also established as individuals. The First Tempter is characterized by flights of lyrical poetry; the Second Tempters empathetic tone derives from an insistent rhythmic verse full of alliteration; the Third tempter favoured 'man to man' approach is helped by colloquial intonation; and the Fourth parodies Thomas' own voice and language. Unadorned the verse can be realistically descriptive, as in the messenger's account of the people's welcome to Thomas on his return (I. 88-90). Here Eliot is at his most Shakespearean. The other passages are suitably realistic as in the description of merchant and labourer (I. 27-8). Homely realism rapidly but smoothly gravitates to the elevated questioning of fear and doubt (I. 36-9). When the Tempters combine in their own chorus towards the end of Part I the short lines of abstractions

leads to lists of endeavour and effort which are mocked as meaningless (I. 605-10). Questions give simple happenings a threatening effect in a single long line describing rain and wind (I. 626). Long lines also elevate humble action in the final affirmation (II. 625).

Prose is used to bring the play back to our world, down to earth, in the Apology and the Sermon, both of them adopting public forms of address, defensive and threatening in the former, intimate and interpretative in the latter. A sermon is exactly right in terms of the plays setting and hero, and also corresponds usefully to the dramatic device of soliloquy. The prose gives audiences' ears a pause from the insistent and powerful rhythms of the verse, and offers explanations, one true and one false, of the central event.

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## 4.8 Questions

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1. Examine the character of Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral*. Do you think the character acquires dramatic significance through conflict and change ?
2. What function do women of Canterbury perform in *Murder in the Cathedral*?
3. Consider the dramatic significance of the Knights' speeches after the murder of Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral*.

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## **UNIT 5 □ Samuel Beckett : Waiting For Godot**

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### **STRUCTURE**

- 5.0 Brief life of Samuel Beckett**
- 5.1 Background**
- 5.2 Critical Analysis of Waiting for Godot**
- 5.3 Act 1 : Arrival of Pozzo and Lucky**
- 5.4 Act 1 : Lucky's Dance and Speech**
- 5.5 Act 1 : Departure of Pozzo and Lucky : Vladimir and Estragon Alone**
- 5.6 Act 2 : Arrival of Pozzo and Lucky**
- 5.7 The Absurdity of the world**
  - 5.7.1 The Trap of Religion**
  - 5.7.2 The Trap of Reason**
- 5.8 Memory and Time**
- 5.9 An approach to the play-Waiting for Godot**

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### **5.0 Brief life of Samuel Beckett**

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Samuel Beckett was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1906, the second son of comfortable middle-class parents who were a part of the Protestant minority in a predominantly Catholic society. He was provided with an excellent education, graduating from Trinity College, Dublin, with a major emphasis in French and Italian. His first job was as a teacher in English in the Ecole Normale Superieure in Paris. In 1931, he returned to Ireland as a lecturer in French literature, and he received his master's degree in French from Dublin and subsequently returned to Paris as a teacher in 1932. He has made Paris his home since that time, except for visits abroad and a retreat to the Unoccupied Zone in Vichy, France, during 1942-44.

Beckett found teaching uncogent to his creative activities and soon turned all of his attention to writing. During the 1930s and 1940s, his writing consisted of critical studies (Proust and others), poems, and two novels (Murphy and Watt), all written in English. In the late 1940s, he changed from writing in English to writing in French. Part of the reason for this was his basic rejection of Ireland as his homeland. When asked why

he found Ireland uncongenial, he offered the same explanation that has been given by other famous Irish expatriates, such as Sean O' Casey and James Joyce. He could not tolerate the strict censorship of so many aspects of life, especially the arbitrary censoring of so many works of literature by the Catholic clergy. In addition, the political situation created an oppressive anti-intellectualism. Even after he became famous, he refused to allow some of his plays to be presented in Ireland. In 1958, during the International Theatre Festival in Dublin, a play of his compatriot O' Casey was banned and Beckett, in protest, withdrew his plays, which have not been seen in Ireland since then.

Since the major portion of his dramas were composed in French and first presented in Paris, many critics find difficulty in classifying Beckett's works : should he be considered a French or an Irish writer? The nature of his characters, even when named Vladimir and Estragon, seems to be more characteristically Irish than any other nationality. Essentially, it should be a moot question because Beckett, when composing in French, was his own translator into English and vice-versa. Thus his works do not suffer from another translator's tempering with them, and his great plays now belong to the realm of world literature.

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## 5.1 Background

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The philosopher Theodor Adorno, characterizing *Endgame*, spoke of the unfolding of an historical moment....Since the Second World War, everything, even culture, apparently reviving, is in fact in ruins, without knowing it: humanity vegetates, going on crawling after events that even the survivors cannot survive, on the heap of ruins'. Adorno's perception applies equally well to the rest of Beckett's fictions. What Beckett offers, through his various characters and landscape, is a vision of the collapse and decay of western culture and society.

The vision has its immediate historical origins, but it belongs also within a tradition. Beckett's work and perceptions fall clearly within the ambit of the *theater* of the absurd. Absurd drama was first launched on the horrified Parisian public in 1898 with the first brief stage appearance of Alfred Jarry's *King Ubu*, an obscenely comic caricature of the bourgeois violence, rapacity and bad faith which in Jarry's view were tearing apart the moral fabric of his world. It was preserved and developed in the thirties by Antonin Artaud, creator of the Theatre of Cruelty and the co-founder of the Theatre of Alfred Jarry, and proliferated from the fifties and the sixties through the work of Beckett, Ionesco and Boris Vian, the latter a cult figure of 1968 student revolt. All these writers take as their subject the hollowness, decadence and fundamental absurdity of the western world. Their drama pierces through the tissue of lies on which western man has built

his heroic self-image and presents in its place the end of the civilized illusion, the end of civilization and the end of the hero. It is the language of this culture that has created and “perpetuated its lies ; and the aim of absurd drama is to tear language apart, until it discloses its deceptions.

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## **5.2 Critical analysis of Waiting for Godot**

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### **ACT 1 : VLADIMIR AND ESTRAGON**

This rising curtain exposes a landscape that is strange and alien. It most resembles some strange people in outer space with its haunting and brooding sense of despair. A country road or an actual lonely road is the main setting, and there is a single tree. We know there is a ditch on the other side of the road because immediately Estragon tells Vladimir that he slept last night in the ditch. The loneliness and the isolation of the setting set the tone for the play. The idea of a road implies a journey, a movement, a purpose to life, but we see, instead, two deserted, isolated figures with no place to go and with no journey to look forward to. These figures are dressed in rags and tatters, clothes that would be worn by two tramps in an old, second-rate burlesque production. Thus the setting and the clothing make an ominous comment before we are too far into the drama.

The play opens with Estragon involved in a tremendous struggle—but not a struggle of a highly metaphysical nature; instead, it is a physical struggle to get his stuck boot off his sore foot. The struggle has literally exhausted him, and he gives up the struggle with the opening words of the play : “Nothing to be done” (emphasis ours). Vladimir repeats Estragon’s words two more times in the next moments of the play, and variations of this phrase become one of the central statements of the drama. The phrase is innocent enough in itself and obviously directed toward a specific struggle—the removal of the boot. But as frustrating as the boot is, this is still a minor concern when compared to what Estragon and Vladimir are to do with the problem of waiting for Godot. In response to Estragon’s struggle with his foot, Vladimir ignores the immediate physical problem but agrees with Estragon metaphysically that there is “nothing to be done,” even though he has not “yet tried everything”.

Thus the two opening speeches, innocent and simple enough in themselves, set the tone for the entire drama. The words carry a foreboding overtone, which will be later, associated with the word “appalled,” or as Vladimir calls it, “AP-PALLED,” and also the two tramps’ inability to laugh.

After the opening words, we find that the two tramps are linked to each other in some undefined, ambiguous way. Vladimir greets Estragon with the comment “I thought

you were gone forever,” and since they are “together again at last,” they will “have to celebrate.” Vladimir then discovers that Estragon spend the night “in a ditch...over there” and that he was beaten by “the same lot as usual.” This reference to be a beaten man in a ditch carries overtones of other matters, but cannot be definitely correlated. For example, this could be oblique reference to the biblical story of the Good Samaritan who finds a man beaten, robbed; and thrown into a ditch and rescues him. But no Good Samaritan has come to Estragon’s rescue. Instead, he has apparently spent the entire night alone in the ditch, which men as that both of them are, as their clothes indicate, in the most extreme, impoverished condition that they have even known.

Estragon remains concerned with his boots; Vladimir, however, is extremely impatient and finds the conversation about the boots to be profitless. He turns the conversation to more abstract matters. Very early in the play, then, the difference between the two tramps is established; Estragon is concerned about immediate, practical problems—the removal of his boots, the beating, and now his aching foot; Vladimir, in contrast, laments the general nature of their sufferings by remembering better days that used to be. Whereas Estragon’s foot hurts, Vladimir is concerned with suffering of a different nature.

The philosophical concept of the nature of suffering is first introduced here by the contrasting physical ailments of each character: Estragon has sore feet which hurt him, and Vladimir has some type of painful urinary infection which causes him to suffer; one character hurts and the other one suffers. Ultimately, the physical disabilities characterize the two men (an aching foot is easier to locate and describe than is a painful urinary infection) and also symbolize the various spiritual disabilities of the two characters.

Vladimir’s thoughts shift from his urinary problems to the biblical concept of “Hope deferred maketh the something sick...” but he is unable to complete the proverb. The proverb fits Vladimir and Estragon’s condition perfectly since we will see them in a state of sickness of heart; their hopes are constantly deferred as they continually wait for Godot, and their desires are never fulfilled since Godot never arrives. Vladimir then concludes, as did Estragon: “Nothing to be done”.

Estragon has not gotten his boot off, and he looks inside it to see what was causing the difficulty. Vladimir then chastises Estragon for one of man’s most common faults: blaming one’s boots for the faults of one’s foot. This accusation, of course, refers to the tendency of all of mankind to blame any external thing—boots, society, circumstances, etc.—for deficiencies in one’s own nature. It is easier for Estragon to blame the boots for his aching feet than to blame his own feet.

The idea of Estragon’s foot hurting and Vladimir’s suffering, combined with their appalling human condition, causes Vladimir to realize again that there is “nothing to be done”.



This suffering and lack of hope turn Vladimir's thoughts to the suffering of the two thieves on the cross and their lack of hope. Then from the Old Testament proverb about hope, Vladimir's thoughts turn to the New Testament and the possibility of hope expressed in the story of Christ and the two thieves on the cross. There were two thieves, as there were now two tramps, and one of the thieves was saved; therefore may be there may be hope for either Vladimir or Estragon if they repent—but there is nothing to repent of, except being born. This remark causes “Vladimir to break into hearty laugh which he immediately stifles,” and he reminds Estragon that “one daren't even laugh any more”; one may “merely smile.” This comment is another early indication of the seriousness of their condition. Vladimir's apprehension over laughing suggests that they both have a nagging awareness of the precariousness and insecurity of their condition, a condition that extends beyond their physical concerns.

In the discussion of the thieves, Estragon is unable to participate fully because he can't remember the details. In frustration, Vladimir yells to Estragon: “Come on...return the ball can't you, once in a way ?” Vladimir's complaint is descriptive of much of the dialogue in the remainder of the play; it is very much like the two people playing a game with one another and one is unable to keep the ball in play. Estragon constantly fails to “keep the ball in play”; that is, throughout the drama, he unable to sustain his end over the conversation. Even in response to the matter of being saved “from hell” or “from death,” Estragon merely replies, “Well what of it?” Therefore, even if they were to repent, Estragon can't understand what they might be saved from, who their savior would be, and, furthermore, why the four Gospels differ so significantly. The discussion is brought firmly to a close with Estragon's pronouncement: “People are bloody ignorant apes.”

From this discussion, the two tramps confront the central problem of the play, Estragon looks about the bleak, desolate landscape and tells Vladimir: “Let's go.” The recurring thematic refrain is then put forth: they can't leave because they are “waiting for Godot.” They are not sure they are in the right place; they are not sure they are here on the correct day; they are not sure what day of this week it is (maybe it is yesterday); they think they were to meet Godot on Saturday, but if today is Saturday, is it the right Saturday ? At least, they are fairly certain that they were to meet by a tree, and there is only one tree on the horizon, but it could be either a bush or a dead tree. The tree, whatever its symbolic value (the cross, the hanging tree, spring's renewal), is a rather pathetic specimen and cannot be a very hopeful sign. Completely frustrated, they resign themselves to waiting. Vladimir paces, and Estraton sleeps.

Suddenly, Vladimir, feeling lonely, awakens Estragon, who awakens from his dream with a start. Estragon wants to tell about his dream (or nightmare), but Vladimir refuses to listen to it. Estragon's nightmare, even without its subject being revealed, symbolizes

the various fears that these tramps feel in this alienated world. Vladimir's refusal to listen suggests his fear and apprehension of all of life and of certain things that are best left unsaid. Estragon, then, unable to tell about his nightmare, tries to tell a joke about an Englishman in a brothel. Again Vladimir refuses to listen and walks off.

Estragon's attempt to tell his nightmare and then his attempt to tell his joke about the Englishman—a story that is never finished—represent an effort to pass the time while the two are waiting for Godot. Since they have been waiting and will be waiting for an indeterminate time, the essential problem is what to do with one's life while waiting, how to pass the time while waiting.

When Vladimir returns, the two embrace and then they try to decide what they are going to do while waiting. During the embrace, the tender, fraternal rapport of the moment is suddenly broken by Estragon's mundane observation that Vladimir smells of garlic. This technique is typical of Beckett's method of deflating man's pretensions by allowing the absurd and the vulgar to dominate the action.

The eternal question returns: what to do while waiting? Estragon suggests that perhaps they could hang themselves. That would certainly put an end to their waiting. Hanging also has another incentive: it would excite them sexually and cause each to have an erection and ejaculation. But the matter of hanging creates some problems. Vladimir should hang himself first because he is the heaviest. If the straggly tree does not break under Vladimir's heavier weight, then it would be strong enough for Estragon's lighter weight. But if Estragon went first, the tree might break when Vladimir tried it, and then Estragon (Gogo) would be dead, and poor Vladimir (Didi) would be alive and completely alone. These considerations are simply too weighty to solve. Man's attempt to solve things rationally bring about all types of difficulties; it is best to do nothing "It's safer." Accordingly, they decide to "wait and see, what [Godot] says," hoping that he, or someone, will make a decision about them or that something will be done for them. They will make no effort to change their rather intolerable and impossible situation, but, instead, they will hope that someone or some objective event will eventually change things for them.

Having resolved to wait for Godot, they then wonder what he might offer them and, even more important, "what exactly did we ask him for?" Whatever it was they asked him for, Godot was equally vague and equivocal in his reply. Maybe he is at home thinking it over, consulting friends, correspondents, banks, etc. The tramps' entire discussion about Godot indicates how little, if indeed anything at all, they know of this Godot. The fact that Vladimir can't remember what they asked of Godot indicates that they are unable to understand their own needs. They rely on someone else to tell them what they need. Similarly, the request and the possible response are discussed in terms of a person requesting a bank loan or some type of financial transaction. A philosophical

question then begins to emerge: how does one related to God ? If he is God, can one enter into a business contract with this person? And if so, where is He ? If Godot (or God) has to consult many outside sources before replying or appearing, then Vladimir and Estragon's condition is not very reassuring. And, if, as it now begins to become obvious. Vladimir and Estragon represent modern man in his relationship with God (Godot), then the modern condition of man is disturbingly precarious.

What, then, is man in this modern world? He is a beggar or a tramp reduced to the direst circumstances: he is lost, not knowing where to turn. He is denied all rights, even the right to laugh :

Estragon : We've no rights anymore?

Vladimir : You'd make me laugh if it wasn't prohibited.

Furthermore, they are reduced to crawling "on [their] hands and knees." Of course, in ancient cultures, man always approached a deity on his hands and knees. But in Beckett's dramas, a character's physical condition is correlated with his spiritual condition; all outward aspects of the two tramps reflect man's inward condition.

In a feeble attempt to assert their freedom, Estragon murmurs that they are not tied, but his assertion does not carry much conviction. The assertion, however feeble, that they are not tied might suggest man's revolt from God, because as soon as the idea of revolt is verbalized, they immediately heard a noise as though someone is approaching—Godot or God—to chastise them for heresy. They huddle together in fear :

Estragon : You gave me a fright.

Vladimir : I thought it was he.

Estragon : Who?

Vladimir : Godot.

After the discussion of whether or not they are tied has occupied their thoughts. Vladimir gives Estragon their last carrot to eat. Now they have only a turnip left to eat, and these reduced circumstances make it necessary for them to continue to wait for Godot—and possible salvation.

While eating his carrot, Estragon ruminates further about being "tied" or "ti-ed." Even though Vladimir feebly asserts that they are not tied, we noted that they are indeed tied to the idea of waiting. They cannot assets themselves: they have ceased struggling; there is even "no use Wriggling." They are merely two stranded figures on an alien landscape who have given up struggling and are dependent upon waiting for Godot, realizing there is "nothing to be done." Thus, the play opens, and the section closes on the same note : *nothing to be done.*

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### **5.3 Act 1 : Arrival of Pozzo and Lucky**

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As Vladimir and Estragon sit in peaceful resignation to their condition, a loud cry destroys the quietness and terrifies them. They immediately run to hide, huddling together

and “cringing away from the menace.” Suddenly Pozzo and Lucky arrive on the scene. Lucky has a rope around his neck and is being driven forward by Pozzo, who is brandishing a whip. This sudden, surprise entrance lacks only the flair of a drum roll and a band to give the entrance a highly theatrical, circus atmosphere. In the same way that Vladimir and Estragon are parodies of the circus clown or burlesque tramp, we now have the appearance of a character resembling a circus ring-master and his trained animal. Throughout this scene, circus imagery is used to suggest that life itself can be seen as a circus, and one, which will soon be brought to an abrupt end.

Vladimir and Estragon are in awe of the forceful manner in which. Pozzo seems to be in control of Lucky; he seems to absolutely dominate the poor creature. Nothing his omnipotence and authority, they inquire about the possibility of this man’s being Godot. The mere fact that they have to ask, however, emphasizes their ignorance about the identity and true nature of Godot, the entity whom they are waiting for. They can’t even explain Godot to Pozzo :

Vladimir : .....he’s a kind of acquaintance.

Estragon : Personally, I wouldn’t even know him if I saw him.

Throughout the scene, Pozzo conducts himself not only as a ringmaster, but also as person far superior to the two tramps whom he condescends to spend some time with, even though he barely recognizes them as belonging to the same species. Furthermore, Vladimir and Estragon recognize Pozzo’s seeming superiority and are dutifully obedient to him, even after they discover that he is not Godot.

With the arrival of Pozzo and Lucky, we see how two people are *physically* tied to each other. Estragon and Vladimir are tied to each other by abstract bonds and also by their common act of waiting for Godot, but Lucky is literally and physically tied to Pozzo. And whereas Vladimir and Estragon are waiting, Pozzo and Lucky seem to *going*-but where they are going is not stated.

After denying all knowledge of Godot, Pozzo magnanimously decides to rest for a while. Even though Vladimir and Estragon are terribly inferior to him, Pozzo recognizes that they are “human beings none the less....of the same species as Pozzo! Made in God’s image!” Thus, Pozzo recognizes these clowns (tramps) as belonging to the same species, albeit they are very imperfect specimens of the species, and he condescends to rest because he has been travelling for six hours without seeing a soul.

After rather elaborate preparations for setting himself, involving his ordering Lucky to set up a stool and picnic, Pozzo sits down to enjoy a meal of chicken and wine. Vladimir and Estragon being an investigation of Lucky. Pozzo had earlier called the poor fellow “pig” and “hog”. Vladimir, in particular, is appalled by Pozzo’s treatment of Lucky and is quick to discover a running sore on Luck’s neck. The two conclude that Lucky

is a “halfwit...a cretin.” The irony here lies in the levels of humanity which Estragon and Vladimir fail to grasp—that is, Lucky is very much like Pozzo, and he is also very much like the tramps; he is a member of the same species, and his predicament emphasizes the essential oneness of us all.

After Pozzo had finished eating his chicken. Estragon notices the bones lying in the ditch and, to Vladimir’s embarrassment, asks Pozzo if he can have the first right to have the bones. Meanwhile, Vladimir continues to be shocked by Pozzo’s treatment of Lucky. He tries to express his horror over the situation only to be ignored. Vladimir wants to leave, but he is reminded that they must meet Godot.

Pozzo justifies his treatment of Lucky by maintaining that Lucky wants to impress him with his ability to carry things; yet, in reality, Lucky is very bad in that capacity. A basis of any relationship can be seen in Pozzo and Lucky’s relationship, where one person has a desire to dominate and command and the other person craves to be dominated and to be a slave. Pozzo points that the the reverse could have easily been true—that he could have been, in other chance situations, Lucky’s slave.

As Lucky begins to weep upon hearing that he might be sold at the fair and that the world would be a better place without him (“the best thing would be to kill....such creatures”), Pozzo notes that tears in themselves are not unusual: “The tears of the world are a constant quality. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops.” Basically, for Beckett, the misery of human existence will always exist, and man must learn to live with his tears and his misery. For example, when Estragon tries to wipe away Lucky’s tears, Lucky rewards him with a tremendous kick in the shins.

Estragon, Pozzo, and Vladimir talk in circles with images of the circus and the music hall dominating their conversation. Pozzo feeling the need of leaving if he is to keep on his schedule, undertakes a lyrical explanation of “what our twilights can do.” His recitation goes from lyrical enthusiasm about the nature of the gentleness of the “sky at this hour of the day” to a realization that more ominous matters lurk “behind this veil of gentleness and peace” and that, eventually, night “will burst upon us...when we least expect it...that’s how it is on this bitch of an earth.” The seriousness of this speech and its contents are then undermined when Pozzo lets it be known that he was merely delivering a pompous, memorized oration.

Before leaving, Pozzo wishes to express his appreciation to Vladimir and Estragon and wonders if they have any requests of him. Estragon immediately asks for ten francs (or even five, if ten is too much), but Vladimir interrupts and asserts that he and Estragon are not beggars. Pozzo then offers to let Lucky entertain them by dancing, singing, reciting, or thinking. They decide first on dancing and then on thinking.

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## 5.4 Act 1 : Lucky's Dance and Speech

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Lucky's dance is merely a clumsy shuffling, which is a complete disappointment to Vladimir and Estragon. Thus they decide to have Lucky think. They give him his hat, and after protesting Pozzo's brutality, they arrange themselves for Lucky's performance of thinking. It takes the form of a long, seemingly incoherent speech. The speech is delivered as a set piece, yet it is anything but a set piece. Under different directors, this scene can be variously played. For example, Lucky most often speaks directly to the audience with the other characters with his back, while Vladimir and Estragon become more and more agitated as the speech progresses. Often Vladimir and Estragon run forward and try to stop Lucky from continuing his speech. As they try to stop Lucky, he delivers his oration in rapid-fire shouts. At times, Pozzo pulls on Lucky's rope, making it even more difficult to continue with his speech. The frenzied activity on the stage, the rapid delivery of the speech, and the jerking of the rope make it virtually impossible to tell anything at all about the speech and, consequently, emphasize the metaphysical absurdity of the entire performance. Lucky's speech is an incoherent jumble of words which seems to upset Vladimir and Estragon, for sporadically both rise to protest some element of the speech. Therefore, the speech does communicate something to the two tramps or else they would not know to protest. The form of the speech is that of a scholarly, theological address, beginning "Given the existence...of a personal God," but it is actually a parody of this kind of address since the nonsensical and absurd elements are in the foreground and the meaningful aspects of it are totally obscured, as is the God whom Lucky discusses. Here, we have a combination of scholastic, theological terminology along with the absurd and the nonsensical. For example, the use of *qua* (a Latin term meaning "in the function or capacity of") is common in such scholarly addresses but Lucky's repetition of the words as *qua-quaquaqua* creates an absurd, derisive sound, as though God is being ridiculed by a quacking or squawking sound. Furthermore, the speech is filled with various academic sounding words, some real words like *aphathia* (a loss of speech; here it refers to the fact that God from his divine heights now has divine aphasia or a divine silence) and some words like *aphathia* or *athambia* which do not exist (even though *aphathia* is closely aligned to *apathy* and thus becomes another oblique comment on the apathy of God in the Universe). Other absurd terms are used throughout the speech, and there is also a frequent use of words, which sound obscene, interspersed throughout the speech. As an example, the names of the scholars *Fartov* and *Belcher* are obviously created for their vulgarity.

Therefore, the speech is filled with more nonsense than sense-more that is illogical than that which is logical. If, however, we remove the illogical modifiers, irrelevancie

and incomprehensible statements and place them to the side, the essence of the speech is as follows in the left-hand column :

THE ESSENCE OF  
LUCKY'S SPEECH

“Give [acknowledging]  
the existence....

Of a personal God...  
[who exists] outside [of]  
time...  
[and] who...

loves us dearly...  
and [who] suffers...  
with those who...

are plunged in torment...

it is established beyond all  
doubt....

that man...  
that man...

for reasons unknown...  
for reasons unknown...  
for reasons unknown...

[our] labors abandon left  
unfinished...  
abandoned unfinished...

THE IRRELEVANCIES,  
THE ABSURDITIES

as uttered forth in the public  
works of Puncher and Wattmann with  
white bread quaquaquaqu

without extension  
from the heights of divine apathia  
divine athambia divine aphasia  
with some exceptions....  
but time will tell [etc.]  
like the divine Miranda [etc.]  
for reasons unknown, but time  
will tell  
in fire [etc.] [that will] blast  
hell to heaven so blue....so calm [etc.]

all other doubt than that which clings  
to the labors of men that as a result of  
the labors [etc.]  
in spite of the strides of  
Alimentation and defecation  
wastes [etc.]  
no matter what the facts [etc.]  
in spite of the tennis [etc.]  
in spite of the tennis on the  
beard [etc.]

graver still [etc.]  
the skull the skull in Connemara [etc.]

Lucky's speech is an attempt, however futile, to make statement about man and God. Reduced to its essence, the speech is basically as follows :

Acknowledging the existence of a personal God, one who exists  
outside of time and who loves us dearly and who suffers with those

Who are plunged into torment, it is established beyond all doubt that Man, for reasons unknown, has left his labors abandoned, unfinished.

It is significant that the speech ends at this point because man can make certain assumptions about God and create certain hypotheses about God, but man can never come to a logical conclusion about God. One must finish a discourse about God, as Lucky did, by repeating “for reasons unknown...for reasons unknown...” And equally important is the fact that any statement made about God is, by its nature, lost in a maze of irrelevance, absurdity, and incoherence-without an ending. Therefore, man’s final comment about God can amount to nothing more than a bit of garbled noise, which contains no coherent statement and no conclusion. Furthermore, Lucky’s utterances are stopped only after he is physically overpowered by the others.

After the speech, Pozzo tries to receive Lucky, who is emotionally exhausted, completely enervated by his speech. After great difficulty, Pozzo gets Lucky up, and amid protracted adieus, he begins to go, albeit he begins to go the wrong way. Pozzo’s inability to leave suggests man’s reliance upon others and his natural instinct to cling to someone else. But with one final adieu, Pozzo and Lucky depart.

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## **5.5 Act I : Departure of Pozzo and Lucky : Vladimir and Estragon Alone**

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With the departure of Pozzo and Lucky, Vladimir realizes that he is glad that the episode helped pass the time. Constantly the two, are faced with finding some way of passing the time while waiting, even though Estragon philosophically points out that time “would have passed in any case.” Thus the entire episode seemingly has no real significance to them. They return to wondering what they can do now—besides wait for Godot. Since they can do nothing, they decide to make a little conversation about whether or not they had previously known Pozzo and Lucky, but no agreement is reached. Estragon then returns to tending his aching feet.

### **Act 1 : Arrival of Boy Messenger**

Out of nowhere a boy with a message from Mr. Godot appears, but the boy is too frightened to come close to the tramps. They question the boy about his fears and ask him if he has been here before. Suddenly, the boy delivers his message: “Mr Godot told me to tell you he won’t come his evening, but surely tomorrow.” The tramps questions the boy about Mr. Godot and discover that the boy tends the goats for Mr. Godot, that Mr. Godot does not beat him, but that he does beat the boy’s brother, who tends the sheep. Both of the brothers sleep in the hayloft of the barn. The boy then leaves.

The main significance of the arrival of the boy lies in what light he can shed on the figure of Godot. By the way the tramps questions the boy about Godot, we **now** realize



that Vladimir and Estragon know very little, if anything, about Godot. Apparently, Godot keeps sheep and goats and is good to the boy who tends the goats but beats the brother who tends the sheep. The reasons for beating the brother are unknown. If, therefore, Godot is equated with God, then Godot's behavior would suggest an Old Testament God who accepts the offering of one brother (Abel) and rejected the offering of the other boy (Cain). God's rejection of Cain's offering is difficult or impossible to explain. Thus Godot's actions are as incomprehensible as some of the actions of the Old Testament god.

### **Act 1 : Vladimir and Estragon Alone**

After the boy leaves, Vladimir and Estragon are left alone. Night has fallen and the moon risen. The two tramps resolve to leave since there is "nothing to here," but then, hopefully, Vladimir reminds Estragon that the boy said, "Godot was sure to come tomorrow." Thus, they must wait even though nothing is certain. Impulsively, they decide to leave but do not do so.

The first act ends as it began. Estragon is still concerned about his feet and his boots, which he is now carrying. Vladimir reminds Estragon that he can't go barefoot because it's too cold, and Estragon compares his going barefoot with Christ going barefoot. Vladimir can't see the comparison; Christ went barefoot in a warm climate. Yet Estragon is quick to point out that it was precisely because of that warm climate that Christ was crucified quickly, whereas here and now, man, by implication, must suffer for an extended time. The futility of their situation makes Estragon wish for some rope so that he can hang himself. The thought of death reminds him of a time about, fifty years ago when he threw himself in the Rhone River and was "fished out" by Vladimir. This allusion reminds us of the Christian symbols of baptism, cleansing and renewal. Yet the incident occurred fifty years ago, so now it is "all dead and buried." In other words, there is no more hope of baptism and renewal-instead, they must face the coldness and darkness of the world alone.

The first act began with the line "Nothing to be done." Nothing has been done. Now Vladimir and Estragon realize that "nothing is certain," and that "nothing is worthwhile now." Consequently, they decide : "Let's go." But instead, according to the stage directions, "they do not move." The act ends, therefore, with a contradiction between their words and their actions. All they can do now is simply wait.

### **Act 2 : Vladimir and Estragon Alone**

The second act begins almost exactly as the first act did with one exception : there are now four or five leaves on the once barren tree. As in Act 1, Estragon is alone and Vladimir enters, singing some repetitions doggerel about a dog which was bitten

to death because he stole a crust of bread. The repetition of the doggerel is typical of the repetition of the entire drama, and the condition of the dog in the doggerel is similar to the condition of the two tramps. Again, as in Act 1, Vladimir wonders where Estragon spent the night and discovered that Estragon has again been beaten. Thus, the dog in the doggerel was beaten to death, and now we hear that Estragon is suffering from beating. Consequently, the second act begins on a note of death, but one that is doubly ominous.

After a moment, the two tramps are reconciled and embrace each other, pretending that all is right between them. However, Estragon immediately reminds Vladimir that he was singing all the while that he (Estragon) was being beaten. Vladimir can only respond "one is not master of one's moods." Vladimir's remarks characterize the actions of the first act especially where it was evident that the two tramps were not in control of their lives, that they were unable to determine what was going to happen to them.

We now discover part of the reason for Vladimir's singing. He is happy because he slept all night long. The urinary trouble that he had in the first act did not force him to get up during the night and, therefore, he enjoyed a complete night's sleep. But then, if Vladimir had been with Estragon, he would not have let the people beat Estragon. Vladimir assumes a traditional philosophical position, a position that goes back to the writer of the Book of Job in the Old Testament. If Estragon was beaten, it was because he was guilty of doing something wrong and, had Vladimir been with Estragon, he would have stopped him from doing whatever it was that caused Estragon to get a beating. This scene reminds one of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*; there, the main character is punished for a crime and is never able to discover what his crime was and feels increasingly more guilty by asking what he is accused of.

After the two convince each other that they are happy, they then settle down to wait for Godot, and the basic refrain of the drama reemerges: the two tramps can do nothing but wait. Suddenly, Vladimir is aware that "things have changed here since yesterday." The change that Vladimir notices (and note that it is always Vladimir who is the most perceptive of the two, even though in the final analysis he is also incapable of changing their predicament) concerns the tree. Later, the change in the tree will be more fully appreciated, but for now, Estragon is not convinced that it is the same tree; he does not even remember if it is the same tree that they nearly hanged themselves from yesterday. In addition, Estragon has almost forgotten the appearance of Pozzo and Lucky, except for the bone he was given to gnaw on. Blankly, he asks, "all that was yesterday, you say?" For Estragon, time has no real meaning; his only concern with time is that it is something to be used up while waiting for Godot. He dismisses the discussion by pointing out that the world about him is a "muckheap" from which he has never stirred.

The world-as-a-muckheap is a central image in Beckett's work-for-example, in *Endgame*; one of the central images is garbage cans as symbols of the status of man, who belongs on the refuse heap of the world. Estragon solidifies the image of the world-as-a-muckheap by asking Vladimir to tell him about worms.

In contrast to the landscape, or world which they now inhabit. Vladimir reminds Estragon of a time once long ago when they lived in the Macon country and picked grapes for someone whose name he can't remember. But it has been so long ago that Estragon can't remember and can only assert that he "has puked [his] puck of a life away here...in the Cackon country!" The oblique reference to another time and place where apparently grapes (the biblical symbol of fertility) could be harvested contrasts with this barren landscape where they now eat dried tubers of turnips and radishes. If Estragon and Vladimir are representatives of mankind waiting for God to appear to them, then we realize that possibly they are in this barren land because they represent man as fallen man-man who has been cast out of the garden of Eden, man who originally was picking the grapes of God has now incurred the wrath of God, who refuses to appear to them any more.

Vladimir and Estragon make a desperate attempt at conversation in order to make time pass "so we won't think." Their efforts at conversation are staid and useless, and each time after a few meaningless words, they obey the stage directions: *Silence*. This is repeated ten times within the passing of a minute or so-that is, a few meaningless phrases are uttered, followed by "silences." The two contemplate trying to contradict each other, but even that fails. The entire passage is characterized by brooding sense of helplessness and melancholy, The images are those of barren, sterile lifelessness-the falling of leaves, ashes, dead voices, skeletons, corpses, and charnel-houses, etc. all of these images are juxtaposed to the background idea of a once-fertile life "in the Macon country" that can no longer be remembered and the idea that they are constantly involved in the sterile, unprofitable endeavour of waiting for Godot. The entire conversation is absolutely pointless, and yet Estragon responds, "Yes, but now we'll have to find something else." The only effect, then, of their banter was to pass the time.

With nothing else to do, the two tramps are momentarily diverted when Vladimir discovers that the tree, which was "all black and bare" yesterday evening, is now "covered with leaves." This leads to a discussion of whether or not the two tramps are in the same place; after all, it would be impossible for a tree to sprout leaves overnight. Perhaps it has been longer than just yesterday when they were here. Yet Vladimir points out Estragon's wounded leg; that is proof that they were here yesterday.

The confusion about time and place is typical of Beckett's drama. How long the two tramps have been in this particular place can never be determined. The fact that Estragon

has a wound proves nothing because man is eternally wounded in Beckett's dramas and, furthermore, can show proof of his injuries. The leaves on the tree, which earlier was black and bare, astonish Vladimir. It would indeed be a miracle if such an event could occur in a single night, and this would open up all types of opportunities for miracles to occur. But the discussion of a miracle is rejected by Estragon because the leaves have no mystical appearance. They could be a manifestation of spring, or else this could be an entirely different tree. Consequently, their conversation is inconclusive, and we never know if this is the same tree in the same place or not. This confusion is characteristic of Vladimir and Estragon's inability to cope with life.

As Vladimir is trying to prove to Estragon that Pozzo and Lucky were here yesterday, he makes Estragon pull up his trousers so that they can both see the wound which is 'beginning to fester.' This scene is especially significant in the manner that it is staged because the actions of the two tramps are those found in a burlesque comedy house, with Vladimir holding up Estragon's leg while Estragon can hardly keep his balance, and against this background of farcical comedy is the contrasting intellectual idea of the metaphysical and spiritual wounds that man carries about with him.

The wound on Estragon's leg, in turn causes Vladimir to notice that Estragon does not have his boots on. Coincidentally, there is a pair of boots lying on the ground, but Estragon maintains that his boots were black and this pair is brown. Maybe someone came and exchanged boots. Are they the same boots or someone else's boots?

As with the tree, the confusion about the boots is a further indication of the inadequacy of Estragon and Vladimir's logic and reasoning. They are unable to find anything which will help "give us the impression that we exist." The boots were to be objective proof of their particular existence on this particular bit of landscape at their particular time, but in an absurdly tragic manner, they cannot even determine if the boots are the same boots that existed yesterday. They are unable to find within themselves or outside themselves anything which is helpful in establishing their existences. There is no hope within or without. Therefore even the attempt to arrive at a conclusion totally exhausts them, and with the familiar refrain "we are waiting for Godot," they abandon the problem.

But the boots are still there, and Vladimir convinces Estragon to try them on. Even though they are too big, Estragon grudgingly admits that the boots do fit him. Then with his new boots on, Estragon wishes that he could sleep. "He resumes his fatal posture" and to the accompaniment of a lullaby sung by Vladimir, Estragon is soon asleep, only to be awakened shortly by the recurrence of a nightmare. Frightened, Estragon wishes to leave, but Vladimir reminds him that they can't leave because they are "waiting for Godot."

Estragon's assuming the fatal position suggests his complete resignation and despair,

his defeat in the face of such staggering, unsolvable metaphysical problems as the significance of the tree and the mysterious boots. Obviously, too, this is a “return-to-the-womb” situation wherein Estragon can escape from the responsibilities of life. His security in the womb however does not last long because he is awakened by a nightmare about falling. Whether it is a nightmare involving falling from the womb (man’s most traumatic physical experience) or falling from God’s grace (man’s most traumatic spiritual experience), we are never sure.

Suddenly, Estragon can bear no more. He is going and tells Vladimir that he will never see him again. Vladimir doesn’t pay attention, for he has found a hat, Lucky’s hat; and so, in the midst of all these ambiguous physical and philosophical considerations, we have another burlesque interlude. In the tradition of the old burlesque theatre, a tramp (Vladimir) in an old bowler hat discovers another hat on the ground. There follows an exchange-of-hats act between himself and his partner that could be found in many burlesque acts. The hat is apparently the one that Lucky left the day before, during the scene when he was silenced after his speech. The comic exchange begins when Vladimir gives his own hat to Estragon and replaces it with Lucky’s. Estragon then does the same, offering his hat to Vladimir, who replaces it for Lucky’s, and hands Lucky’s hat to Estragon, who replaces it for Vladimir’s and so on until they tire of the interchange. And then there is silence.

Once more the two tramps must pass the time while waiting. They decide to play a game of pretending to be Pozzo and Lucky, but this game lasts only a moment because they think that they hear someone approaching. After a frantic search for some place to hide, they decide that there is no one coming. Vladimir then tells Estragon : “You must have had a vision,” a phrase that is reminiscent of T.S. Eliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, a long poem in which the main character, an ineffectual intellectual of the twentieth century, cannot do anything, much less have the strength to have the visions. Furthermore, visions are associated with people entirely different from these two tramps. To think that they could have a vision is absurd.

One more game is attempted. Remembering Pozzo’s calling Lucky ugly names and recalling the anger and frustration of the master and his slave, they begin a game of name-calling. It is Vladimir who suggests the idea of the game: “Let’s abuse each other.” There follows in rapid succession a series of name-calling :

Vladimir : Moron !

Estragon : Vermin !

Vladimir : Abortion !

Estragon : Morpion !

Vladimir : Sewer-rat !

Estragon : Curate !

Vladimir : Cretin !

After this, they make up, and then they decide to exercise, mutually relieved by the discovery that time flies when one “has fun!”

Vladimir : We could do our exercises.

Estragon : Our movements.

Vladimir : Our elevations.

Estragon : Our relaxations.

Vladimir : Our elongations, [etc., etc.]

The name-calling, the embracing, and the exercising are finally over; they have been no more than futile attempts to pass the time while waiting for Godot, and Estragon is reduced to flailing his first and crying at the top of his voice, “God have pity on me!...On me! On me! Pity! On me!”

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## **5.6 Act 2 : Arrival of Pozzo and Lucky**

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Suddenly and without warning, as in the first act, Pozzo and Lucky come back on the stage. Their arrival puts an end to Vladimir and Estragon’s games. Things have changed significantly for Pozzo and Lucky. The long rope which bound them together is now much shorter, binding them closer together and suggesting that however much might man consider himself from others, ultimately he is bound closer and closer. Furthermore, Pozzo and Lucky are physically changed : Pozzo is blind and Lucky is dumb (i.e. mute) but the entire scene is played without the audience’s knowing that Lucky is dumb. As they enter, staggering under their load, Lucky now carries suitcases filled with sand (symbolically, perhaps, the sands of time). Lucky falls and drags Pozzo down with him.

With the arrival of Pozzo and Lucky, Vladimir and Estragon think that help (“reinforcements”) have arrived from Godot. But they soon realize that it is just Pozzo and Lucky. Estragon wants to leave them, but Vladimir must remind him once again that they cannot go; they are “waiting for Godot.” After some considerations, Vladimir decides that they should help Pozzo and Lucky get up. But Estragon wants to consider an alternative plan. After all, he was wounded by Lucky the day before. Vladimir reminds him, however, that “it is not everyday that we are not needed.” This is one of the most profound comments of the drama. Vladimir realizes that Pozzo’s cries for help were addressed to “all of mankind,” and “at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not.” This statement certainly clarifies the idea that Vladimir and Estragon represent all mankind in its relationship to God (Godot). Realizing this, Vladimir also realizes that man’s fate is to be a part of “the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us.”

Instead of Hamlet's "To be or not to be, that is the question", Vladimir asks, "What are we doing here, that is the question." Again, his problem is more akin to the dilemma of T.S. Eliot's Prufrock (who is also faced with an "overwhelming question": should he marry or not?) then it is to be predicament of Shakespeare's Hamlet. Vladimir concludes : "We [all mankind] are waiting for Godot to come." Hamlet's metaphysical question about existence is reduced to a Prufrockian decision to do nothing but wait.

At the end of Vladimir's speech, Pozzo's call for help loses importance as Vladimir once again asserts his pride in the fact that they have at least kept their appointment to meet Godot; not all people can make such a boast. Vladimir's confusing the metaphysical with the practical anticipates the confused actions that are to immediately follow—that is, Vladimir decides that they should help Pozzo and Lucky get up, and the result is that all four of the men ultimately end up on the ground. Thus their cries for help fall on deaf ears.

The entire scene in which the two tramps try to help two equally distraught figures get up returns the drama to the burlesque house. The scene is a parody of many similar types of scenes found in the burlesque theatres, thus emphasizing again the absurdity of man's actions, or in the words of Estragon: "We are all born mad. Some remain so."

Immediately after the above statement, Estragon leaves off with philosophy and becomes very practical; he wants to know how much Pozzo is willing to pay to be extricated from his position. Meanwhile, Vladimir is concerned with finding something to do to Pozzo, but, as noted above, they all end up in a heap on the ground, and Pozzo, in fear, "extricates himself," then crawls away. This incident also serves as a contrast to Pozzo's action in the first act; there, he was proud and disdainful and asserted himself with aloofness and superiority. Now he has lost all his previous qualities and is simply a pathetic, blind figure crawling about on the ground. Like Job or Sophocles' blind Oedipus, Pozzo seems to suggest that no man's life can be secure since tomorrow might bring incalculable catastrophes.

Lying on the ground, Vladimir and Estragon try to call to Pozzo, who doesn't answer. Then Estragon decides to call him by some other name :

Estragon : ....try [calling] him with other names....It'd pass the time. And we'd be bound to hit on the right one sooner or later.

Vladimir : I tell you his name is Pozzo.

Estragon : We'll soon see. (He reflects.) Abe ! Abe !

Pozzo : Help !

Estragon : Got it is one !

Vladimir : I begin to weary of this motif.

Estragon : Perhaps the other is called Cain. Cain ! Cain !

Pozzo : Help !

Estragon : He's all humanity.

Beckett's use of the names of Abel and Cain stresses the universality of the characters since Pozzo answers to both names. According to some interpretations of the scriptures, all of mankind carries with it both the mark of Cain and the mark of Abel; thus Pozzo can answer to both names because "He's all humanity!"

To pass the time, Estragon suggests that they stand up. They do. Then Estragon suggests once again, "Let's go," only to be reminded once again that they must remain because "we're waiting for Godot."

Since there is nothing else to do, Vladimir and Estragon help Pozzo get up. It is then that they discover that he is blind. In contrast to the Pozzo of the first act, we now see a pathetic figure leaning on the two tramps for physical support and pleading for help because he is blind. For Estragon, there is hope in Pozzo's blindness because the prophet of old, such as the Greek Teiresias, were often blind but could "see into the future," exactly what Estragon hopes Pozzo can do. But there is no hope for Vladimir and Estragon. Carrying through with the Greek imagery, Estragon tries of holding Pozzo, especially since he can't prophesy for them. Pozzo wants to drop him since he and Vladimir "are not caryatids" (caryatids were statues of Greek goddesses used to hold up temples; why Estragon uses this word instead of "telamons," the male equivalent, is confusing).

Because of his blindness, Pozzo has also lost all contact with time. He even refuses to answer questions about what happened yesterday: "The blind have no notice of time." This confusion over time by symptomatic of his changed condition; just as he has lost all contact with life, so also has time lost all significance for him. When Vladimir hears that Lucky is dumb, he inquires, "Since when?" The question incenses Pozzo and causes him to violently reject Vladimir's concern with time: "have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you?" For Pozzo, one day at a time is enough for him to cope with. All he knows know and all that he "sees" now is the misery of life. Life itself is only a brief moment—that flash of light between the darkness of the womb and of the tomb. "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." Thus the grave-digger is the midwife of mankind. Ending on this note of utter despair, Pozzo arouses Lucky and they struggle off to continue on their journey.

## **Act 2 : Desparture of Pozzo and Lucky : Vladimir and Estragon Alone**

While Vladimir and Pozzo have been talking, Estragon has been sleeping again in



his fetal position. Vladimir, feeling lonely, awakens him. Significantly, since Estragon was sleeping in his fetal position, his dreams were happy ones; but even so, Vladimir refuses to listen to them. Vladimir's final speech before the entrance of the Boy Messenger suggests that, he feels a deep estrangement from the universe. Something tells him that there should be some reason for him to be here at this place, at this time, with his friend Estragon while waiting for Godot. Furthermore, he is aware of a misery, a disquietness which he cannot understand. Life seems as though it is "astride of a grave," and there is to be a "difficult birth," for the "grave-digger puts on the forceps." Vladimir senses that life is filled with the cries of a suffering humanity, but he has used him "a great deadener" (boredom) as a barrier to these cries. Suddenly, in complete despair, he cries out: "I can't go on." But the alternative to his despair is obviously death; therefore, he immediately rejects his despair by asking, "What have I said?" There is left only man's stubborn, useless clinging to a meaningless life.

### **Act 2 : Arrival of Boy Messenger**

Vladimir's depression is suddenly interrupted by the appearance of a boy. Since this boy asserts that he was not here yesterday, he has to be different one. However, the message that he brings is identical to the one he brought yesterday by a boy : Mr. Godot will not come this evening but he will surely come tomorrow, without fail. Thus Vladimir finds that there is absolutely nothing to do but wait for Godot. But in view of the message from the boy of the preceding day, the assurance that Godot will come tomorrow is lacking in conviction.

Upon questioning the boy further, Vladimir discovers two things—that Mr. Godot "does nothing" and that he has a white beard. Since God is sometimes viewed as a supreme entity doing nothing and possessing a long white beard, then if Godot is God, there can be little or no hope for God's intervention in the affairs of men. Instead, man must continue to stumble through his muckheap, this ash can of a world. Vladimir tells the boy to inform Mr. Godot that "you saw me." Vladimir is so insistent on the fact that the boy has indeed seen him that he makes "a sudden spring forward." This frightens the boy, and he quickly runs off stage.

### **Act 2 : Departure of Boy Messenger : Vladimir and Estragon Alone**

After the boy leaves, the sun sets and the moon rises, indicating that another day of waiting for Godot has passed. Estragon awakens and wants to leave this desolate place, but Vladimir reminds him that they have to wait for Godot. When Estragon suggests that they "drop Godot" and leave, Vladimir reminds Estragon that if they did, Godot would "punish us."

As he did at the end of Act 1, Estragon once again brings up the subject of their hanging themselves. But Estragon forgot to bring the rope. They decide to hang themselves

with the cord that holds up Estragon's trousers, but when tested, the cord breaks. This misadventure returns us to the world of the circus and the world of the burlesque house, and this rare, decisive action to kill themselves is rendered ludicrous since in the process of testing the cord, Estragon suffers the indignity of having his trousers fall down. Thus we see again Beckett's notion of the incongruity between what man attempts (and longs to be) and the absurdity of his position and his actions.

Since they have to come back tomorrow to wait for Godot, Estragon once again proposes that they bring "a good bit of rope" with them; Vladimir agrees :

Vladimir : We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. (Pause) Unless  
Godot comes.

Estragon : And if he comes ?

Vladimir : We'll be saved.

The question then is: if Godot doesn't come, will Vladimir and Estragon be damned. After telling Estragon to put on his trousers, which are still around his ankles since the cord that held up his trousers is now broken, Vladimir suggests that they leave :

Vladimir : Well ? Shall we go ?

Estragon : Yes, let's go.

*They do not move.*

The ending of Act 2 is exactly the same as was the ending of Act 1, and we have one final example of the disparity between the characters' words and the characters' actions. And since both acts are so identical and so circular, it should be obvious that tomorrow will find the two tramps back at the same place waiting for Godot, who will not come but who will send a boy messenger to tell them that Godot will surely come tomorrow and they must come back to wait for Godot, etc.

## Themes and issues

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### 5.7 The Absurdity of the World

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*Waiting for Godot* is a dramatic re-enactment of the unrecognized absurdity of the world that lived and perceived by Beckett's contemporaries. The drama is absurd in two senses. In first place, it is ridiculously funny, as is most of Beckett's writing. Placed in the perspective of eternity, in the shadow of death that the living can never forget ("where are all these corpses from?"), the antics with which the characters fill their short span are ludicrous. All are levelled down to the same laughable status : Estragon's laments over his aching feet, Vladimir's complaints of his friend's sweaty socks, games of losing, finding, swapping hats and boots, suicide attempts, debates on damnation.

That particular translation of 'absurd' as comic is Beckett's dramatic version of its other, philosophical sense. His black, obscene, pantomime humor is an age, put to bring life-preserving detachment into situation so atrocious that to view it head-on could only produce a formless cry of despair. An absurd world is a frightening one. It has in itself no norms, no absolutes, no consoling certainties, and no direction. It simply exists. Nothing and nobody living in it has any pre-ordained sense or purpose. These same assumptions underlie the existentialism of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, which eventually re-shaped the post-war imagination, running parallel with the dramatists' vision.

To say that life is absurd is to challenge head-on the two great acts of faith on which western culture is founded: reason and religion. Confidence in reason is the basis of belief in human ability to order and control the material world. Religion, especially Christianity and its personal god whose Providence directs history, gives an over arching assurance that everything is in control. These are the two languages with which Vladimir and Estragon must make sense of their world, and they would seem to be just so many empty words. In Beckett's own words there is nothing but words, divorced from all meaning: 'it all boils down to a question of words' (The unnamable).

### **5.7.1. The Trap of Religion**

The Christian tradition is the particular tragedy of the characters in *Godot*. Their imaginations are filled with half-remembered images, stories and models of behavior from the Bible : the Dead Sea, pale blue ('I used to say, that's where we'll go for our honeymoon'); the two thieves; John the Baptist, Christ's precursor; the crucified Christ himself. *Godot* is not god, but a symbol who performs for Vladimir and Estragon the same kind of dream Father-function. They are conditioned to expect a revelation and an ending to be given them, 'someone' to come and distribute, arbitrarily, rewards and punishments and, they hope, provide a final refuge. They expect to be given meaning. The truth is that the only meaning in existence is what they construct themselves with their own meaning in existence is what they construct themselves with own words and acts. As Lucky says in his speech : 'for reasons unknown no matter what matter the facts are there'.

An existential vision of life, which says all meanings in the present, not in the past or the future, represents a radical change of perspective. It was not one a fifties audience, only recently introduced to such concepts, could easily accept, which explains much of the hostility with which the play was originally received. For a post-sixties audience, it should be less of a difficulty. For the characters in the play, it is an unanswerable challenge,

not least because most of the time they have no idea that there is a problem. Sometimes they have a glimpse of the dead-end they are in.:

Vladimir : we're waiting for Godot.....  
Estragon : we came too soon.  
Vladimir : it's always at nightfall.  
Estragon : but night doesn't fall  
Vladimir : it'll fall all of sudden, like yesterday....  
Estragon : then it'll be night.  
Vladimir : and we can go.  
Estragon : then it'll be day again  
                  What'll we do, what'll we do !

But they repress their unease, with decreasing success and increasing anguish.

They double their own misery. There is always the pain and struggle of the fact that life is only what you make it. By trying to avoid that struggle, and make someone else responsible for their existence, they put off the evil moment when they must face facts for themselves. And they add the fear and uncertainty of what theory invented "protector" might do to them. The image Beckett uses to bring this metaphysical anguish down to earth is Vladimir's bladder trouble. It hurts to pee, but as Estragon says, it hurts much more when he insists on waiting to the last minute, trying to put off the inevitable. As Vladimir ruefully confesses: 'hope deferred maketh the something sick.'

For those who are blind to the absurdity of the world, life is a nightmare of self-inflicted pain. Completely disoriented, though claiming to know where they are, they can have no confidence in their own definitions of reality. They can't tell whether they are asleep or awake. Vladimir asks himself : 'Was I sleeping, while or think I do, what I shall say of today?'

They are caught on treadmill of their own making, dooming themselves to repeat forever the same tedious cycle. Critics have seen similarities between their waiting state and the suffering of the souls in Dante's purgatory is place of torments may be similar, there is difference. Purgatory is a place of atonement for sins which the sinner repents and which someone will finally forgive. In Beckett's materialist world, no one will forgive because none has sinned. Estragon categorically rejects Vladimir's suggestions that they repent: 'repented for what ?.....Our being born?'

The treadmill they have made themselves is also a trap. They have given away their freedom by tying themselves to Godot: they've 'got rid of their rights', as Vladimir says. Sleep offers no escape, for the unconscious world of dreams only re-naacts in more frightening solution. They only 'play' hanging to bring some excitement into their tedium :

Vladimir : it'd give us an erection.

Extragon : (highly excited). An erection.

Vladimir : with all that follows. Where it falls mandrakes grow.  
That's why they shriek when you pull them up.

They try to leave one another, but they can't. They try to leave the plateau but at its edges are the mysterious 'they' who administer unprovoked beatings and the 'bog', which is audience.

The place where they are caught is full of fear. They are frightened of everything unknown, frightened of silence, frightened of the Godot of their own invention, frightened of other man. They have no reason to fear the unknown and the silence. They have every reason to fear Godot and the authority figures they have invented in his image, having conceded them all power to punish. It is no accident that the first man to cross their path arch-intimidator Pozzo. Displacing shapeless fears into real forms makes very little sense. The silence doesn't go away, and now there is more besides: cruelty, violence, and humiliation.

## 5.7.2 The Trap of Reason

The language of the reason weaves similar traps. Vladimir applies the absurd instruments he had learned to call 'intellect' to justify the equally absurd act of faith by which he defines their space as the place of waiting of Godot. Forced to start afresh every day to chip sense out of his world, his first concern is always to 'prove' that this is the same place he was in yesterday. There might be a considerable advantage in assuming a relatively fresh beginning is being made; which is, indeed, the case, as all things are in constant change. But Vladimir feels when he is using habit as a screen between himself and his fears: 'the air is full of cries. But habit is a great deadener'.

In his essay on Proust, Beckett denounced the power of habit to destroy life :

Habit is a compromise affected between the individual and his environment.....the guarantee of a dull inviolability, the lightning conductor of his existence. Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit.

Though in the short-term it might make living easier ('Breathing is a habit'), its long-term effects are deadly.

Vladimir depends on two faculties to restore the sense of habit to his day's activities; reason and memory. Neither, it seems, as the day runs down, are to be trusted. Vladimir is increasingly frustrated by his failure to fix firm defining points in time or space-Estragon's boots, the tree, the memory of time spent in the Macon country. For Beckett, I a world always in flux there is nothing to be known but change. Individuals are in a state of

constant change, like every element in the world about them, so change is all they can ever know: 'the observer infects the observed with his own mobility'. Neither Vladimir nor Estragon will recognize this. They discuss Pozzo and Lucky :

Vladimir : How they've changed!.....haven't they?

Estragon : What?

Vladimir : Changed.

Estragon : Very likely. They all change. Only we can't.

'Reasoning' is a frustrating exercise. Objects yield hard information, only vague, slippery words. Estragon's boots could be black Estragon has the right description: 'all that's a lot of bloody'. Reason itself is suspect. Even Vladimir begins to question it at the end of the second day. Their plays for filling in the time seem reasonable to begin with, but not so when they become habits, mechanically repeated. They do these things to stay sane. But perhaps they've never been sane. Perhaps the whole world is mad. And the final irony of this mad world is that it can't be questioned except by using the language of reason. 'You follow my reasoning?' he asks Estragon, who's not much comforts: 'we are all born mad. Some remain so.' This is Alice's confrontation with the absurdity of wonderland and the assurances of the Cheshire cat : 'I'm mad. You're mad, we're all mad. You must be or you wouldn't have come here'. And Beckett and the cat seem to have found the same way to cope : brief, acute, not unfriendly comment and then departure, leaving on the air an enigmatic, lingering grin.

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## 5.8 Memory and time

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Memory has gone the same way. Where, when and even why the two are supposed to be waiting for the Godot is very vague : 'what exactly did we ask him for ?.....I can't have been listening'. Memory depends on a sense of time. But in an absurd universe, time doesn't exit: it is only one more human, subjective way of trying to impose meaning on the meaningless.

Each of the characters has his own particular way of relating to time. Pozzo, the professional man, clings to his watch. If he wants to conduct his business efficiently, he must affirm that he controls and regulates time—other people's as well as his own :

Vladimir : Time has stopped.

Pozzo : (cuddling his watch to his ear). Don't you believe it, sir don't you believe it. Whatever you like, but not that.

His description of the natural beauty of twilight is punctuated by references to the time on his watch. Losing his watch is a major catastrophe. The great tragedy of his blindness is that it leaves him completely dependent on others for the time of day.

Vladimir's equivalent of the watch is his own memories, which he tries to convince himself and Estragon is correct. Estragon must accept Vladimir's 'yesterday' for Vladimir to be able to set today in his habitual patterns. Beckett wrote in his essay on Proust : 'there is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us.....Yesterday is .....irremediably part of us, with us, heavy and dangerous'. In one sense, of course, this is true. The past shapes the present. But how absolutely and inevitably it does so we don't know. Beckett struggles to break free; Proust and Vladimir voluntarily chain themselves to their cultures past versions of itself. So many of the memories Vladimir tries to urge on Estragon are linked with death; the times Estragon tried to drown himself in the Rhone or yesterday's tree that they almost hanged themselves from.

Estragon has no interest in remembering: 'I'm not a historian'. This is a healthy attitude, given that little goes on their lives is worth remembering. He has forgotten the visit to Macon country because 'I didn't notice anything'. Vladimir's irate insistence-'but down there everything is red!-proves the point. If everything is the same, nothing is worth bothering with. For the same reason, Estragon cannot 'recognize' today's place as yesterdays:

Recognize ! What is there to recognize? All my lousy life I've crawled about in the mud! And you talk to me about scenery! (Looking wild wildly about him). Look at this muchheap! I've never stirred from it!

Estragon's memory plucks a kind of subjective value out of the absurdity. 'Either I forget immediately or I never forget'. Forgetting is of two different kinds. Sometimes it is the most important, often painful, events of the past that are repressed and buried, usually with neurotic consequences. More often it is the trivial things that go, which did not matter at the time and are not worth remembering. Vladimir remembers the trivia in order to evade the crucial memories (Godot failing to turn up, Pozzo's inhumane treatment of lucky). Estragon remembers what matters : keen physical sensations of pleasure and pain, satisfaction of real needs, and other satisfactions associated with these. He may have, forgotten trying to drown himself in the Rhone, but he remembers the bliss of returning to life in the hot sun.

It is only Vladimir who forces Estragon into the miseries of time, despite his weary resistance: 'don't torment me, didi'. Estragon beings his day relatively content. He remains untroubled when he casually concedes a past to please Vladimir: 'yes, now I remember, yesterday evening we spent blathering on about nothing in particular. That's been going on now for half a century'. But with this concession, he is trapped. By the time Vladimir has finished spinning his precise recollections, Estragon may say he has had enough, he wants to leave, but it is too late. Vladimir's memories drive Estragon to grief and despair.

Beckett quotes Proust's own comment on such situations: 'if there were no such thing as Habit, Life would of necessity appear delicious to all those whom death would threaten at every moment, that is to say, to all mankind'.

But as Beckett's own play shows, Proust is only half-right. There is here one more ludicrous paradox. Without the habits of Vladimir, who destroys his happiness, Estragon could not survive. Feckless, lacking time sense, able only to react, never to take initiatives or forethought, Estragon would be lost without the friend who gives him carrots and radishes, helps him on with his boots, finds him something to do. Vladimir's confidence is not entirely convincing: 'when I think of it.....all these years..... but for me..... where would you be.....? (decisively). You'd be nothing more than a little heap of bones at the present minute, no doubt about it. But he has enough of a point not to, need to worry about Estragon's threat they should part : 'you always say that, and you always come crawling back'.

The life by absurd creatures in an absurd world is riddled with all the contradictions and paradoxes. Beckett found in his Proust.

Time—a condition of resurrection become an instrument of death; Habit—an infliction in so far as it opposes the dangerous exhalation of the one and a blessing in so far as it palliates the cruelty of the other; Memory—a clinical laboratory stocked with poison and remedy, stimulant and sedative.

### **Language**

In this world of absurdity, where either vanishes proliferates beyond understanding, language itself plays a double role. It is only instrument with which the characters can hope to know or control the world outside them but it can offer no true knowledge at all. Whatever they say about the world makes no difference. Reality remains outside the grasp of the language they have learned. And yet they go on speaking, for words are all they have. Estragon knows that to 'say', subjectively, that a thing is so will not make it so. But Vladimir preserves, compulsively pinning down things with labels, as though an adjective ('that') were a cage :

Estragon : In my opinion we were here.

Vladimir : you recognise the place?

Estragon : I didn't say that.

Vladimir : well?

Estragon : that makes no difference.

Vladimir : all the same.....that tree.....that bog.

Vladimir knows the answers he wrings out of Godot's Boy are empty of meaning : 'words, words'. Yet after a pause, he adds : 'speaks'. This is the paradox on which all Beckett's work is built. Language is a poor, faulty instrument but there is nothing



else to work with. Beckett's genius is to turn words against themselves, making them show up their own emptiness. His characters' misery comes from taking words at their face value. Vladimir and Estragon are reluctant to admit that the words are not so much their key to freedom as the stones of which their prison house is made.

As the drama runs its second round, at Act 2, the critical intellect is increasingly aware of the lie, the confidence trick that is language. So Estragon bustles towards a new diversion, delighted to have found something else 'to give us the impression we exist'. Vladimir's comment is ironic: 'yes, we're magicians'. The language the pair has inherited is a vehicle of illusion. It is a collection of techniques not for telling but for inventing and deceiving. When the conjurers are only second-rate, or when the gap between lie and reality becomes too wide, language has to own up to its trickery: and this is what this drama sets out to make it do. If the characters could see through language, they could also see through all these power structures it props up. They, of course, don't: but the audience, sitting at a distance, has a better chance.

Vladimir and Estragon rely on language to see them through their daily life. Time and again, it comes to pieces in their hands. They try hard to use language, as they should, with the precision and clarity, which the academic tradition teaches are the first, steps in controlling any subject-matter. It isn't pure desire for knowledge that drives them, but need. Vladimir feels he needs certainty. He labels a tree not a bush or a shrub (and as extra flourish names it a willow) because he needs to convince his partner and himself that their anonymous space is the particular place of the appointment with Godot. Estragon needs to eat, and he distinguishes between a carrot and a turnip and a pink radish or a black one because not all, for him, are edible. Unlike Vladimir, he feels no need for extra flourishes. Vladimir's solicitous 'how's the carrot?' gets a laconic answer: 'it's a carrot'. Language that really works will satisfy authentic need he's hoping to satisfy—Godot's coming—is only make-believe. It can never be satisfied, so he can never shut up.

The mere fact that one's language is precise is no guarantee it represents anything real. The word 'carrot' lingers on long after the carrots are gone. Estragon's precise imitation of Pozzo devouring his roast chicken does not mean each is experiencing the same material satisfaction. As it happens, the mime in this case works almost like magic, and Estragon gets the bones—but only because Pozzo has his own reason for giving them. It would seem that Vladimir and Estragon stick with the kind of language they're used to because in the short-term it still gives them enough to get by on. In the long term these short-term expedients produce more harm than good, like Estragon's insistence on cramming his feet into boots the audience knows are his old tight ones, despite his denials, or Vladimir's putting off peeing because of his bladder trouble, or Vladimir inventing

a future coming to calm his present fears. Like the language they speak (full of words like 'stir', 'death' and 'waiting'), these are all palliatives that only delay the agony. On the other hand, what better language they might use is impossible to say. No one in this play is interested in fresh inventions, only in making do.

In the absence of anything else, trying to be precise is better than nothing. It fills in the silence, passes the time and stops things sliding together into gray, undifferentiated chaos. Estragon puts it graphically : 'everything oozes....It's never the same put from one second to the next'. Words can't fix meaning totally, but they can at least be used to make some slight discrimination out of the ooze, so the tramps go on practicing : 'our exercises.....movements.....elevations.....relaxations.....elongations'. They are not as good at asking discriminations when it really matters. Admittedly, they are not confused by the closeness of the two names Godot and Pozzo into mistaking their wished-for savior. They have every reason not to be : this terrifying figure is not the savior they want. But they don't watch out for the smaller, subtler word-traps. Vladimir, hurrying to help up Pozzo, never notices a significant word-slip : 'a diversion comes along and what do we do? We let it go to waste. Come, let's get to work! Yet to know whether this action is work or play ('diversion') is crucial, if they are to understand what they're doing with their time. They think they're engaged in free play, but actually they're working for Pozzo.

While the characters are only dimly aware of the dangers of language, the audience sees their plight with painful clarity. Much of the dramatic pleasure—and unease—that the play produces is in the feeling of the language-ground shifting underfoot, sudden, estranging gulfs opening in the words and phrases that are the small change of everyday life. Mrs. Rooney draws attention to the same problem in Beckett's radio play, *All that fall* :

Do you find anything.....bizarre about my way of speaking ? (pause) I do not mean the voice, (pause) No, I mean the words. (Pause More to herself) I use none but the simplest words, I hope, and yet I sometimes find my way of speaking very bizarre.

The language that can impose such effects on an audience must be a very special one. It sounds, at first hearing, 'realistic', just like our own spoken exchanges. If it were, we would be like the tramps, unable to get any critical handle on it. Instead, it is a stylized version of colloquial speech, reconstructed to set its hearers at the distance required for a critical understanding.

Real colloquial speech has quite different patterns from Beckett's play language. It is often incoherent, hesitating, jerky and most of all, crammed with redundancies. We communicate—struggling to get and hold our hearer's attention by saying what we want to say over and over again, repeating ourselves, at unnecessary length, sometimes with

over-emphasis, or else under-emphasis, and what we're trying to say in words, well, we back it up with masses of gestures, face, whole body, waving our hands—you know what I mean. The language of Beckett's characters is pruned down to the minimum and backed up only where necessary by equally pruned down and stylized mime. Simple phrases stand naked in all their triteness. Pauses and silences are rarely hesitations. As in poetry, they are carefully placed at sense points, to create more coherence, riot less. Colloquial jerkiness is smoothed out into lyrical or dramatic rhythms by judicious placing of commas, or subtle repetitions and balances, or the addition or subtraction of 'and'. For example, the sentence 'I would have stopped you from doing whatever it was you were doing' could have been more roughly expressed and 'I'd have stopped you doing whatever it was'; the lengthier version is better balanced and more symmetrical. Or again, on the same page, 'I said to myself, he's all alone, he thinks I'm gone for ever, and he signs' would lose the dramatic swing to a climax if the second comma were replaced by the 'and' which in colloquial speech would be far more likely.

More obvious instruments of stylization are the echoes and repetitions with the extended dialogues, such as the exercise variations, referred to above. (constant repetition always makes a word seem strange, pulling it loose from its usual context). Or the deliberate juxtaposition of different styles in the same speech and even the same sentence, graphically demonstrating how uneasily this second or third-hand, tacked-together cloak of language hangs on present-day shoulders. Pozzo's unintentionally comic account of twilight mixes the prosaic and the lyrical, the learned and the vulgar, elaborate rhetoric and simple onomatopoeia, building to the climax when night bursts on us too, 'pop! Like that!' Swapping insults on Vladimir's instructions (curse me!), Estragon flounders gamely from one stylistic extreme to the next, 'naughty!' to 'Gonococcus! Spirochete!'. Tricks of rhetoric embellish the most ludicrously inappropriate situations. Vladimir and Estragon mourn softly and sympathetically over the fit of Estragon's boots, building up to the plangent 'perhaps you'll have socks some day' Estragon's lyrical musing by the struggling heap of the fallen is rudely interrupted: 'I've always wanted to wanted in the Pyrenees—Who farted?'

But the comic funds on the rubbish-dump of language can have a cutting edge. Rhetoric can be dangerous. Vladimir's speech on the nobility of humane action holds up the action it urges. In Lucky's speech, the display of the rotting fragments of cultural style turns everyone's stomach and drives them to murderous rage.

What self-consciousness the characters have about their language develops in Act-2, where the initial focus is on the art and the use of conversation. Two different kinds of conversation are set against each other.

The first is a demonstration of the emptiness of language, used not to probe a real problem but simply to fill the silence with elegantly structured sounds. Vladimir and Estragon are trying to talk 'calmly', to turn the panic of living and dying into manageable words, to ward off the fear of the silent, unspeakable unknown: 'It's so we won't think.....It's so we won't hear'. Concealing the truth is the traditional function of our inherited language. So when they speak this way, what they summon up are 'dead voices', dry and sterile as sand and ashes, not communicating, only rustling like leaves in the return of the insatiable dead ('to be dead is not enough for them'). Possessed by the past that lives on through language, the conversation goes nowhere, turning round and round on itself, and has only-possible outcome :

Estragon : What do we do now ?

Vladimir : Wait for Godot.

When they try again, immediately, they do better. That wasn't such a bad little canter', Estragon says complacently at the end. This time they don't plan to be calm. They have no fixed aim. They simply want to start, and so the future of their conversation is wide open: 'you can start from anything'. This time they light not on the 'dead voices' but a mere active notion of searching: 'when you seek you hear'. No doubt what you hear are still the 'dead voices' of corrupt language and corrupt experience, but this time they brush that obstacle aside. Instead of circling on the old, dead, know terrain, they move forward, establishing the conditions of conversing: 'let's contradict each other.....Let's ask each other questions', to which in a later exchange they add interruptions and insults.

Vladimir brings the subject matter back to unavoidable topic of the traces of death that corrupt all life ('a charnel house! A charnel house!'), but this time Estragon manages politely to deflect him: 'you don't have to look'. Clearly, to look on language, as process, something to move forward with, a personal, even generous exchange with other people, and to try and establish how it works, even if it works badly, is more fruitful way of handling it than simply to fix a fearful gaze on the traces of the 'dead voices'.

Before concluding this section, something must be said about the silence which is an integral part of Beckett's language and which has a meaning, or rather a range of meanings, of its own: 'It is all very fine to keep silence, but one has also to consider the kind of silence, one keeps' (*The Unnamable*). Claus Zilliasscus (Beckett and broadcasting, 1976 has remained us that silence has been part of theatrical language from the turn of the century. In the music hall, the technique of the comic pause has pointed comic failure to understand, or marked a 'punch line. In the legitimate theatre, with writers such as Checkov, silence has been a means of increasing tension, illustrating incomprehension, inability or unwillingness to communicate, structuring monologues so as to intensify the

loneliness of the speaker, and so on, Beckett uses silence in all these conventional ways. He illustrates, for example, the breakdown of speech with the mime Vladimir uses to get across his question about lucky and his bags, or the frightened silence when the tramps confront the enigma of their relationship to Godot, or in Vladimir's final lonely, despairing monologue over the sleeping estragon.

But Beckett also offers a reinterpretation of the entire nature of silence. It is an image for the different state of being that everyone desires, a new kind of language, if you prefer, so different that there are no words to describe it and no ways that we know to attain it. This is the state for which the image of being with Godot is a very poor substitute. Death is also the wrong image for it, though it is close (being also desired and feared, because wholly unknowable). Death is not what we want, because death is an ending of material existence, not a transformed way of living. Estragon's one attempt to evoke the nearest he ever got to happiness, and the one moment he truly remembers, is linked with death and silence. It was a suicide attempt, by drowning from which Vladimir saved him. The near dying is only memorable because it enabled him to feel a fresh pleasure of living. Similarly, the silence he falls into when he remembers doesn't indicate an absence of meaning, but rather a thrilling crowd of ideas, emotions, sensations beyond the reach of words. In the brief exchange that summons the recollections, everything that matters is 'said' silently, between the lines—Estragon's despair, astonished gratitude, tenderness, and the healing, material warmth of the sun on the newly restored body :

Estragon : Do you remember the day I threw myself in the hone?

Vladimir : We were grape harvesting.

Estragon : You fished me out.

Vladimir : That's all dead and bruised.

Estragon : My clothes dried in the sun.

Words can only be used to build the way the threshold of the unknown, where they stop short. Beckett expects that "The experience of my reader shall be between the phrases, in the silence, communicated by the intervals, not the terms, of the statement" (*Dream of Fair to Middling Woman*).

Silence in Beckett's writing also expresses the sheer unknowable-ness of everything that is not we, and our lack of power to pierce through to that unknown. It plays a vital part in presenting his understanding of the material nature of our experience. Unless the object—the voice outside—addresses us, we know nothing. We think of the world as waiting for our minds to make sense of it. It is not. We have nothing except what the material world gives us; we are receivers, not generators, of sense. In the 1964 Royal Court production, which Beckett supervised, the actors were instructed to freeze and stare ahead at the end of their dialogues. The audience is at the mercy of the actors

for everything it knows; the actors, in their turn, are at the mercy of the author who gives or withholds their lines. The audience can, of course, guess what the silence might mean, just as it guesses what the characters, or the play might mean, but chances are that the reading that comes out reflects the prejudice that go in, learning to discover and respect the limits of understanding is an important part of the experience of watching any Beckett play.

All knowledge is bounded by silence. Life is much less coherent and continuous than we admit. Estragon, pressed by Vladimir to remember yesterday's self, denies that he can, and insists that there is no continuity and no communication between yesterday and today :

Vladimir : And where were we yesterday evening according to you ?

Estragon : How do I know? In another compartment, there's no lack of void.

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## 5.9 An approach to the Play *Waiting for Godot*

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When Alan Schneider, who was to direct the first American production of *Waiting for Godot*, asked Beckett who or what Godot meant, he received the answer, "If I knew I would have said so in the play."

This is a salutary warning to anyone who approaches Beckett's plays with the intention of discovering *the* key to their understanding, of demonstrating in exact and definite terms *what they mean*. Such an understanding might perhaps be justified in tackling the works of an author who had started from a clear-cut philosophical or moral conception, and had then proceeded to translate it into concrete terms of plot and character. But even in such a case the chances are that the final product, if it turned out a genuine work of the creative imagination, would transcend the author's original intentions and present itself as far richer, more complex, and open to a multitude of additional interpretations. For, as Beckett himself has pointed out in his essay on Joyce's *Work in Progress*, the form, structure, and mood of an artistic statement cannot be separated from its meaning, what is said in it is indissolubly linked with the *manner* in which it is said, and cannot be said in any other way. There have been attempts to reduce the meaning of a play like *Hamlet* to a few short and simple lines, yet the play itself remains the clearest and most concise statement of its meaning and message, precisely because its uncertainties and irreducible ambiguities are an essential element of its total impact.

These considerations apply, in varying degrees, to all works of creative literature, but they apply with particular force to works that are essentially concerned with conveying their author's sense of mystery, bewilderment, and anxiety when confronted with the human

condition, and his despair at being unable to find a meaning in existence *In Waiting for Godot*, the feeling of uncertainty it produces, the ebb and flow of this uncertainty—from the hope of discovering the identity of Godot to its repeated actions are themselves the essence of the play. Any endeavour to arrive at a clear and certain interpretation by establishing the identity of Godot through critical analysis would be doomed to be a failure.

Yet it is only natural that plays written in so unusual and baffling a convention should be felt to be in special need of an explanation that, as it were, would uncover their hidden meaning and translate it into everyday language. The source of this fallacy lies in the misconception that somehow these plays must be reducible to the conventions of the “normal” theatre, with plots that can be summarized in the form of a narrative. If only one could discover some hidden clue, it is felt, these difficult plays could force to yield their secret and reveal that plot of the conventional play that is hidden within them. Such attempts are doomed to failure. Beckett’s plays lack plot even more completely than other works of the Theatre of the Absurd. Instead of a linear development, they present their author’s intuition of the human condition by a method that is essentially polyphonic; they confront their audience with an organized structure of statements and images that interpenetrate each other and that must be apprehended in their totality, rather like the different themes in a symphony, which gain meaning by their simultaneous interaction.

But we have to be cautious in our approach to Beckett’s plays to avoid trying to provide an oversimplified explanation of their meaning. This does not imply that we cannot subject them to careful scrutiny by isolating sets of images and themes and by attempting to discern their structural ground work. The results of such an examination should make it easier to follow the author’s intention and to see, if not the *answers* to his questions, at least what the *questions* are that he is asking.

*Waiting for Godot* does not tell a story; it explores a static situation. “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful”. On a country road, by a tree, two old tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, are waiting. That is the opening situation at the beginning of Act 1. At the end of Act 1, they are informed that Mr. Godot, with whom they believe they have an appointment, cannot come, but that he will surely come tomorrow. Act 2 repeats precisely the same pattern. The same boy arrives and delivers the same message. Act 1 ends :

ESTRAGON : Well, shall we go ?

VLADIMIR : Yes, let’s go.

*They do not move.*

Act 2 ends with the same lines of dialogue, but spoken by the same characters in reversed order.

The sequence of events and the dialogue in each act are different. Each time the two tramps encounter another pair of characters, Pozzo and Lucky, master and slave, under differing circumstances; in each act Vladimir and Estragon attempt suicide and fail, for differing reasons; but these variations merely serve to emphasize the essential sameness of the situation.

Vladimir and Estragon, who call each other Didi and Gogo, although Vladimir is addressed by the boy messenger as Mr. Albert, and Estragon, when asked his name, replies without hesitation. Catullus are clearly derived from the pairs of cross-talk comedians of music halls. Their dialogue has the peculiar repetitive quality of cross-talk comedians' patter.

ESTRAGON : So long as one knows.

VLADIMIR : One can bide one's time.

ESTRAGON : One knows what to expect.

VLADIMIR : No further need to worry.

And the parallel to the music hall and the circus is even explicitly stated :

VLADIMIR : Charming evening we're having.

ESTRAGON : Unforgettable.

VLADIMIR : And it's not over.

ESTRAGON : Apparently not.

VLADIMIR : It's only the beginning.

ESTRAGON : It's awful.

VLADIMIR : It's worse than being at the theatre.

ESTRAGON : The circus.

VLADIMIR : The music hall.

ESTRAGON : The circus.

In accordance with the traditions of the music hall or the circus, there is an element of crudely physical humor; Estragon loses his trousers, there is a protracted gag involving three hats that are put on and off and handed on in a sequence of seemingly unending confusion, and there is an abundance of pratfalls. The writer of a penetrating thesis on Beckett, Niklaus Gassner, lists no fewer than forty-five stage directions indicating that one of the characters leaves the upright position, which symbolizes the dignity of man.

As the members of a cross-talk act, Vladimir and Estragon have complementary personalities. Vladimir is the most practical of the two, and Estragon claims to have been a poet. In eating his carrot, Estragon finds that the more he eats of it the less he likes it, while Vladimir reacts the opposite way he likes things as he gets used to them. Estragon is volatile, Vladimir persistent. Estragon dreams, Vladimir cannot stand



hearing about dreams. Vladimir has stinking breath, Estragon has stinking feet. Vladimir remembers past events, Estragon tends to forget them as soon as they have happened. Estragon likes telling funny stories, Vladimir is upset by them. It is mainly Vladimir who voices the hope that Godot will come and that his coming will change their situation, while Estragon remains skeptical throughout and at times forgets the name of Godot. It is Vladimir who conducts the conversation with the boy who is Godot's messenger and to whom the boy's messages are addressed. Estragon is the weaker of the two; he is beaten up by mysterious strangers every night. Vladimir at times acts as his protector, sings to him to sleep, and covers him with his coat. The opposition of their temperaments is the cause of endless bickering between them and often leads to the suggestion that they should part. Yet, being complementary natures, they also are dependent on each other and have to stay together.

Pozzo and Lucky are equally complementary in their natures, but their relationship is one a more primitive level : Pozzo is the sadistic master, Lucky the submissive slave. In the first act, Pozzo is rich, powerful, and certain of himself; he represents worldly man in all his facile and shortsighted optimism and illusory feeling of power and permanence. Lucky not only carries his heavy luggage and even the whip with which Pozzo beats him, he also dances and thinks for him, or did so in his prime. In fact, Lucky taught Pozzo all the higher values of life: "beauty, grace, truth of the first water." Pozzo and Lucky represent the relationship between body and mind, the material and spiritual sides of man, with the intellect subordinate to the appetites of the body. Now that Lucky's powers are failing, Pozzo complains that they cause him untold suffering. He wants to get rid of Lucky and sell him at the fair. But in the second act, when they appear again, they are still tied together. Pozzo has gone blind, Lucky has become dumb. While Pozzo drives Lucky on a journey without an apparent goal, Vladimir has prevailed upon Estragon to wait for Godot.

A good deal of ingenuity has been expended in trying to establish at least an etymology for Godot's name, which would point to Beckett's conscious or subconscious intention in making him the objective of Vladimir's and Estragon's quest. It has been suggested that Godot is a weakened form of the word "God," a diminutive formed on the analogy of Pierre-Pierrot, Charles-Chariot. It has also been noted that the title *En attendant Godot* seems to contain an allusion to Simone Weil's book *Attente de Dieu*, which would furnish a further indication of more recondite literary allusion. As Eric Bentley has pointed out, there is a character in the play by Balzac, a character much talked about but never seen, and called Godeau. The play in question is Balzac's comedy *Le Faiseur*, better known as *Mercadet*. Mercadet is a stock exchange speculator who is in the habit of attributing his financial difficulties to his former partner Godeau, who, years before ran away with their joint capital. On the other hand, the hope of Godeau's eventual

return and the repayment of the embezzled funds is constantly dangled by *Mercadet* before the eyes of his numerous creditors. The plot of *Mercadet* turns on at last, desperate speculation based on the appearance of a spurious Godeau. But the fraud is discovered. *Mercadet* seems ruined. At this moment the real Godeau is announced; he has returned from India with a huge fortune.

The parallels are too striking to make it probable that this is a mere coincidence. In Beckett's play, as in Balzac's, the arrival of Godot is the eagerly awaited event that will miraculously save the situation; and Beckett is as fond as Joyce of subtle and recondite literary allusions.

Yet whether Godot is meant to suggest the intervention of a supernatural agency, or whether he stands for a mythical human being whose arrival is expected to change the situation, or both of these possibilities combined; his exact nature is of secondary importance. The subject of the play is not Godot but waiting, the act of waiting as an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition. Throughout our lives we always wait for something, and Godot simply represents the objective of our waiting—an event, a thing, a person, death. Moreover, it is in the act of waiting that we experience the flow of *time*, in its purest, most evident form. If we are active, we tend to forget the passage of time, we pass the time, but if we are merely passively waiting, we are confronted with the action of time itself. As Beckett points out in his analysis of Proust.

“There is no escape from the hours and the days. Neither from tomorrow nor from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us.....Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a day stone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday.” The flow of time confronts us with the basic problem of being—the problem of the nature of the self, which, being subject to constant change in time, is in constant flux and therefore ever outside our grasp “personality, whose permanent reality can only be apprehended as a retrospective hypothesis. The individual is the seat of a constant process of decantation, sluggish, pale and monochrome, to the vessel containing the fluid of past time, agitated and multicoloured by the phenomena of its hours.”

Being subject to this process of time flowing through us and changing us in doing so, we are, at no single moment in our lives, identical with ourselves. Hence “we are disappointed at the nullity of what we are pleased to call attainment. But what is attainment? the identification of the subject with the object of his desire. The subject had died and perhaps many times on the way. If Godot is the object of Vladimir's and Estragon's desire, he seems naturally ever beyond their reach. It is significant that the boy who

acts as go between fails to recognize the pair from day to day. The French version explicitly states that the boy who appears in the second act is the same boy as the one in the first act, yet the boy denies that he has ever seen the two tramps before and insists that this is the first time he has acted as Godot's messenger. As the boy leaves, Vladimir tries to impress it upon him: "You're sure you saw me, eh, you won't come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me before?" The boy does not reply, and we know that he will again fail to recognize them. Can we ever be sure that the human beings we meet are the same today as they were yesterday? When Pozzo and Lucky first appear, neither Vladimir nor Estragon seems to recognize them; Estragon even takes Pozzo for Godot. After they have gone, Vladimir comments that they have changed since their last appearance. Estragon insists that he didn't know them.

VLADIMIR : Yes you do know them.

ESTRAGON : No I don't know them.

VLADIMIR : We know them, I tell you. You forget everything.  
(Pause. To himself.) Unless they're not the same....

ESTRAGON : Why didn't they recognize us, then?

VLADIMIR : That means nothing. I too pretended not to recognise them.  
And then nobody ever recognizes us.

In the second act, when Pozzo and Lucky reappear, cruelly deformed by the action of time, Vladimir and Estragon again have their doubts whether they are the same people they met on the previous day. Nor does Pozzo remember them : "I don't remember having met anyone yesterday. But tomorrow I won't remember having met anyone today."

Waiting is to experience the action of time, which is in constant change. And yet, as nothing real ever happens, that change is in itself an illusion. The ceaseless activity of time is self-defeating, purposeless, and therefore null and void. The more things change, the more they are the same. That is the terrible stability of the world. "The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, someone else another stops." One day is like another, and when we did, we might never have existed. As Pozzo exclaims in his great final outburst :

"Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time ?.....One day is that not enough for you, one day like any other day he went dumb, one. day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we'll die, the same day, the same second...They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams as instant, then it's night once more."

And Vladimir, shortly afterwards, agrees : "Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave digger puts on the forceps."

Still Vladimir and Estragon live in hope : they wait for Godot, whose coming will

bring the flow of time to a stop. “Tonight perhaps we shall sleep in his place, in the warmth, dry, our bellies full, on the straw. It is worth waiting for that, is it not?” This passage, omitted in the English version, clearly suggests that peace, the rest from waiting, and the sense of having arrived in a haven that Godot represents to the two tramps. They are hoping to be saved from the evanescence and instability of the illusion of time, and to find peace and permanence outside it. Then they will no longer be tramps, homeless wanderers, but will arrived home.

Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot although their appointment with him is by no means certain. Estragon does not remember it at all. Vladimir is not quite sure what they asked Godot to do for them. It was “nothing very definite....a kind of prayer....a vague supplication.” And what had Godot promised them? “That he’d see...that he would think it over.”

When Beckett is asked about the theme of *Waiting for Godot*, he sometimes refers to a passage in the writings of St Augustine: “There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine. I wish I could remember the Latin. It is even finer in Latin than in English. “Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned.” And Beckett sometimes add, “I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them.... .That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters.”

The theme of the two thieves on the cross, the theme of the uncertainty of the hope of salvation and the fortuitousness of the bestowal of grace, does indeed pervade the whole play. Vladimir states it right at the beginning: “One of the thieves was saved....It’s a reasonable percentage,” Later he enlarges on the subject : “Two thieves...One is supposed to have been saved and the other...damned....And yet how is it that of the four evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved ? The four of them were there or thereabouts, and only one speaks of a thief being saved.....Of the other three don’t mention any thieves at all and the third says that both of them abused him.” There is a little chance, but as only one out of four witnesses reports it, the odds are considerably reduced. But, as Vladimir points out; it is a curious fact that everybody seems to believe that one witness: “It is only version they know.” Estragon, whose attitude has been one of skepticism throughout, merely comments, “People are bloody ignorant apes.”

It is the shape of the idea that fascinated Beckett. Out of all the malefactors, out of all the millions and millions of criminals that have been executed in the course of history, two, only two, had the chance of receiving absolution in the hour of their death in so uniquely effective a manner. One happened to make a hostile remark; he was damned. One happened to contradict that hostile remark; he was saved. How easily could the roles have been reversed ? These, after all, were not well-considered chance

exclamations uttered at a moment of supreme suffering and stress. As Pozzo says about Lucky, "Remarks that I might easily have been in his shoes and he in mine. If chance had not willed it otherwise. To each one his due." And then our shoes might fit us one day and not the next: Estragon's boots tormented him in the first act; in act 2 they fit him miraculously.

Godot himself is unpredictable in bestowing kindness and punishment. The boy who is his messenger minds the goats, and Godot treats him well. But Godot beats the boy's brother, who minds the sheep. "And why doesn't he beat you?" asks Vladimir. "I don't know, sir", the boy replies. The parallel to Cain and Abel is evident: there too the lord's grace fell on one rather than on the other without any rational explanation—only that Godot beats the minder of the sheep and cherishes the minder of the goats. Here Godot also acts contrary to the Son of Man at the Last Judgment: "And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left." But Godot's kindness is bestowed fortuitously, his coming is not a source of pure joy; it can also mean damnation. When Estragon, in the second act, believes Godot to be approaching, his first thought is, "I'm accursed." And as Vladimir triumphantly exclaims, "It's Godot! At last! Let's go and meet him," Estragon runs away, shouting, "I'm in hell!"

The unexpected bestowal of grace, which passes human understanding, divides mankind into those that will be saved and those that will be damned. When, in act 2 Pozzo and Lucky return, and the two tramps try to identify them, Estragon calls out, "Abel! Abel!" Pozzo immediately responds. But when Estragon calls out, "Cain! Cain!" Pozzo responds again. "He's all mankind," concludes Estragon.

There is even a suggestion that Pozzo's activity is concerned with his frantic attempt to draw that little chance of salvation upon himself. In the first act, Pozzo is on his way to sell Lucky "at the fair." The French version, however, specifies that it is the Market of the Holy Saviour to which he is taking Lucky. Is Pozzo trying to sell Lucky to redeem himself? Is he trying to divert the little chance of redemption from Lucky (in whose shoes he might easily have been himself) to Pozzo? He certainly complains that Lucky is causing him great pain, that he is killing him with his mere presence—perhaps because his mere presence reminds Pozzo that it might be Lucky who will be redeemed. When Lucky gives his famous demonstration of his thinking, what is the thin thread of sense that seems to underlie the opening passage of his wild, schizophrenic "word salad?" Again, it seems to be concerned with the fortuitousness of salvation: "Given the existence...of a personal God...outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown...and suffers....with those who for reasons unknown are plunged in torment." Here again we have the personal God, with his divine apathy, his speechlessness (aphasia), and his lack

of the capacity for terror or amazement (athambia), who loves us dearly with some exceptions, who will be plunged into the torments of hell. In other words, God, who does not communicate with us, cannot feel for us, and condemns us for reasons unknown.

When Pozzo and Lucky reappear the next day, Pozzo blind and Lucky dumb, no more is heard of the fair. Pozzo has failed to sell Lucky; his blindness in thinking that he could thus influence the action of grace has been made evident in concrete physical form.

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## **5.10 Questions**

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1. The act of waiting is stressed in the title of the play, *Waiting for Godot*. Examine the element of waiting in the play.
2. Do you agree that *Waiting for Godot* distills the theme of futility? Give reasons for your answer.
3. What is the dramatic significance of the function of Godot in *Waiting for Godot*?

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## UNIT 6 □ John Osborne : Look Back in Anger

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### STRUCTURE

#### 6.0 Background and an approach to the Play

#### 6.1 Critical response

#### 6.2 John Osborne

#### 6.3 A General Summary

#### 6.4 Commentary

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### 6.0 Background and an approach to the play

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**Look back in Anger** first appeared and gradually built itself into a success. The particular advantage it had in doing this was the character of its hero, Jimmy Porter. By a happy accident, no doubt, his attitudes were strategically situated between those of the cynics and those of the “**committed**” idealists. Like so many of the heroes of the **Lucky Jim** type of novel, he is socially adrift, in rebellion, or at least reaction, against the social and educational system which has helped to shape him, and determined, whatever he does, not to act in the way ‘**they**’ might expect him to. On the other hand, though his picture of the situation of Britain is very much that of the cynical heroes, and though his sexual opportunism and his boorishness or impatience with social nice ties would seem to ally him with them, his bitterness and anguish carry him further over in the direction of the self organizing, protesters: if he can find no cause to fight for, he nevertheless speaks eloquently of the need for such a cause, the necessity of the search for one.

Jimmy Porter was thus ideally constituted to be the all-purpose hero of the dissatisfied young. But of course to achieve this position he had not only to speak, but also, most importantly, to be heard. And in May 1956 the theatre would have seemed a rather unlikely place for this to occur. Nobody doubted that the British theatre had been in precipitate decline since the end of the war. Audiences had been falling off and theatres closing all over the the country a process accelerated rapidly by the starting-up of television after a war time break. Moreover, creatively British drama had been stagnating. The most successful dramatist in Britain at this time was Terence Rattigan, a conscientious and intelligent craftsman who specialized in solid emotional dramas judgments, but with

good meaty acting roles. But then the first success, **French Without Tears**, dated right back to 1936, so he could hardly be regarded as a rising young talent. The main cause for excitement in the post-war London theatre had been the unexpected box office success of a series of verse-plays by Christopher Fry, which, along with a couple of plays by the senior T.S. Eliot and a scattering of other theatrical ventures by established poets, were held to constitute a revival of poetic drama. Fry's light, whimsical verse-fantasies are at the moment so far out of fashion it is almost impossible to attempt a balance estimate of them. But it is certain that the particular sort of escapism they offered was less and less what the theatre going public required, and it is perhaps significant that after **Look Back in Anger**, and all that its success ushered in, this previously very prolific dramatist produced only one stage play in 12 years.

In the theatre the time is always ripe for an exciting new talent. But in 1956 it was even riper than usual. A new group, the English Stage Company, had been set up at the Royal Court Theatre, somewhat off the normal West End theatrical map, with the declared intention of becoming a writer's theatre. Many other companies had begun in the same spirit, with the same high ideals, and succumbed all too rapidly to the commercial pressures of London theatre. The English Stage Company might easily have gone the same way if it had not been for **Look Back in Anger**, which just came to them through the post in answer to an advertisement for new drama. Its author, a 26-year old actor of no particular distinction, had not had any play previously produced in London and had no literary reputation whatever. The English Stage Company liked the play and decided to put it on as their first by a new author, in repertory with plays by Arthur Miller, the established novelist Angus & Wilson, & the well known verse-dramatist Ronald Duncan.

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## 6.1 Critical response

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It was to prove a happy decision. Though the play got a good deal of critical attention on its opening, of which more in a moment, it did not immediately establish itself as a hit. It did well enough to justify its being kept on for a short run on its own after the first repertory season ended, but it continued to play at a little below break-even figures until something rather interesting happened. The Company agreed to let an Act of it be shown on television (something normally done only when a play is doing so well nothing can harm it or so badly that nothing can come to it but good). And at once the takings leapt up, nearly doubling in 2 weeks. Clearly the play, by being seen in part on TV, by TV's mass audience, had managed to leap the gap generally filled, if at all, by the theatre critics. Audiences used to going to the theatre did not have, in this instance, to rely entirely on what the critics said in order to decide if they should



go to the play or not: they were given a sample and were able to judge directly for themselves. Moreover, other people, who were probably not regular theatergoers, were presented in their own homes with a bit of this play. If they liked it, if it spoke to them, they might be moved to see the whole thing for themselves. The 'new drama' which followed on the success of the **Look Back in Anger** has clearly found a new audience, or a number of different new audiences. **Look Back in Anger** was only the first to demonstrate that TV, feared rival of the theatre, might provide a valuable means of providing new theatergoers, untrammelled by traditional ideas of what did and did not constitute a good evening in the theatre. It should not be understood from this, though, that **Look Back in Anger** succeeded largely in spite of the critics. Though in recent years the legend has grown up that when it opened it was greeted with almost universal incomprehension & dislike until Kenneth Tynan in the Observer saved the day with a glowing recommendation, this is in fact far from being the case. Tynan was certainly the most unequivocally enthusiastic, but the reception of the play, or at any rate of the playwright, was almost uniformly favourable. With a couple of exceptions everyone agreed that Mr. Osborne was a dramatist to watch and that this was just the sort of thing required to justify the new company's existence.

T.C. Worsley in the New Statesman, e.g., caught the prevailing opinion very well when he wrote:

“As a play **Look Back in Anger** hardly exists. The author has written all the soliloquies for his Wolver Hampton Hamlet and virtually left out all the other characters & all the action. But in these soliloquies you can hear the authentic new tones of the 1950's desperate, savage, resentful & at times, very funny. This is the kind of play which, for all its imperfections, the English Stage Company ought to be doing.....” In the Daily Express John Barber put the same view rather more briskly: It is intense, angry, feverish, undisciplined. It is even crazy. But it is young, young, young. ‘In the Financial Times Derek Granger, describing **Look Back in Anger** as this arresting, painful & sometimes astonishing first play said of it : Mr Osborne communicates no sense to us that he has taken even 3 paces back from the work that has so hotly & tormented engaged him. But for all that this is a play’ of extraordinary importance. Certainly it seems to have given the English Stage Company its first really excited sense of occasion. And its influence should go far beyond such an eccentric & contorted one-man turn as the controversial *Waiting for Godot*.’

Even those who had more serious doubts about the play itself found Osborne an exciting new writer. Cecil Wilson in the Daily Mail felt that the English Stage Company ‘have not discovered a dramatist of outstanding promise : a man who can write with a searing passion’, but happens in this case to have lavished it on the wrong play..... The repetitiousness cries out for the knife. But through all the author's over writing &

laborious shock tactics, we can perceive what a brilliant play this young man will write when he has got this one out of his system & let a little sunshine to his soul.' The Daily Worker agreed, remarking that the play's stars rich in promise, but lets us down with a sickening melodramatic thud", & concluding that Osborne's development as a writer will depend on what he look's forward to. For Milton Shulman in the Evening Standard.' *Look Back in Anger*' aims at being a despairing cry, but achieves only the stature of self-pitying snivel.....but underneath the rasping, negative whine of this play one can distinguish the considerable promise of its author.

John Osborne has a dazzling aptitude for provoking & stimulating dialogue, & he draws character with firm convincing strokes. When he stops being angry or when he lets us in on what he is angry about he may write a very good play'. Of the three 'quality' dailies the Manchester Guardian (as it then was) & the Daily Telegraph were, on the whole, more for that against. Phillip Hope-Wallace called it 'this strongly felt but rather muddled 1st drama, & concluded that'. 'It is by no means a total success artistically, but it has enough tension, feeling & originality of theme to make the (English Stage Company's) choice understandable..... I believe that they have got a potential playwright at last.....

In the **Telegraph** Patrick Gibbs thought it a work of some power, uncertainly directed. Only The Times came out decidedly against ('this first play has passages of good violent writing, but its total gesture is all together inadequate'), in which opinion it found support only in the Daily Mirror ('An angry play by an angry author, neurotic, exaggerated & more than slightly distasteful') & the Birmingham Post ('We shall be very frank about this. If more plays like tonight's *Look Back in Anger* are produced, the "**Writers' Theatre**" at the Royal Court must surely sink. I look back with anger upon a night misconceived & mis-spent.')

Then came Sunday, with a generally favourable review from Harold Hobson in the Sunday Times & Kenneth Tynan's great outburst of enthusiasm in the Observer which ended : "I agree that **Look Back in Anger** is likely to remain a minority taste. What matters, however, is the size of the minority, I estimate it at roughly 6,733,000, which is the no. of people in the country between 20 & 30..... I doubt if I could love anyone who did not wish to see **Look Back in Anger**. It is the best young play of its decade."

The general accent of the 1st critical reaction, obviously, was on the novelty of what Osborne was saying & on the sought of character he chose for his hero. As might be expected, later & more considered critical attention has gone rather to the making of connections between Osborne'e attitudes & those of earlier writers, & to the examination of precisely what technical means he uses in **Look Back in Anger** to put those attitudes

over. If Jimmy Porter still seems to be the extreme embodiment of a particular state of mind, & therefore a key figure in the study of a period when the state of mind was the most influential in intellectual & artistic circles, it was inevitable that further considerations should reveal earlier writers for whom in general the answer to life was like wise 'no'.

An obvious parallel might be found among these writers who threw all their energies into the Spanish Civil War during the later 1930's & then, when Franco won the whole thing prove to be only a dress rehearsal for a full scale fight against Fascism in the 1940's, became disoriented & disillusioned & mostly wondered off to find more comfortable private solutions to the problems of life in the United States. But a favoured stalking-horse of Osborne has been someone who, though involved in Spanish Civil War, was quite outside the particular circle : George Orwell, whose hatred of the present, fear of the future & disdain mixed with potent nostalgia for the past suggest an obvious relationship with Osborne.

As for the technical side of **Look Back in Anger**, Osborne himself has been in the forefront of the revaluers : by 1961 he was ready to describe it as 'a formal, rather old fashioned play'. And immediately after *Look Back in Anger*, he had already begun to break away from the traditional naturalism of the play's surface-style by making use in his next play, *The Entertainer*, of non-realistic devices derived from the practice of Brecht. In *Look back in Anger*, in now appears; he was using a structure handed on to him from the most conventional theatrical craftsman of his apprenticeship. It was only the force (disruptive as far as this structure was concerned) of Jimmy Porter's rhetoric, which distinguished *Look Back in Anger* from such traditional pieces as Rattigan's *The Deep Blue Sea*. Clearly in *Look Back in Anger* something is happening to the everyday language of the British theater normal at that time; but the changes are still potential and partial. Despite what the critic of *Financial Times* said about the play in relation to *Waiting for Godot*, the fact remains (it was realized by few more quick than Osborne himself) that a play like *Look Back in Anger* seems technically anachronistic after *Waiting for Godot*. It is any way significant that influential though Osborne's success was in persuading managers to try out other young writers in the theatre, *Look Back in Anger* had surprisingly little influence on either the subject-matter or the style of the dramatists who came after of Harold Pinter, John Arden, N.F. Simpson, Ann Jellicoe, Arnold Wesker, Henry Livings, to name only a few of the more important.

Finally, there is the inescapable question of where the play stands in critical estimation now. The easiest & the most obvious answer is that it doesn't. Coherent critical revaluation tends to be contingent on some obvious occasion. Such an occasion might be provided if, for instance—it is not entirely impossible—the National Theatre was to put on a full

dress revival. That would force the critics to think again, to come to terms with their immediate reactions to the play in the late 1960s instead of the mid 1950s, instead of inclining to refer back mentally to the way it all seemed then & presume, as it is human nature to do, that those first reactions remain valid.

It one may generalize meanwhile in the absence of very much concrete evidence, it seems that those coming to the play for the first time now, or somehow finding themselves constrained to read it afresh or watch an amateur revival, on the whole find both its good & its bad qualities intensified. Jimmy's rhetoric is still as forceful as ever & he remains, however dislikeable, at last genuinely magnetic. On the other hand the feebleness of the opposition presented to him, the relatively shadowy characterization of those around him, is more evident now than ever it was, & not only the bears-and-squirrels game but a lot concerned with the character of Alison's father seems positively sentimental.

On the other hand, it is only fair to say that *Look Back in Anger* remains just the effective beginning of a career which has continued to develop during the years between; it is Osborne's first word, and not by a long way his last. Moreover, of all the dramatists who have been thrown up by Britain's theatrical New Wave, Osborne alone has succeeded, whatever may say against his work, in getting through to a mass public, in achieving a broadness & amplitude of utterance which have carried him far beyond the clubs & coteries. That is already a lot. Just how much only the passage of another forty years or so will enable us to decide for sure.

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## 6.2 John Osborne

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Whatever may be said about John Osborne's subsequent career, at least no one can deny that *Look Back in Anger* started everything off : after a slightly shaky beginning it became the first decisive success in the career of The English Stage Company & established the Royal Court as the London home of young drama. Although the lead in these matters had passed elsewhere in later years, & 'the Osborne generation' proved only the first of several waves, 8 May 1956 still marks the real breakthrough of "the new drama" into the British theater, & Osborne himself remains, one way and another, one of its most influential exponents, as well as representing for the general public the new dramatist *par excellence*, the first of the angry young men & arguably the biggest shock to the system of British theatre since the advent of Shaw. And this in spite of the inevitable difficulties of following up a sensational debut with something which guarantees that the first sensation was not merely a freak success or the one work of a one-work writer.

Though *Look Back in Anger* was the first of Osborne's plans to reach the London stage, it was not by any means his first written; he admits to 'several' works unpublished and unperformed as well as *Epitaph for George Dillon*, written in collaboration with Anthony Creighton, which came earlier but was performed later, and an early piece which

contributed some material to *The World of Paul Slickey*. He had also already had two plays performed out of town. *The Devil Inside Him* in Huddersfield in 1950 and *Personal Enemy* in Harrogate in 1955. The first, written in collaboration with Stella Linden and revived at the Pembroke, Croydon, in 1962 as *Cry for Love*, by Robert Owen', is a strange melodrama about a Welsh youth whom the villagers think an idiot and his relations a sex-maniac because he writes poetry; but meanwhile he is constrained to kill a local girl who attacks his idea of beauty by attempting to pass him off as the father of her child. More characteristic was *Personal Enemy*, written with.

Anthony Creighton, about the reactions of a soldier's relatives and friends when he refuses to be repatriated from his captivity in Korea; the play apparently suffered at the time from wholesale deletions demanded by the Lord Chamberlain, including a whole homosexual strand in the plot. But *Look Back in Anger* it was which provided the first type-image of the new drama, and which has dogged its author ever since, so it seems inevitably the right place to start. When it was first performed Osborne was 26, an actor with some years' experience in provincial repertory, notably at Ilfracombe and Hayling Island, and familiar to regulars at the Royal Court in small parts, though he says that he never took himself seriously as an actor, and neither did anyone else. Looking back on *Look Back in Anger*, it is a difficult but necessary exercise to try and see it through the eyes of its first audience.....Osborne himself has recently characterized it as 'a formal, rather old-fashioned play', and the description is not unfair, though it should, of course, be read in the light of his accompanying statement that he dare not pick up a copy of the play now a days, as it embarrasses him. Certainly there is nothing much in the form of the piece to justify so much excitement; it is a well-made play, with all its climaxes, its tightening and slackening of tension in the right places, and in general layout it belongs clearly enough to the solid realistic tradition represented by, say, *The Deep Blue Sea*.

No, what distinguished it as a decisive break with Rattigan and the older drama was not so much its forms as its content : the characters who took part in the drama and the language in which they expressed themselves. Though Jimmy Porter and his milieu seem, even at this short distance of time, an inescapable 'period' as the characters in *The Vortex*, quintessentially 'mid-fifties', it was precisely the quality of immediacy and topicality which makes them so now that had the electrifying effect in 1956: Jimmy was taken to be speaking for a whole generation, of which he and his creator were among the most precious representatives, since it was essentially the post-war generation they represented, those who had, like Lindsay Anderson,' nailed a red flag to the root of the mess at the fort of Annan Parbat' to celebrate the return of the Labour government in 1945 and then gradually became disillusioned when a brave new world failed to materialize. Most of the people who felt this way were inevitably in their middle to late thirties in 1956, but with Osborne as a figurehead they were all cheerfully labelled 'angry young men' and Jimmy Porter was linked in a rather improbable twosome with Amis's *Lucky*

Jim as cult-figure of the younger generation.

The main usefulness of Jimmy Porter in the guise is that he is the stuff of which perennial rebels are made; though it is more difficult now than it was 5 years ago to see him as heroic, there is no denying the truth of the picture as a permanent human type—the self-flagellating solitary in self-inflinched exile from the world, drawing strength—from his own weakness and joy from his own miseries. He is, we gradually learn, a university graduate and an enormous cultural snob (only the safe classics and the most traditional jazz, only good books and ‘posh’ Sunday papers), but he lives in a tumbledown attic flat in drab Midland town and makes his living by keeping a sweet stall in the market. Everything in his life dissatisfies him, and the tone of his conversation (which is mainly monologue anyway) is consistently one of railing and complaint. The principal sufferer from all this is his wife Alison, whom he cannot forgive for her upper-middle-class background and whom he constantly torments in order to extract some reaction from her, to bring her to her knees, while she, having discovered that her only defense is imperturbability, refuses as long as she can to react. And so they render each other, under the sympathetic eye of Cliff, the helpless *tertium quid* in this strange *menage a trios*, until a fourth, Alison’s actress friend Helen, arrives. Helen, with her air of being ‘the gracious representative of visiting royalty’, soon makes the situation intolerable by her very presence, and packs off Alison who is expecting a baby and has not told Jimmy, to her home and family before her falling into Jimmy’s arms at the end of the 2nd act.

In the 3rd act Jimmy turns out to be settled fairly happily with Helen, as far as he can be happy with anyone partly, it seems, because she stands up to him rather more (like bullies in sexual situations, Jimmy appears basically just to want bullying back) and partly because he is bound to her by nothing more complicated than lust. When Cliff announces that he thinks he should leave, Jimmy more or less admits these two possibilities in the play’s most familiar pronouncement :

“It’s a funny thing. You’ve been loyal, generous, and a good friend. But I’m quite prepared to see you wander off, find a new home, and make out on your own. All because of something I want from that girl downstairs, something I know in my heart she’s incapable of giving. You’re worth half a dozen Helens to me or to anyone. And, if you were in my place, you’d do the same thing....Why, why, why do we let these women bleed us to death! Have you ever had a letter, and on it is franked ‘Please Give Your Blood Generously’! Well, the Postmaster-General does that, on behalf of all the women in the world. I suppose people of our generation aren’t able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the 30s & 40s, when we were still kids. There aren’t any good, brave causes left. If the big bang does come, and we all get killed off, it won’t be in the aid of the old-fashioned, grand design. It’ll just be for the Brave New Nothing-very-much-thank-you, about as pointless and inglorious as

stepping in front of a bus. No, there's nothing left for it, me boy, but to let yourself be botched by the women."

It is not, however, Helena who finally reduces him, but Alison, returned after losing her baby. When Helena wants to extract herself from the painful situation Jimmy dismisses her with :

"It's no good trying to fool, yourself about love. You can't fall into it like a soft job, without dirtying up your hands. It makes muscle and guts. And if you can't bear the thought of messing up are nice, clean soul, you'd better give up the whole idea of life, & become a saint. B'coz you'll never make it as a human being. Its either this world or the next."

Then he rounds on Alison :

"Was I really wrong to believe that there's a-kind of-burning virility of mind & spirit that looks for something as powerful as itself ? The heaviest, strongest creatures in this world seem to be loneliest, like the old bear, following his own breath in the dark forest. There's no warm pack, no herd to comfort him. That voice that cries out doesn't have to be a weakling's, does it ?"

But she for once has an answer :

"I was wrong, I was wrong! I don't want to be neutral; I don't want to be saint. I want to be a lost cause. I want to be corrupt & futile! Don't you understand? It's gone! It's gone! That-that helpless human being inside my body. I thought it was so safe, & secure in there. Nothing could take it from me. It was mine, my responsibility. But it's lost. All I wanted was to die. I never knew what it was like. I didn't know it could be like that! I was in pain, & all I could think was you, & what I'd lost. I thought: if only—if only he could see me now, so stupid & ugly & ridiculous. That is what he had been longing for me to feel. This is what he wants to splash about in! I am in the fire, I'm burning, & all I want is to die! It's cost him his child, & any others I might have had! But what does it matter—this is what he wanted from me! Don't you see! I am in the mud at last! I'm groveling and crawling! OH GOD".

Faced at last with a really effective' e.g. of his own handiwork, Jimmy quails, and at the last he and Alison are untied again in their idyllic dream world of bears & squirrels, content, perhaps, never to make it as human beings in the real world around them.

On of the most fascinating things about *Look Back in Anger* is the divergence between Osborne's conscious intentions, as conveyed in his comments & stage directions in the printed text, & what actually emerges in performance. This applies particularly, of course, to the character of Jimmy, and indeed it is arguable that the force and intensity of the play derived mainly from the author's shifting, ambivalent love-hate relationship with his hero.

At the beginning Jimmy is described as ‘a disconcerting mixture of sincerity & cheerful malice, of tenderness & freebooting cruelty; restless, importunate, full of pride, a combination which alienates the sensitive & insensitive alike. Blistering honesty, or apparent honesty, like his, makes few friends. To many he seems sensitive to the point of vulgarity. To others, he is simply a loudmouth. To be as vehement as he is to be almost non-committal’.

That doesn’t sound particularly heroic, & the impression is fostered by the running commentary of stage directions throughout: ‘Jimmy is rather shakily triumphant. He cannot allow himself to look at either of them to catch their response to his rhetoric.....’; ‘He’s been cheated of his response, but he’s got to draw blood somehow’; ‘Jimmy watches her, waiting for her to break’; ‘Jimmy enters .....he is almost giddy with anger, & has to steady himself on the chair.....’ There are constant indications of his neurotic determination to establish himself & keep his supremacy in any situation, inventing trouble if there is none lying around in order to do so, his hysterical persecution of Alison, his childish petulance. Indeed, the image which constantly emerges is that of the spoilt, difficult child, convinced that any world not run entirely for his convenience must of necessity be out of joint, and in need of nothing more than a good slapping-down (which would square with the theory that his misfortune sexually is that he has coupled with a door mat when what he really longs for is a strict disciplinarian nanny-substitute).

And yet somehow this is not quite what comes over in the play on stage. For one thing it is called *Look Back in Anger*, not *Look Back in Petulance*, and both the most familiar interpreters of Jimmy (Kenneth Haigh is the original stage production, Richard Burton in the film) have been stocky, substantial, heroic figures rather than the weekly neurotics one might fairly cast in the role. For another, Osborne has, consciously or unconsciously, provided a complete cover for the heroic interpretation: what by the less ideal view would be merely excuses (everyone is out of step but our Jimmy) become if one looks at it from the other point of view genuine reasons: there are no great causes left, the world is all wrong, and it need not be just the weakling who cries out against it; Jimmy is the saint-like witness to right values in a world gone wrong, the mouthpiece of protest for a dissatisfied generation. And finally, what really makes this interpretation stick in the playgoer’s mind is the burning rhetoric of his great tirades: even if their motivation is to be found in petty personal disputes & minor skirmishes in the battle of the sexes, once Jimmy gets going they generate their own force & convictions; those around him put him with him & listen entranced instead of briskly telling him to shut up & not be so silly, & her very real personal dynamism & magnetism come over to the audience as they do to the other characters on the stage. The only mystery is, why should someone so forceful remain so impotent ? & there we come back at once to the answer he himself provides : it is a deficiency of the modern world, which have made him so.



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## 6.3 A General Summary

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*Look Back in Anger* concerns a group of young people living in a Midland town in the mid-1950s. The husband, Jimmy Porter, is an exundergraduate who has married a wife from a class higher than his own. They share their flat with a young, uneducated friend, Cliff, who helps Jimmy runs a sweet-stall in which business he has been set up by the mother of a friend of his, Hugh Tanner. Most of the play is occupied by the long tirades of abuse spills over into scathing, if bitterly humorous, attacks on his friend and his wife. It is clear that Jimmy blames her for her origins and cannot find a way to reconcile the hatred this engenders with the love and attraction for her, which he also feels.

The arrival of Alison's friend Helena causes Alison, who, without Jimmy knowing, has become pregnant, to decide to leave him. She returns home with her father, and Jimmy has a brief, unsatisfactory affair with Helena. In the meantime Alison has lost her baby and when she returns, broken and in pain, as Jimmy has hoped she would, Helena leaves to allow them to take up the threads of a relationship which can survive only by a process of fantasizing against the dreadful reality of their situation. At the end of the play they are left clinging together in tender and resigned despair.

As John Russell Taylor wrote as early as 1961 in his study of the new wave of dramatists entitled *Anger and After*, John Osborne's 'revolutionary' play which shocked and puzzled its first audience in 1956 is essentially a 'well-made-play' following the basic three act structure conceived by the French dramatists Eugene Scribe (1791-1861) and Victorien Sardou (1831-1908) in the mid-nineteenth century, and developed as the principal dramatic formula for comedy and 'serious' drama in the following hundred years.

In its simplest form the 'well-made-play' formula seeks to provide a logical ordering of events designed to maintain dramatic suspense and to keep an audience sufficiently informed to be interested but puzzled enough not to be bored. To this end it divides the play into three major units : exposition, complication and denouement (or unravelling). The exposition serves to provide the basic information about plot, character and scene to allow an audience to place the action in its social and geographical context. It introduces the relationships between the major figures, and provides, through dialogue, those facts about their lives and the events they have experienced which are necessary for the audience to understand the situation on the stage. The exposition also allows the dramatist to place some apparently innocent piece of action—a letter, a reference to a meeting, or something similar—which will be used later in the action as a device to resolve the complexities, which follow.

Complication (or *scene a faire*) is the part of the action, usually Act Two, or Acts Two and Three in a four-act structure, where the situation of the exposition is deepened

and complicated by new events, the forging of new interactions, or the revelation of the consequences of the past and its effect on the present, often effected by the return of some character from the past.

The third and the final stage of the action, the denouement, allows the solution of the complexities or brings them to a crisis which ends the action of the play. Often the buried devices from the exposition surface here to provide such a resolution.

Clearly *Look Back in Anger* cannot be fitted into this formula as into a mould. But many of its elements are present. Act One, which is long and undivided, does serve to introduce all the major characters either on stage or by description. We meet Jimmy, Alison and Cliff, and are shown the uneasy but functioning relationship they have established. We are introduced to Helena, and are shown the disruptive effect her entrance is likely to produce. We are given lengthy descriptions of all the other characters whose relationships with the main figures in the play shape their present responses. Primarily these are Alison's father and mother; Hugh's mother, who has set Jimmy up with his sweet-stall; Hugh himself; Webster, the only one of Alison's friends whom Jimmy can tolerate, and so on, right down to minor characters, rapidly sketched in the dialogue, such as Alison's brother Nigel.

We learn about Alison's pregnancy, the factor that will come up again in a complex way in Act Two and which provides a sort of resolution when she loses her child in Act Three. We are introduced to the game of bears and squirrels, the full explanation of the significance of which is held over until Act Two Scene One, when Alison tells Helena how it became 'the one way of escaping from everything' for both of them. Finally, the act ends with Jimmy receiving the news of the death of Hugh's mother, providing an effective climax and allowing the complication of Act Two, Alison's resolution to go home, to occur in the period of his absence.

In many ways, then, this first act is constructed in a very direct and simple way along the traditional lines of a 'well-made-play'. It provides all the information we need, outlines the characters and their situations and paints a vivid picture of the atmosphere of stifling boredom into which Jimmy's frustration and violence burst like thunder in sultry, heavy weather.

Act Two is subdivided into two scenes. The first scene is concerned primarily with the effect on the existing situation of the arrival of Alison's friend, Helena. Helena is puzzled, appalled and yet intrigued by the situation she finds. At first she functions as a device to allow Alison to tell the audience in greater depth about the early days with Jimmy. In Act One Alison has had to be a silent character. Now for the first time we are allowed to 'go behind' and see the events of the past from her point of view. In this scene the first section of Act Two Scene One is essentially *expository* (that is, concerned with exposition or providing information).

Helena, as an alternative and fresh target, allows Jimmy to renew his attacks; but

in passing we learn of his own past and childhood. Clearly we could not learn this so easily in dialogue between Jimmy and characters he already knew well. Helena then in Act One Scene One functions strongly to enhance and develop the exposition, serving as a catalyst to allow strands of the past which bear on the situation presented in Act One to be revealed to us in a greater depth.

Act Two Scene One also begins the process of complicating the action by introducing the potential for future dramatic ironies, for instance, Jimmy's hope that Alison will learn to suffer, to understand the meaning of pain, sets up the potential for their response to the loss of their child in Act Three.

Act Two Scene Two introduces the new figure of Alison's father, an ex-Indian Army colonel. This character serves to complicate the action further by failing to behave in the stereotypical way we might expect. His sympathy for his daughters' plight is modified by his sense of how she may have been partly to blame for the estrangement between herself and Jimmy. A sense of continuity if not similarity between the colonel and Jimmy complicates any simple decision we might be tempted to make in favour of one or the other of the characters who have been introduced.

When Helena tells Jimmy at the end of the act that Alison is to have a baby, and he reacts in a violent and bitter outburst, she reveals as the climax of Act Two the attraction she has felt for him and which has emerged only obliquely up until this point. The act ends with their passionate embrace.

The complications established in Acts One and Two are now fully wound up and Act Three must resolve them.

The time passage between Act Two Scene Two and Act Three Scene One is the longest in the play ('several months later'). At first nothing appears to have changed except that Helena is substituted for Alison as the main target of Jimmy's abuse. Her reactions are less profound, and his abuse as a result, less intense. It is a recapitulation of the main theme of the first act but in a minor key, muted and falling in tone. Actions, which are repeated, underpin this—for example the ironing board is again involved in a piece of horseplay.

Cliff's leaving emphasizes this too, since it is clear that he feels he has lost his role when Alison leaves. There is no real struggle between Jimmy and Helena, and his purpose as a buffer and intermediately has gone. The first scene of this final act ends with the return of Alison. Helena seems almost relieved and resolves the situation by asserting her intention of leaving. Jimmy and Alison are left alone to renew their struggle. But there has been a change. Alison, through the loss of the baby, has arrived at that point of desolation which Jimmy wished for her and she capitulates in the longest and most agonized speech she has in the whole play. At the end, Jimmy and she can retreat again to the temporary refuge of bears and squirrels, leaving any future open and in doubt.

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## 6.4 Commentary

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### Introduction

*Look Back in Anger* is often dismissed even now as a play which has dated and the interest of which is purely historical. Usually this view of the play accompanies an interpretation which suggests that there is only one properly realized central character: Jimmy. It further suggests that the other characters are ineffectively drawn and serve only to fill out the gaps in Jimmy's series of dramatic monologues.

If we consider the implications of this view, and try to look at the text of the play, the point at issue would be clear.

### Jimmy : characterization

A good place to begin might be the characterization of Jimmy. Osborne is clearly in the tradition of English dramatists beginning with Bernard Shaw, and descending through J.B. Priestly (b. 1894), Somerset Maugham (1874-1965) and Terrence Rattigan (1911-77) who offer a very detailed account of their characters and the situations they are placed in through stage directions. The detailed and complex description in the opening stage direction (pp. 9-10) of Jimmy Porter's character is a good case in point:

*....we find that JIMMY is a tall, thin young man about twenty-five, wearing a very worn tweed jacket and flannels. Clouds of smoke fill the room from the pipe he is smoking. He is a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting\* cruelty, restless, importunate, full of pride, a combination which alienates the sensitive and insensitive alike. Blistering honesty, or apparent honesty, like his, makes few friends. To many he may seem sensitive to the point of vulgarity. To others, he is simply a loudmouth. To be as vehement as he is to be almost noncommittal.*

Clearly, if this description of Jimmy is realized in and through the dialogue which follows, that is, if the actor who plays Jimmy is given the opportunity by the text to reveal the full complexity of the description, then it will be impossible to dismiss Jimmy Porter as 'a mere mouthpiece', or even a 'spokesman for his generation'. The description draws attention to the paradoxical nature of Jimmy—tenderness and cruelty, cheerful malice, and so forth. Osborne appears to be inviting us here to consider the character of Jimmy in a complex way. He is instructing the actor who plays the part to search the character for its hidden possibilities. There is a stress on the weakness and unsureness of Jimmy, a strong hint that the verbal force and energy is the product of a nervous tension within the character, and is in the contradiction to his physical appearance. He does not have a strong physical appearance : he is a tall, thin young man'. He smokes a pipe, which

he uses as a device to assert a masculinity and assurance that perhaps, in reality, he does not possess. He is a character, the description suggests, who has a strong need to compensate on the surface for weaknesses within himself, weaknesses which he perceives, but not too well or too completely. As a result, there is a feeling behind the description that there are possibilities latent in Jimmy for the capturing of the audience's sympathy if they perceive the real figure behind the mask, the unsure, tender and honest young man behind the blustering, cruel and arrogant surface.

Most people, reading or seeing the play for the first time, would find this a difficult task. The reaction of the reviewers of the early performances has been typical of that of many members off the audience at later performances of the play. Here, for instance, are the views of Patrick Gibbs, reviewing the first production of the play in 1956 for the *Daily Telegraph* :

The leading character, a man of education living in poverty, would seem to be intended as a full-length study in resentment. Something of a sadist and very much an exhibitionist, he has married above himself, apparently out of spite against middle-class respectability. His wife he lashes with a verbal fury that is often witty and always cruel. It is not, however, resentment that is personified as much as self-pity and this causes the sympathy, which the author intends, to be withdrawn. When his wife left him, it seemed she was fortunate. When she returned to him in the end, a broken spirit, were we intended to cheer?

What these comments draw attention to is the immediate focus of sympathy in the first act on Alison and her plight, a focus which is aided by the sympathetic presentation of Cliff. The result of this is to throw into sharp relief those elements in Jimmy Porter's character that Osborne describes as 'freebooting cruelty' and to play down those aspects of his character, which reveal the tenderness beneath. Certainly in the opening few minute of the play we would be forgiven for failing to register the tenderness of Jimmy at all. Instead we should probably note the picking, nagging insistence with which he goads his wife and his friend :

JIMMY : I've just read three whole columns on the English Novel. Half of it in French. Do the Sunday papers make you feel ignorant?

CLIFF : Not arf.

JIMMY : Well, are *are* ignorant. You're just a peasant. [*To Alison*] What about you? You're not a peasant are you?

ALISON : [*absently*] What's that?

JIMMY : I said do the papers make you feel you're not so brilliant after all ?

ALISON : Oh—I haven't read them yet.

JIMMY : I didn't ask you that. I said—

CLIFF : Leave the poor girlie alone. She's busy.

JIMMY : Well, she can talk, can't she? You can talk, can't you? You can express an opinion. Or does the White Woman's Burden make it impossible to think? (pp. 10-11)

Yet the atmosphere of the opening helps to establish some legitimacy to Jimmy's claim that the other two are stifling him, and themselves. The slow opening, with only the occasional sound of Alison's iron, the rustling of the papers, the long, boring emptiness of a chilly, spring evening captures the mood in a small midland town where there is nothing to do, and nowhere to go, except the pictures or the pub.

In addition, Jimmy's nagging aggression, there are subtle indications to the audience that Jimmy's cruelty is part of a complex defense mechanism, which hides his own basic insecurity. He is to sprinkle his attacks on the 'posh Sundays' with enough intellectual references and word games to prove his right and ability to be critical of them: 'the English Novel' : 'the White Woman's Burden'; and, in an ironic allusion to T.S.Eliot's Mrs. Porter (*in The Waste Land*) 'And Mrs. Porter gets them all going with the first yawn.'

On the surface Cliff's tenderness towards Alison may appear to emphasize Jimmy's aggression and cruelty. But Cliff shows affection and understanding towards Jimmy too, and the audience is required as a result. Thus, when Cliff kicks out at Jimmy in Alison's defense, there is instantly a note of comic tenderness in his following comment, as if he is trying to tell Jimmy that he understands and that he is buffer for them both, not just for one alone.

CLIFF : [*leaning forward*] Listen—I'm trying to better myself. Let me get on with it, you big, horrible man. Give it me. [*Puts out his hand for the paper*]

It is Cliff who draws our attention to the most overt clue to Jimmy's insecurity and weakness, in his joking attack on his need for food.

JIMMY : [*picks up a weekly*] I'm getting hungry.

ALISON : Oh no, not already!

CLIFF : He's is a bloody pig.

JIMMY : I'm not a pig. I just like food—that's all.

CLIFF : Like it ! You're like a sexual maniac—only with you it's food. You'll end up in the *News of the World*, boy, you wait. James Porter, aged twenty-five, was bound over last week after pleading guilty to interfering with a small cabbage and two tins of beans on his way home from the Builder's Arms. The accused said he hadn't been feeling well for sometime, and had been having blackouts. He asked for his good record as an air-raid warden, second class, to be taken into account. JIMMY : [*Grins*] Oh yes, yes, I like to eat. I'd like, too. Do you mind ? (p. 12)

Jimmy's response to Cliff (notice that he grins) indicates an appreciation of the imagination in Cliff's story, and is a clue to the attraction that has drawn them together as friends. He is also tacitly acknowledging Cliff's role as helpmate to both of them. But behind this psychological exchange there is Cliff's perception that Jimmy is like a child, whose

eating is a cry for comfort in a world where he is always falling down and cutting himself on the edges of things.

In response to the play's opening it would be easy, ignoring such signs, to dismiss Jimmy Porter as just another 'Rebel Without A Cause', a self-indulgent young man who doesn't know what he wants and screams and shouts because he can't get it. Much of his behaviour conforms to this childish pattern, for instance his screaming at Alison to make tea (p. 12), and then his sudden announcement that he doesn't want any (p. 14). Jimmy Porter does behave through much of the opening act, where the audience is experiencing his character for the first time, like a spoilt child. He wants the moon. But beneath the self-indulgence, the small hints in the text are sufficient for an actor with skill to indicate that this is a symptom rather than the root of his character. Restless, selfish and egotistic as his responses are, they are nevertheless rooted in a legitimate anger against a world where people make no demands, but are content to accept what they are offered. His anger is directed at those who come close enough to be struck, but his dissatisfaction is with himself, and with his inability to change the world. At his best in this scene he does not escape his own denunciation:

JIMMY : Oh heavens, how I long for a little ordinary human enthusiasm. Just enthusiasm that's all. I want to hear a warm thrilling voice cry out Hallelujah! [*He bangs his breast theatrically*] Hallelujah ! I'm alive ! I've an idea. Why don't we have a little game? Let's pretend that we're human beings, and that we are actually alive. Just for a while. What do you say? Let's pretend we're human.

Although the attack here is directed dramatically towards Alison, the shift from first person singular to first person plural indicates that Jimmy is including himself in his condemnation. It is interesting to speculate what the other actors might do at a moment like this. Cliff, perhaps, would look away, in a moment of embarrassed perception. Hence his next line ('What did he say?'); Alison, perhaps allows her eyes to rest on the bear and squirrel on the sideboard, the nearest she and Jimmy get to 'being human'.

The insight behind this speech is picked up in an amplified way in Osborne's later play *The Entertainer* (1957), when the fading stage Comic, Archie Rice, reflects on an old black jazz singer he heard sing years ago in America:

She was poor and lonely and oppressed like nobody you've ever known. Or me, for that matter. I never even liked that of music but to see that black whore singing her heart out to the whole world, you knew somehow in your heart that it didn't really matter how much you kick people, the real people, how much you despise them, if they can stand up and make sure, just a natural noise like that, there's nothing wrong with them, only with everybody else....But you won't hear it anywhere now. I don't suppose we'll ever hear it again. There's nobody who can feel that. I wish to God I could....

In *The Entertainer* Archie Rice expresses his own sense of failure, and of personal

involvement in the process, much more clearly than Jimmy Porter. But behind Jimmy's attacks is the same half formed sense of his own collusion in the process of conformity and acceptance, which he despises. To miss this note in the character is to miss the subtlety of Osborne's conception of this complex figure. The fact that Jimmy Porter's protest is mingled with nauseous self-pity and self-indulgence ought not to swamp our awareness that he is crying out in genuine anguish, and that the source of this anguish is in his awareness, as in Archie Rice's, that he too is finally passionless, convictionless and adrift, unable to act because of his own sloth and inadequacy :

'Nobody thinks, nobody believes. No beliefs, no convictions and no enthusiasms. Just another Sunday evening.'

### **The relationship between Cliff and Alison :**

The action that erupts at the end of Act I is the first clear indication of the tenderness in Jimmy which has been buried so far beneath the free-booting cruelty and cheerful malice of the earlier action. The routine of Alison ironing is broken just as the routine of Jimmy's attack on those close to him is broken by Cliff's attempt to drive Jimmy from the cover of his despair through humour.

CLIFF : Well, shall we dance? [He pushes Jimmy round the floor, who is past the mood for making this kind of fooling] Do you come here often?

JIMMY : Only in the mating season. All right, all right, very funny [He tries to escape but Cliff holds him like a vice] Let me go.

CLIFF : Not until you've apologized for being nasty to everyone. Do you think bosoms will be in or out, this year?

JIMMY : Your teeth will be out in a minute, if you don't let go! (pp. 24-6)

The sudden reversal of feeling, which follows Alison's being hurt in the struggle between the two men, is one of the most violent shifts in language in the play. The fact that Osborne employs what on surface is an apparent cliché is less important than the fact that Jimmy, who uses it, talks usually neither in terms of endearment nor in clichés.

CLIFF : [*picking himself up*] She's hurt. Are you all right?

ALISON : Well, does it look like it!

CLIFF : She's burnt her arm on the iron.

JIMMY : Darling, I'm sorry.

ALISON : Get out!

JIMMY : I'm sorry, believe me. You think I did it on purpose.

ALISON : [*her head shaking helplessly*] Clear out of my SIGHT! [*He stares at her uncertainly. Cliff nods to him, and he turns and goes out of the door.*] (p.26)

This is the scene too in which we are shown more of both Alison and Cliff than we have seen in the plays so far; Again, this process employs reaction rather than direct revelation of character. It is in reaction to Jimmy's statement that the characters are exposed.



CLIFF : Here we are then. Let's have your arm. [*He kneels down beside her, and she holds out her arm*] I've put it under the tap. It's quite soft. I'll do it ever so gently. [*Very carefully, he rubs the soap over the burn*] All right? [*She nods*] You're a brave girl.

ALISON : I don't feel very brave, [*tears harshening her voice*] I really don't Cliff. I don't think I can take much more. [*Turns her head away*] I think I feel rather sick.

CLIFF : All over now. [*Puts the soap down*] Would you like me to get you something? [*She shakes her head. He sits on the arm of the chair, and puts his arm around her. She leans her head back on to him.*] Don't upset yourself, lovely. [*He massages the back of her neck, and she lets her head fall forward.*] (p.27)

In a small section like this we see how both Cliff's and Alison's dependence on one another is strengthened by the roles they are able to adopt. Alison here slips very easily back into the role of the small girl and Cliff assumes the role of the father, yet this too is as much play-acting as the bears and squirrels which are later to be shown to be the substitute for the real 'human enthusiasm' that Jimmy has demanded from all of them.

The failure of the roles to sustain the characters is shown in the fact that Alison and Cliff immediately reverse their positions. She leans back and closes her eyes again.

ALISON : Bless you. [*He kisses the top of her head*]

Cliff reveals his own very strong dependence on both Alison and Jimmy in the speech which follows :

CLIFF : I don't think I'd have the courage to live on my own again in spite of everything. I'm pretty rough, and pretty ordinary really, and I'd seem worse on my own. And you get fond of people too, worse luck.

It is this final comment that Alison picks up when she replies, 'I don't think I want anything more to do with love any more. I can't take it on.' Cliff reverts to the father role in the following speech :

CLIFF : You're too young to start giving up. Too young, and too lovely. Perhaps I'd better put a bandage on that, do you think so? (pp. 27-8)

But there has been there, at that point in play, a moment that is never to recur when Cliff comes close to revealing a sexual love for Alison but it is a moment that fades with Alison's denial of that possibility and is not referred to again until Alison's lengthy explanation to Helena in Act Two Scene One of the relationship between Cliff and herself :

ALISON : He had his own jazz band once. That was when he was still a student, before I knew him. I rather think he'd like to start another, and give up the stall altogether.

HELENA : Is Cliff in love with you ?

ALISON : [*Stops brushing for a moment*] No....I don't think so.

HELENA : And what about you ? You look as though I've asked you a rather peculiar question. The way to help. After all, your behaviour together is a little strange by most people's standards, to say the least.

ALISON : You mean you've seen us embracing each other?

HELENA : Well, it doesn't seem to go on as much as it did, I admit. Perhaps he finds my presence inhibiting even if Jimmy's isn't.

ALISON : We're simply fond of each other, there's no more to it than that.

HELENA : Darling, really! It can't be as simple as that.

ALISON : You mean there must be something physical too ? I suppose there is, but it's not exactly a consuming passion with either of us. It's just a relaxed, cheerful sort of thing, like being warm in bed. You're too comfortable to bother about moving for the sake of some other pleasure.

HELENA : I find it difficult to believe anyone's that lazy!

ALISON : I think we are. (pp. 41-2)

Finally, what Alison is seeking to express to Helena at that moment, is that there is not a physical or indeed even a sexual passion between Cliff and herself but that they are fundamentally more concerned with the peace that they can attain by restraint rather than the pleasure they might enjoy through fulfillment. In a real way they are proving in their relationship the truth of Jimmy's assertion that 'Nobody can be bothered. No one can raise themselves out of their delicious sloth'. Significantly, that quotation is followed by a direct attack on Alison and Cliff :

JIMMY : You two will drive me round the bend soon...I know it, as sure I'm sitting here. I know you're going to drive me mad. (p. 15)

And the action of the play underlines the fact that the burn which has been received by Alison at the end of Act One is at least as much the fault of Cliff as the fault of Jimmy. This is not to assert that Cliff and Alison are attacked as characters at this point in the play but rather that they are shown to be as complex in their own way and in their reactions to Jimmy as he himself is and as much involved in the creation of the situation that they must all endure. It is, of course, here at the end of Act One that Alison reveals for the first time to Cliff that she has realized that she is pregnant. Cliff acts out the role that is normally assigned to the lover in such situations.

CLIFF : What are you going to do?

ALISON : I've no idea.

CLIFF : [*Having cut her bandage, he starts tying it*] That to tight?

ALISON : Fine, thank you. [*She rises, goes to the ironing board, folds it up, and leans it against the food cupboard.*]

CLIFF : Is it.....Is it.....?

ALISON : Too late to avert the situation ? [*Places the iron on the rack of the stove*] I'm not certain yet. May be not. If not, there won't be any problems, will there?

CLIFF : And if it is too late? [*Her face turned away from him. She simply shakes her head*] (p. 29)

In a peculiar way, Cliff, at this point in the play, has become a means of showing that tenderness and love for Alison which Jimmy so clearly possesses and is yet unable to express to her in a direct way. When Jimmy returns we are shown the only form in which he and Alison can express the love they have for one another. Jimmy is beginning, almost automatically, to move back towards the aggressive mood which had dominated the action of the play to this point and which has only been broken by the accident with the ironing board. It is in reaction to Alison's alarm at this new aggression that Jimmy's tenderness is revealed.

**The Fantasy world of Jimmy and Alison :**

JIMMY: ..... and there's Hugh's mum, of course. I'd almost forgotten her. She's been a good friend to us, if you like. She's even letting me buy the sweet-stall off her in my own time. She's only bought it for us, anyway. She's so fond of you. I can never understand why you're so — distant with her.

ALISON : [*alarmed at this threat of a different mood*] Jimmy—please no!

JIMMY : [*staring at her anxious face*] You're very beautiful. A beautiful, great-eyed squirrel. [*She nods brightly, relieved*] Hoarding, nut-matching squirrel. [*She mimes this delightedly*] With polished, gleaming fur, and an ostrich feather of a tail.

ALISON : Wheeeeeeeee !

JIMMY : How I envy you. [*He stands, her arms around his neck*].

ALISON : Well, you're a jolly super bear, too. A really sooooooooooooooooooper, marvelous bear.

JIMMY : Bears and squirrels ARE marvelous.

ALISON : Marvelous AND beautiful. (pp. 33-4)

This world of squirrels and bears has been the only refuge to which they have always been able to retreat. These scenes are difficult to reconcile at first with the angry, swinging cruelty of the opening of Act One and yet the psychology is clearly delineated. The childish, insistent demands of Jimmy, the need to eat for comfort, to which Cliff draws attention, the strongly asserted dependence on characters from the past, all point in the same direction, and it is a direction which naturally leads to this defensive world of imaginary furry little animals. The make-believe game of bears and squirrels is more than a retreat from an intolerable situation in their marriage. It is expression of a mutual dependence, a dependence which stems in Jimmy's case from his failure to relate to his father. In Alison's case, although the action buries the implication deeper than in Jimmy's, similar point is underlined. In Act Two Scene Two, for example, when Alison's father has arrived too take her home, a clear indication of the identical roles they have played in their respective marriages is brought out :

COLONEL : Perhaps you and I were the ones most to blame.

ALISON : You and I!

COLONEL : I think you may take after me a little my dear. You like to sit on the fence because it's comfortable and more peaceful.

ALISON : Sitting on the fence ! I married him, didn't I ?

COLONEL : Oh, yes, you did. (p.66)

Once again, the action of the play points to a complex situation in which Jimmy's reaction and Jimmy's character is only one factor. By the end of Act One, we have learned that Cliff and Alison are not merely ciphers.

**Helena, and what she reveals about Jimmy's attitude to women :**

The arrival of Helena at the end of the act is of course necessary to pick up the underlying continuing struggle, the revelation of which is the main point of the whole exposition. Jimmy introduces the violent attack on Alison, with which the act ends, in a rather peculiar way. In a speech, which contains more intellectual references and allusions than any other in the play so far, he launches into yet another of his violent attacks on 'women':

JIMMY : What does she want? What would make her ring up? It can't be for anything pleasant. Oh well, we shall soon know. [*He settles on the table*] Few minutes ago things didn't seem so bad either. I've just about had enough of this 'expense of spirit' lark, as far as women are concerned. Honestly, it's enough to make you become a scoutmaster or something isn't it? Sometimes I almost envy old Gide and the Greek Chorus boys. Oh, I'm not saying that it mustn't be hell for them a lot of the time. But, at least they do seem to have a cause—not a particularly good one, it's true. But plenty of them do seem to have a revolutionary fire about them, which is more than you can say for the rest of us. Like Webster, for instance, he doesn't like me—they hardly ever do.

[*He is talking for the sake of it, only half listening to what he is saying*]

I dare say he suspects me because I refuse to treat him either as a clown or as a tragic hero. He's like a man with a strawberry mark—he keeps thrusting it in your face because he can't believe it doesn't interest or horrify you particularly. [*Picks up Alison's handbag thoughtfully, and starts looking through it*] As if I give a damn which way he likes his meat served up. I've got my own strawberry mark—only it's in a different place. No, as far as the Michelangelo Brigade's concerned, I must be a sort of right-wing deviationist. If the Revolution ever comes, I'll be the first to be put up against the wall, with.

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## 6.5 Questions

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1. Examine the character of Jimmy in Look Back in Anger.
2. Comment on the relationship between Cliff and Alison and its dramatic significance in Look Back in Anger.
3. Do you agree that Look Back in Anger has already started dating and is losing its relevance ? Substantiate your answer.

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## Unit 1 □ Tom Jones : Henry Fielding

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- 1.1 Objective
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 Brief note on Author and Text
- 1.4 Critical Analysis of Text
- 1.5 Structures and Meaning
- 1.6 Language and Style
- 1.7 Conclusion
- 1.8 Questions
- 1.9 References

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### 1.1 Objective

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We remember Fielding not only because we read *Tom Jones* and enjoy it every time with renewed fervour but also because he was one of the pioneers of this art form that has achieved a great height during the last century. He contributed as well as anybody else in the making of this particular genre. The objective of this material is to familiarize the students with this important literary text and to appreciate its rich complexity in the following terms.

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### 1.2 Introduction

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On hearing the news of Fielding's death, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu wrote, "He was so formed for happiness, it is a pity he was not immortal!" Interestingly, Fielding was not a happy man in his personal life; but he had a tremendous zest for life and his books reveal a happy world-full of glamour and game. One would say, he took the task of writing novels with the approach of a writer of a comedy. Later Lamb adopted this philosophy with great effect.

The *orbis terrarum* of literary criticism has not had much difficulty in deciding that *Tom Jones* is something else than mere size, indeed Fielding's greatest work, though Johnson and Thackeray seem to have preferred *Amelia*. The characteristics of *Amelia* were well suited to contrast with and atone for the rather exaggerated delineation of Fielding's Bohemianism which it had suited Thackeray to give; and, speaking to a mixed audience, he no doubt felt it easire to dwell on the later rather than the earlier book. The extreme condemnation of Tom the hero as distinct from

Tom the book, which is put elsewhere in the mouth of Colonel Newcome, is at least partly dramatic; and one is not sure that the indirect eulogy in *Pendennis*—that *Tom Jones* was the last book in which an English novelist was allowed to depict a man—does not make up for any censure expressed or implied elsewhere. It is, without the grandiloquence, nearly as lofty a eulogy as Gibbon's. What that great writer said is universally known, and no comment on it is necessary, except a reminder that in many ways Gibbon's tastes were rather Continental or Cosmopolitan than English, and that he was by no means likely to be bribed by the intensely national flavour of the novel. Of late there has been a disposition to demur to Coleridge's hardly less lofty eulogy of the mere craftsmanship shown in the novel. But Scott, a practised critic, a novelist of unsurpassed competence, and not always a very enthusiastic encomiast of Fielding, has endorsed it in the Introduction to the *Fortunes of Nigel*. After such names it is unnecessary to cite any others by way of authority, and we may pass to the direct consideration of the book itself.

*Tom Jones*, then, is a novel, which differs from almost all other novels both in the range and the precision of its scale and scheme. Its personages are extremely numerous, and there is justice in the half-humorous protestation of the author, in reference to the apparent repetition in the two landladies, that they are 'most carefully differentiated from each other'. Its scenes are extremely varied, and each has its local colour adjusted with perfect propriety. Of the actions and passions represented it is indeed possible for the advocatus diaboli to urge that, whatever their range and truth to nature within their limits, there is a certain want of height and depth in them. But this is only saying in other words that the middle of the eighteenth century was not the beginning of the sixteenth; that Fielding had not the tragic touch; and that though he was most emphatically a 'maker', he was not in the transferred and specialized sense a poet. Lastly, all these varying excellences and excellent variations are adjusted together in so cunning an arrangement of dramatic narrative, that some have found it absolutely impeccable, while few have done more than protest against the Man of the Hill, question whether we do not see more than we need of Mrs. Fitzpatrick, and ask whether the catastrophe is not, especially considering the very leisurely movement of the earlier scenes, somewhat hurried and huddled. As for the characters, exception, so far as I know, has not been seriously taken to any save on the score of art and nature to Allworthy and, Blifil, on the score of morality to Mr. Jones himself. Some have indeed expressed their desire for something with more air and fire than the heroine; but there are always people who grumble thus. Let us try to sweep the negatives aside before attempting the affirmative.

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### 1.3 Brief Note on Author and Text

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Henry Fielding was born on the 22nd April, 1707 at Sharpham park. When Henry was only two years old, his family moved to East Stour, in Dorset where his father General Fielding, had set himself up as a farmer. Henry's mother died just before he was eleven, and his father married again. Later Fielding was sent to a local public school. But it was at Eton that Henry learnt to love literature, especially the classics. Fielding left Eton at the age of seventeen. For a few years he lived a life of a man of leisure. He was very handsome, witty and quick in his spirit. At the age of eighteen he fell in love with Sarah Andrew. And he made an attempt to elope with her but was caught in the way. In 1728, for the first time he published a satirical poem and had his first play produced at Drury Lane. Then within a month he went to Holland to become a student in the Faculty of Letters at the University of Leyden. It was turning point in his career. He began to learn the classics seriously.

Fielding hardly deserved the tribute to him by Bernard Shaw who called him the 'greatest practicing dramatist with the single exception of Shakespeare...'. However, he certainly achieved a high degree of proficiency in writing satirical plays whose purpose was to be immediately effective journalism. Of the wit, there can be no question at all. In Shaw's words, "Fielding, driven out of the tradition of Moliere and Aristophanes, took to that of Cervantes."

In 1734, Fielding had married Charlotte Cradock, after a four-year courtship ending in the elopement. He described and celebrated her character as Sophia Western in *Tom Jones*. Henry produced the first of his major work, *Joseph Andrews*, in 1742. But this year was brought a personal crisis as well. Charlotte died in 1742, Fielding's monetary condition deteriorated swiftly, Later he remarried Mary Daneil who had been his former wife's maid. No wonder it became a butt of comedy.

For a number of years Fielding had been the most brilliant of the political writers supporting the Government, and at last he got his reward, in 1784, he was appointed Justice of Peace for Westminster and the Country of Middlesex. Interestingly he satirized the magistrates in *Joseph Andrews*, *Tom Jones* and in *Amelia*. He had not been maintaining good health. He suffered from asthma and dropsy. In 1754, he decided to visit Portugal in quest of health. At first, it seemed that Portugal was doing him good. But the recovery was an illusion. He died on the 8th October, 1754.

Fielding, with Richardson (the names are always coupled in any discourse on the Novel and with good reason) strikes a note of robust realism in the 18th century novel. Unlike Richardson, a novelist interested in feminine psychology, he seems to have a comprehensive grip over human nature. Like his contemporary, his stories are

not thin. That is why he always aimed at the ‘epic’ dimension of his works. He stands as a powerful raconteur, the teller of tales. Fielding comes to adopt a novel method of depending upon his personal stock of knowledge. In *Tom Jones* (published in 1749, one year after *Clarissa*) we find a broad and fast moving panorama of life and not “a slow-motion picture of life”. And as an artist he adopts a selective process relinquishing the unnecessary details. Fielding intended that his novel should furnish not merely entertainment, but also instruction. He deliberately used it as a vehicle for his artistic ideas and ideals. These explanations he put forward, partly in ‘initial essays’ prefixed to the several books and partly in shorter comments interjected, when suitable opportunities occurred, into the narrative. The regular insertion of any essay at the commencement of each division of the work is a peculiarity of *Tom Jones*. The prefatory chapters have, for the most part, no organic connection with the chapters which follow. Fielding compared them with prologues to plays. *Just* as prologues were, as a rule, so slightly connected with the plays which they prefaced that the prologue to anyone play could just as well serve for any other; so, said, he, most of the initial chapters might as properly be prefixed to any other book in this history as to this one. The majority of them are, in fact, independent dissertations, which can be taken out of their places and rearranged in any order, or even—without injury to the story though not without loss of pleasure and profit to the reader—omitted altogether. In this polished miniature essays, Fielding expounded some of his views on literature and life.

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## 1.4 Critical Analysis of Text

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The object of the picaresque novel is to take a central figure through a succession of scenes, introduce a great number of characters, and thus build up a picture of society. Like *Moll Flanders*, this is exactly the pattern, which the story of *Tom Jones* follows. The hero is taken through a succession of scenes and situations, and has number of adventures on the roads and inside inns. He encounters a galaxy personalities of different types and tempers. In this way a picture of society is gradually built up.

A novelist gained some advantages through the use of the ‘picaresque’ mode of writing. Above all, it did not demand a well-organized or closely-knit plot, though Fielding refused to make use of this advantage. The mode also gave an author an opportunity to introduce, a wide range of characters and incidents. Tom, for instance, has adventures in the countryside, on the road to London, and in London itself. He meets thieves and rouges, rescues damsels in distress, falls in love, fights, duels, gets arrested and imprisoned, gets cheated by seemingly innocent people and helped by apparent scoundrels. The picaresque mode, furthermore, offers a writer the change to



present the chequered life and culture of his age. It gives him an ideal chance to criticize and satirize the evils of his age and its customs. But the essential feature of his picaresque novel is the travels and adventures of the hero. Like the hero of the picaresque novels, *Tom Jones* undertakes a journey, and meets with a succession of adventures on the way to his destination.

The story begins like this. Accompanied by a schoolmaster, Partridge, Tom sets out for London. It is easy to see in Partridge a parallel to Sancho Panza, the travelling companion to Don Quixote, in Cervantes's picaresque novel *Don Quixote*. Fielding also sends his heroine, with a suitable lady companion, on adventures along the highway. On the way, Tom meets with a number of adventures, some of which are amorous in nature. He goes from place to place stopping at numerous inns on the way. He joins the army as a volunteer but being seriously wounded in a fray, cannot accompany the soldiers with whom he wants to go. He meets several strange persons, one of whom is the Man of the Hill, who willfully leads a lonely life. He rescues the old man from being attacked by two ruffians. The next morning he saves Mrs. Waters from being killed by Ensign Northern. After the boisterous scenes in Upton Inn, Tom and Partridge are again on the road. They now meet beggars, highwaymen, and finally fall among gypsies in whose camp they spend a night. Finally they reach London. But Tom's adventures do not come to an end there. He meets Lady Bellaston, a lustful woman who for some time supports him in London. Misfortune, however, persistently dogs his heels, and he is imprisoned in London. In this way the story of *Tom Jones* is a long string of adventures in different scenes and situations.

If *Tom Jones* is studied, we find that the hero is sent on travels by 'which device he comes across hosts of characters, of diverse types and temperaments, The travelling hero meets persons pursuing different occupations and belonging to different social strata. Besides, he has a one succession of adventures most of which befall him on the roads and inside the inn. Now a novel in which the hero is sent on travels for the sake of adventures, and in which he passes through different scenes and meets different sorts of persons is called a 'picaresque' novel. We can say that *Tom Jones* has several traits of the picaresque novel.

There is a unity of design in the many little incidents of the novel. One of the unifying factors is the pursuit motif. Tom is turned out of doors, Sophia follows him. She catches up with him in the inn at Upton but not the pursuit is reversed. From Upton it is Tom who pursues Sophia. Meanwhile Squire Western has set out in pursuit of his daughter, and finally Square Allworthy and Blifil must go to London in pursuit of Western and the scenes at Upton occur at the center of the story and it is here that we again pick up Partridge and Jenny Jones. It is at Upton also that the

set of London characters first begins to appear with Mrs. Fitzpatrick and her husband as its representatives. Fitzpatrick pursuing his wife. From the central scenes at Upton Inn; the novel pivots around itself. It is at Upton Inn, in the mathematical midpoint of the story that country and city come together. The initial pursuit motif; beginning at the end of Book Six, finishes its arabesque at the end of Book Eight again with nice mathematical balance when Tom reaches London and is enabled to meet Sophia. Now, it is Blifil who pursues Sophia, so that eventually everyone winds up in London for the demovement. Fielding manages to gather many pursuing and pursued people together, in the proper places and at the proper times for intricate involvement, and complicated infringe. All that can be said is that it must be a small world and that's why Fielding is so readily able to do this. The pursuit motif is, then, not only a provision for comic situation but, as the immediate dynamics of action, it is, integral to the plot development.

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## 1.5 Structures and Meaning

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*Tom Jones* has several traits of the picaresque novel, yet in one essential point it differs greatly from the picaresque tradition. Unlike the picaresque novel, Tom Jones has a coherent and well-knit and well-planned plot. It further shows a harmony between characters and incidents. Tom Jones, the central character, is contrasted with Blifil. The wicked Blifil, is indeed Tom's opposite, and the chief cause of his sorrows. Blifil provides the chief character contrast in the book. For while the curve of tragedy is spun from within the tragic protagonist, produced out of his own passions and frailties; the curve of comedy is spun socially and gregariously as the common product of men in society. Out of the gregarious action in Tom Jones, the conflict between hero and villain is propelled to a resolution. In the end, the rogue who appeared to be a good man is exposed in his true nature as rogue, and the good man, who appeared to be a rogue, is revealed in his true good nature. Other similar exposures of other characters happen towards 'the end.

The 'Picaresque' novel offers criticism of the age whose picture it presents. Cervantes in his great picaresque novel, *Don Quixote*, gives a smashing blow to the tradition of chivalry. He ridicules knight errantry by making his hero, Don Quixote, charge windmills. The novels of Fielding too offer a criticism of his age and society. In *Joseph Andrews*, for instance, Fielding ridicules the ways of corrupt society. The laws of that society are meant to oppress the poor. Its lawyers are, selfish and egocentric. Its priests are worldly-minded. Its aristocracy is dishonest and lustful. A similar satirical picture of a corrupt society is presented in *Tom Jones*. Tom is a good man, and yet he suffers, for he falls a victim to deceit and treachery, cruelty and

revenge. The 'picaresque' novel is not purely a novel of adventures. It has an innate moral or satirical purpose. It exposes the vice and corruption inherent in a society. It ridicules its folly and frivolity. If its purpose is wider and universal, as in *Tom Jones*, it ridicules folly, vice and weakness of mankind in general. Characters like, Square and Thawackum, Bridge Allworthy, Captain Blifil and young Blifil, Mrs. Honour and lady Bellaston are epitomes of hypocrisy and dishonesty and Fielding exposes them in the novel. It is however, undeniable that the defects of Allworthy and Blifil appear at this point more than elsewhere, and indeed to some extent produce the effect complained of. And I shall further admit that these two characters, especially Blifil, seem to me almost the only sports in Fielding's sun. For Allworthy we can indeed make some excuse—lame after its kind.

*Tom Jones* like, Don Quixote is characterized by a systematic organization of contrasts. One attitude is played off against the other and one way of life is contrasted with the other. There is a constant detail of contrast in the character relationships, scene relationships and even verbal relationships. This novel feels the full and direct artistic impact of Don Quixote. Like Cervantes Fielding uses the 'point of view' of the omniscient author. His world is populous and extensive in its spatial design. One character alone does not demand attention; the author's own humorous irony is itself one of the materials of the novel. In the 'head-chapters' a contrast is provided between intelligence focused 'on' the human situation he has created and the intelligence of the characters within the created situation.

*Tom Jones* is a social document of historical value. The novel is, obviously, the mirror of the social morality, the condition of the landed gentry, and of the corrupt upper strata of life. The life of the town, the countryside and the metropolis has been drawn in a graphic manner in the novel. Fielding does not give his own experience alone, but the conditions as registered by the social barometer. It is the countryside which has been shown best in the novel for in it we find the actual human figures which matter, London gives only the types of the corrupt aristocracy in the characters of Lady Bellaston and Lord Fellamar.

The culture history of the time as revealed by the novel has the sexual morality on one side and social mores on the other. The universalized cultural facts are of great importance. It appears from the novel that the social morality must have been at a low ebb. His two comic epics *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* mirror sexual morality in a blatant form. Some facts are shocking indeed. The latter is enmeshed in conditions which shock the refined sentiment. But Fielding has not written the two things of life in a low manner. He is great in the sense that he has written about the morality of the time in a consummate manner. The low matter has been attempted in an elevated manner.

In the age of Fielding there was no dearth of the sluts whose conduct was discussed in the open. The upper strata were most corrupt wherein the lords and the ladies were nothing but libertines. The immorality depicted by Fielding pervaded every stratum of society. Molly Seagrim, Mrs. Waters and Lady Bellaston are the figures who interpret the sexual morality or immorality of the time with historical precision. The illegitimacy of Tom himself is a pointer to the immoral conditions of the age.

The observations of a great novelist on the subject of his art are naturally of special interest and the student of literature may possibly regard the essay on this topic as the most valuable and important. Fielding claimed to be the founder of a new province of writing, which he named 'prosaic-cornie-epic', or the 'heroic, historical prosaic poem'. In *Joseph Andrews* he had described the general character of this new species : but he deemed it desirable in *Tom Jones* to offer some additional comments and explanations.

At the outset he emphasizes the point that the writer of a comic prose epic has his rough materials provided for him in the actual facts of human nature. He does not invent them out of his own brain as does the fanciful romance writer; he discovers them already existing in the world about him. Hence his work had better not be called a 'romance'; it rather resembles a 'history'. For, just as the historian draws his materials from authoritative records, so a writer of the new fiction draws his materials from an authoritative source, namely, 'the vast authentic doomsday—book of nature'. The materials are then supplied; but they still need to be artfully 'dressed up' for the reader. And for proper and fudicious dealing with them two principles are laid down. The first is the Principle of Selection. The good fiction writer must on no account imitate the method of some 'painful and voluminous' historians, who consider themselves obliged to chronicle all happenings, important or unimportant, with equal fullness; whose histories, indeed, 'resemble' a newspaper; which consists of just the same number of words, whether there be any news in it or not. On the contrary, he must practice the sagacious selection recommended by Horance, passing over commonplace and insignificant matters and reporting those alone which are sufficiently curious or momentous to merit a place in his history. The second principle is the Principle of Lively and Varied Presentation. A monotonous record of facts and events is inevitably boring. The storywriter, therefore, should seize every opportunity to include in his narrative 'surely similes, descriptions, and other kind of poetical embellishments'.

The humor in *Tom Jones* is primarily high comedy, as illustrated by the techniques of hyperbole and double meaning in the novel. These techniques are also a part of

'School for Wives' by Moliere and 'Henry IV, Part One'. There is a good example of hyperbole in 'Tom Jones'. Partridge's fears as they are travelling to London are exaggerated to the point of being a flaw. Fear can be sensible to a certain extent. For instance, being fearful of having one's house robbed if the door is left unlocked at night is a reasonable fear. However, Partridge is frightened to an extreme that causes him trouble with character judgment. He is afraid of the old woman, who offers him and Tom lodging, because he thinks she is a witch. Actually, she is simply the kind servant of the master of the house. Hyperbole is also used in Moliere's play with the character Arnolphe. In this case, Arnolphe's wish for order is exaggerated to a fault. A desire for order is fine to a certain degree. One can understand the need for a calendar to remember appointments, for instance. However, Arnolphe takes his wish for order too far. He thinks he can place Fate in the sequence he wants. He has decided to raise Agnes to be his simple and submissive wife, tell her he will marry her, and then wed her. Obviously, his plan is not wise because Agnes does not want to be part of his plan. In Shakespeare's play Falstaff's presentation of himself in a positive light is overstated to his own detriment. One should bring up his actual strengths when he is on a job interview trying to impress a company. 'Tom Jones' is generally high comedy, as exemplified by the hyperbole and double meanings in the novel. One sees the exaggeration and double meanings in 'School for Wives' and 'Henry IV, Part One' as well. The double meanings are clever. Finally, the exaggeration of normally acceptable qualities to flaws in these great works should teach one not to take fear, the want of order, and bragging about oneself to extremes.

To safeguard the credibility of the story, three rules must be observed. The first is the Rule of Possibility. Nothing should be related which is beyond the range of human capacity: supernatural agencies should be eliminated. Even ghosts should be seldom, if at all, introduced. Miracles are 'banned'. All the occurrences described must be capable of being explained as the effects of natural causes. The second rule is the Rule of Probability. While it is admitted that many improbable things have happened, and do happen, in real life—things which are sufficiently attested by evidence and which a historian of public transaction is consequently justified in recording—yet the novel-writer if he would avoid 'that incredulous hatred mentioned by 'Horace' had I better refrain from introducing such matters into his narrative. In his characterization also he would be wise nor to picture persons of extraordinary goodness wickedness.

There is a notable dissertation on the nature of love. Leaving out of account that capricious youthful sentiment which is sometimes, improperly called love—'the idle and childish liking' of boys and girls, who is often fixed on outside only and on

things of ‘little value and no duration’—Fielding emphasized the distinction between lust and love. The former is simply ‘the desire of satisfying a voracious appetite with a certain quantity of delicate white human flesh’. It might well be called hunger : for a lustful man hungers after a woman in just the same way as an epicure hungers after choice food. This passionate hunger may be very violent for a while, but like every other kind of hunger, it naturally abates when it has been satisfied. Love, on the other hand, in its widest sense (e.g. love of friends, love of mankind), is a kind and benevolent disposition, which is gratified by contributing to the happiness of others and indeed finds ‘a great and exquisite delight in promoting their well-being Fielding here is obviously using the distinction between *amos* and *philia* love in the narrower sense of a special attachment between a man and a woman is in substance this same benevolent disposition with amorous desire added. But since delight in making a dear person happy is the substance of love while desire, inspired by that person’s youth and beauty, is only an accompaniment, love can survive in a good mind, after youth and beauty, and the amorous desires, which they provoke, have passed away.

The major contrast in *Tom Jones*—the novel is the conflict between natural, instinctive feeling and those appearances with which people disguise deny or inhabit natural feeling-intellectual theories, rigid moral dogmas, economic conveniences doctrines of social responsibility. This is the broad thematic contrast in Tom Jones. Form and instinctive feeling engage in constant eruptive combat. The battlefield is between with debris of ripped masks. It is shown in many occasions in Tom Jones that the animal or instinctive party of man is denied. Instead, a more formal appearance is adopted. The damaging uses of intelligence in human nature are depicted—in wicked Blifil’s calculative shrewdness in Black George’s rationalization for keeping Tom’s money, in the absurd intellectual formulas, elaborated by Thwackum and Square. The disparaging effects can also, be seen in Allworthy’s high minded ethics and in Tom’s own idealism. In the other hand of intellectualized thoughts are the instinctive responses that are Tom’s Tom yields formidably and frequently to instinct, and in so doing, he exhibits the ‘naturalness, and therefore the rightness of instinct as constituent of the personality’. Thus, he corrects the overemphasis on formal appearances, which we see in other characters. But at the same time, Tom Jones shows a remarkable absence of that useful social sense which we call desertion a lack of which is damaging certainly to him and a cause of confusion to others. It is the incongruity between what a man might ‘naturally’ be and what he makes of himself by adopting a formulary appearance or mark that gives ‘human nature’ its variety and funniness and treacherousness.

Fielding insisted that his theme was ‘human nature’ and he exposes it in the



various conflicts in the novel. Broadly, human nature refers to a mixture of animal instinct and human intellect. But at many occasions in the book its meaning tips to one side : tending to lean heavily toward, 'animal instinct'. This is also because the animal and instinctive part of man is so frequently disguised or denied by the adoption of formal appearance. The author as being an important, constituent of 'human nature' emphasize instinctive drives. Also, displayed in the narrative are the curious, sometimes beneficial, sometimes damaging uses of intelligence, Blifil's nature is inherently bad—an inheritance from a tenderly hypothetical mother and a brutally hypocritical father. Nature in Tom, on the other hand, seems to be congenitally good though he had the same mother as Blifil and a father on whom we cannot speculate at all, as he is not described. Human nature—presented in the book is a balanced mixture of instinctive drives and feelings and intellectual predilections. It is not instinctive feeling alone; it is the human tendency to revert instinct by intellection. It may be altogether bad or altogether good. And, the ideal human nature would be a happy collaboration of instinct as well as intellect. It would mean neither the suppression of instinct by intellect nor a suppression of intellect by instinct. Tom himself is the apt representative of human nature though he has to learn with difficulty the appropriate balance between instinct and intellect. Tom yields frequently to instinct and in doing so exhibits the 'naturalness and therefore 'rightness' of instinct as a constituent of the personality. But, he also shows a remarkable absence of the useful social sense which we call discretion, a lack of which is damaging certainly to himself and a cause of confusion for others. On the other hand he also no fool—his proposal to Sophia at the end of the book, is conched in civilized, exquisite language. On the whole 'human nature' in Tom, in all its intricacies and difficulties and mistakes, is a splendid thing. It is fine and splendid because it is undisguised. It is unpretentious, unlike the pretentiousness of other characters. Nature is not fine and splendid but indecent and embracing when a man adopts a mask for appearance's sake and allows it to warsp instinct. It is the incongruity between what a man might 'naturally' be and what he makes of himself by adopting a mark that gives human nature its variety funniness and breatherousness. The indecency of 'nature' when it has been going around in a mask and the mask is suddenly ripped off is illustrated grossly when Philosopher Square is exposed in bed with Molly. Square's mask of deistic theory corrupts his instinctive nature into the narrow channel of 'lust'. Henry Fielding also represents 'human nature' beautifully in a variety of other minor characters—Molly Seagrim, Black George, Squire Allworthy, Bridget Allworthy, Jenny Jones and Partidge. In the process Fielding creates characters that represent a wide variety of human beings and their many emotions.

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## 1.6 Language and Style

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Fielding was aware of the fact that he was writing a novel. And novels, as an art form, in his time, were still very new. As a matter of fact, there were too few earlier examples as far as the form, structure and linguistic aspects were concerned. So, Fielding's job, in this case, was two fold. Firstly, he must produce something that would satisfy the expectation of the general intelligentsia. Besides, he must set a platform for the future novelists so far as the technical aspects of novel writing are concerned. Fielding, one would say, did those exactly.

Fielding's is a living language. *Tom Jones* is systematically divided into town and country settings moves freely from one place to another : sometimes from one set of tradition to another. Fielding, uses an ever changing linguistic form to match the singularity of each situation (or characters). Moreover, he uses irony coupled with his own sense of humour in the speeches of his characters. As a result, his language becomes not less appealing than his immortal characters. In fact, it is the use of his language, formulated successfully, that has made his characters more interesting and life like. An interesting study is made when in London, the trusting but foolish little Nancy Miller reveals her pregnancy as a result of being seduced by young Nightingale under promise of marriage, thus occasioning Tom gives his ethic of sexual behavior.

“Lookee, Mr. Nightingale... I am no canting hypocrite, nor do I pretend to the gift of chastity more than my neighbours. I have been guilty with women, I owe it; but I am not conscious that I have ever injured any...”

This speech not only clears Tom's stand on the question of chastity/morality, but also put his character under serious vigil. But that is not the highlight of that candid confession. After all Fielding was writing a picaresque novel. But it also establishes Tom as the hero who has done everything 'right' (social taboos are not his cup of tea!) even when he 'plays foul'.

Fielding also introduces the radical conception of morality. The cut and dried conception of morality looks like to state slab of cheese in his hands. The wide sweep of life comes to incorporate many nuances of human personality, the individuals differing from one another as we find in life.

As a realist Fielding has drawn the diverse quality of souls especially in *Tom Jones*, but there is compassion in his approach towards the characters. The disreputable persons like Black George have been treated sympathetically. This tendency can be traced in some of the modern writers like Somerset Maugham. The 18th century saw the advent of masculine quality in the realm of realism.



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## 1.7 Conclusion

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“As a painter of real life, he was equal to Hogarth; as a mere observer of human nature, he was little inferior to Shakespeare, though without any of the genius and poetical qualities of his mind.” Right from the aristocracy down to the ‘howling pits’ Fielding describes life faithfully. Scott says about him that the persons of the story live in England, travel in England, quarrel and fight in England. His works are imbued with a peculiar English quality.

It is said that Fielding has a precious documentary value for his town manners, country society, stagecoaches, inns, underworld of vice and crime. Though Defoe had done much in the sphere of realistic writings, Fielding moved many steps further to impart the social quality to it. In *Joseph Andrews*, a critic observes, he learnt to face facts. Life as repository of facts is found abundantly in his writings. He achieves a unique verisimilitude. He paints an atmosphere with the details of real life. Even his psychological realism is more penetrating than the realism of material detail. According to some modern critics, his psychological realism is the very foundation of his comedy. Richardson is an idealist and Fielding is a realist.

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## 1.8 Questions

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1. What value, if any, has *Tom Jones* as a social document?
2. Examine the charge of immorality against *Tom Jones*.
3. Examine *Tom Jones* as ‘a comic epic poem in prose’.
4. Write a note on Fielding’s realism with special reference, to *Tom Jones*.

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## 1.9 References

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3. Kettle, Arnold : *An Introduction to The English Novel*, (Vol. 1).
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## Unit 2 □ Emma : Jane Austen Critical Perspectives

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Structure :

- 2.0 Objective
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The content of the units
- 2.3 Some Information about composition and publication
- 2.4 Title and Topic
- 2.5 Theme
- 2.6 Plot
- 2.7 Characters and Characterization
- 2.8 Narrative Devices
  - 2.9.1 Let us sum up
  - 2.9.2 Question
- 2.10 Introduction
- 2.11 Restructuring critical opinion : The influence of F.R. Leavis
- 2.12 Marxist perspective
- 2.13 Feminist criticism : Gender-based Readings
- 2.14 Post Colonial approaches
- 2.15 Let us sum up
- 2.16 Questions
- 2.17 Reading List

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### 2.0 Objective

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This unit takes up for discussion certain aspects of Jane Austen's novel **Emma**. After reading it you should be ready to analyse the plot construction of Emma, discuss the characters as well as Austen's art of characterisation, and the narrative techniques Austen uses in her novels.

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### 2.1 Introduction

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Module 1 discusses Emma from several standpoints. Many of you are already acquainted with Jane Austen, since you studied **Pride and Prejudice** at Bachelor

Degree Level. Those who did so are already familiar with some important areas of the study of Jane Austen. For example, you know the major details of Austen's life, her society and times. You have also been told about Austen's major novelistic predecessors, from whose works she sometimes took themes, hints of characterisation and elements of craftsmanship. You can approach **Emma** therefore, with a well-prepared mind. In course of our discussion of Emma, we may sometimes find it necessary to refer back to what has been already discussed in Netaji Suhhas Open University's EEG paper II Module 6. Those of you who begin your acquaintance with Jane Austen's novels at this level from **Emma**, are requested to read the Module mentioned above.

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## 2.2 The Content of the Units

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This module is subdivided into two units. In the first unit we shall approach the novel with traditional critical tools, discussing themes, plot, characters and characterisation, modes of narration. In the second unit however, we have tried to provide you with an overview of recent critical perspectives. These will show you how different ages and different ideologies read their own subtexts (= hidden or second meaning) in a classic literary work. No major work of literature therefore can become stale or static, for each age reads a different meaning in it.

Please read the novel with close attention to the text as you go through the study material. You will also find that acquaintance with other novels of Austen will help you to understand **Emma** better and will add depth to your own critical opinions. I have used the Norton edition, which I also recommend to you, since it contains excerpts from some major Austen critics. The Norton edition follows the original 3-volume structure, but you will find that I have not kept the volume division in my references to chapter numbers. This has been done in case you are using some other edition of **Emma**, which does not show the division in volumes.

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## 2.3 Some information about composition and publication

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**Emma** was the fourth of Jane Austen's novels in order of publication, although many critics think that it came fifth in the order of writing. It was published in three volumes in December 1815 and dated 1816 by her publisher John Murray. The title page of the 1816 first edition mentions that it was "By the author of **Pride and Prejudice**". **Pride and Prejudice** had by then received critical notice and popularity. **Emma** was dedicated to the Prince Regent, possibly because Austen had declined a request of his, conveyed to her, to write a "romantic" novel on the House of Saxe-

Coburg (The Prince Regent's ancestral family). The majority of Austen scholars think that it was written entirely in 1814, after *Mansfield Park* had been completed (unlike **Sense and Sensibility** and **Pride and Prejudice** which were revised version of earlier draft novels, **Elinor and Marianne** and **First Impressions** respectively). One important Austen critic, Mrs. Q. D. Leavis however has argued that **Emma** was a slow development made over the years, from an early fragment called **The Watsons**, which was probably written in 1803, when Austen was living in Bath (Q. D. Leavis : **A Critical Theory of Jane Austen's Writing—essay in scrutiny 10 1941-42**). The heroine of this unfinished draft novel is Emma Watson. She has Emma Woodhouse's good looks and openhearted manner, but her financial constraints and family circumstances are like those of Jane Fairfax, the other important woman character in *Emma*. Emma Watson lives with difficulty, garrulous relatives in a house that is too small, in genteel poverty. She has no dowry and no prospects. Her family cannot afford to provide for her. She is poised to go into service as a governess. Although **The Watsons** was never finished, we can conjecture that Emma Watson was to be saved from the servitude of a governess by marriage, possibly with the well-bred and intelligent clergyman, Mr. Howard. Austen's nephew Edward Austen had said that his aunt never finished **The Watsons** because, "She had placed her heroine too low, in a position of poverty and obscurity, which, though not necessarily connected with vulgarity, has a sad tendency to degenerate into it, and therefore, like a singer that has begun on too low a note, she discontinued the strain" (William Austen-Leigh and Richard Austen Deigh : **Jane Austen, Her Life and Letters : A Family Record**).

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## 2.4 Title and Topic

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**Emma** is the only eponymous novel by Austen. Unlike **Sense and Sensibility** or **Pride and Prejudice** its title does not suggest the clash of opposing values or attitudes to life. Nor do we find here, as we do in **Mansfield Park**, an estate mode an emblem of cultural and moral values, which the individual characters must absorb, revere and embody. The title indicates an important sheft in emphasis, focussing primarily on consciousness of self rather than consciousness of society, although you will find that the two consciousness coexist, in close interdependent relationship. Austen, when she began to write **Emma** had said, "I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like" (James Edward Austen Leigh : **A Memoir of Jane Austen**). The novel had never been as popular as **Pride and Prejudice**, but Austen scholars have almost universally agreed that **Emma** is the most intricate and complex of her works. It is apparently structured on very sketchy subject matter. Walter Scott, in his contemporary review commented on the "slightness" of the story.

It follows almost exactly Austen's famous comment : "3 or 4 families in a country village is the very thing to work on". Yet it displays all the qualities for which she is famous—moral seriousness, fine control to narrative method; irony; wit; characterisation. The surface story of a wealthy and rather spoilt young girl's stumbling attempts at controlling the lives of the people around her is turned into a classic story of discovery of self and others.

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## 2.5 Theme

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Is courtship and marriage the central theme of **Emma**?

The first thing that strikes us as we read the novel is that this heroine is set apart from all previous heroines in one very important aspect. Marriage is not a necessary or essential means of financial and social security and prestige for her. Unlike Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, Jane and Elizabeth Bennet or Fanny Price, Emma Woodhouse is remarkable by virtue of her being rich in her own right. She is "handsome, clever, rich, with a comfortable home...". No entailment on her father's property threatens her future. She has no brother to drive her out to indigence. She is not a defenceless dependent on a rich relation. She is the younger daughter, but unlike Anne Elliot in **Persuasion** (the novel of follow), she is not put into shade by her elder sister Isabella. She has therefore "lived twentyone years in the world with very little to distress or vex her."

"Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor,—which is one very strong argument in favour of matrimony"—so Austen had remarked in a letter to her niece Anna. This recurrent motif of the economic compulsion of marriage for women living in a society which offered them few preferable means of livelihood, is present in Emma too. But the theme has been shifted from the centre and is dealt with in the subplot of Jane Fairfax. Emma on the other hand, tells her protege Harriet : "...I am not only, not going to be married at present, but have very little intention of ever marrying at all" (Ch 10). You must read the entire conversation carefully. Emma also says, "A single woman with a very narrow income must be a ridiculous, disagreeable old maid!... but a single woman of good fortune, is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else."

Even in isolation, separated from the context, such comments will strike us as smugly self-satisfied. Emma in fact, to a much greater extent than Elizabeth Bennet, and in a markedly more unpleasant manner, is over confident of herself. Her fault is far more dangerous than Elizabeth's : not absolute faith in her own judgment, but self love and snobbery. The Novel is to chart the course of Emma's self-discovery, her

humbling recognition that neither her birth, nor her fortune naturally give her the prominence, the emotional immunity, or the right to tinker with other's lives, which she thinks she owns as a birthright.

The thematic structure in **Emma** is much more complex than in other earlier novels. Emma enjoys the privileges generally reserved for males in contemporary society, whose laws restricted women's rights to own property, to run businesses. Jane Austen's world was exclusively a man's world. Emma daringly sets out to infringe male territorial rights when she asserts herself by trying to organize others' lives e.g. the lives of Harriet Smith and Mr. Elton. She wants to mould Harriet's life only to find that her imaginings had been entirely erroneous. Instead of bringing happiness and betterment to Harriet, she has only caused sorrow. Emma, is chastened, but she continues to be an "imaginationist" (Austen's own word) who goes on to imagine a secret love life of Jane Fairfax. This has led two of Austen's modern critics, Sandra M. Gillbert and Susanne Gubar, in their influential book **The Madwoman in the Attic** to consider that a subterranean theme of Emma is the problem of the woman writer in the 19th century,—a problem which Austen herself had to face. The woman writer in the 19th century was ambivalent about her imaginative power. The use of creative imagination freed the women from the shackles of shabby conventions of her society. But they wondered whether they were transgressing against the natural role of women.

It is easy to see Emma as the incarnation of the creative artist. She likes to play with words and their meanings, paints portraits (of Harriet), spins stories, like the one about Jane Fairfax and Mr. Dixon, the husband of Jane's friend Miss Campbell, and about Harriet's genteel birth; the romance she spins about Frank Churchill's rescue of Harriet from the gypsies is also noteworthy. It is interesting that no other character except Emma pays much attention to the incident, not even Harriet herself. She tries to manipulate people as if they are characters in her own stories.

We may therefore think that which Emma's lesson of self-knowledge, social and moral responsibility is the theme at one level, the other theme is the resolution of the conflict of women's experience between desire for assertion in the world and wish to retreat into the security of the home—the conflict between independence and dependency. The relationship between personal identity and social role is problematic for women. Austen suggests that the problem can be resolved by a sustained double vision. For Austen's heroines, especially for the assertive ones like Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, as opposed to the passive ones like Anne Elliot or Fanny Price, self consciousness, knowledge of their selves, liberates them from the self, enabling them to be sensitive to the needs and responses of others. Their maturity

distinguishes them from the comic victims of Austen's wit. Emma hovers close to becoming Mrs. Elton, but is redeemed from being consigned to her novel. This maturity achieved by Elizabeth Bennet or Emma implies the possibility, or even the necessity of self-division, amounting almost to duplicity. After their reconciliation Elizabeth longs to mock Darcy's unquestioning assumption about guiding Bingley's decisions; but she has to remember that Darcy has not yet learnt to be laughed at. At the point of the narrative when Emma is happiest, after having received and accepted Mr. Knightley's declaration of love, the narrator comments :

"Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised or a little mistaken." The heroines, accepting submission to the norms of society, embark on a life, that is, as projected by the author, both psychologically and critically the right choice. But an uncomfortable sense remains with us, especially with Emma, that this is a painful degradation for their free selves. We, as readers, should be alert to these textual complexities suggesting multiple themes, when we study the novel.

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## 2.6 Plot

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The plot structure of **Emma** is an outstanding achievement. David Lodge, in an essay on Austen, has said :

"There is, to my knowledge, no precedent for such a novel before **Emma** that is, a novel in which the authorial narrator mediates all the action through the consciousness of an unreliable focalizing character." **Emma** has been compared to detective fiction, with the heroine in the role of a myopic detective. In fact Emma reminds us of the fictional detective's assistant, a Dr. Watson of Conan Doyle or a Captain Hastings of Agatha Christie who has all the evidence before her eyes, and yet fails to recognize the truth until it is revealed at a climatic moment.

We shall discuss here the plot construction of **Emma**, to see in what way it was a new departure, not only, as Lodge says from the works of novelists who were Austen's predecessors, but also from other novels by Austen herself. The motif which operates through the plot, binding the main plot and the sub plot is that of revelation and release of concealed love. The action of the plot centres on the heroine. Emma Woodhouse, we are told at the very beginning, is the virtual monarch of all she surveys, unhampered by restraints at home where she had lived with an ineffectual father and an indulgent governess. By virtue of belonging to the wealthiest family in Highbury, she is the first in consequence there; and since, the big landowner in the area in her brother-in-law, Emma is effectively the queen of the district. All other



local inhabitants of Highbury have a lower social status. The novel then, presents to us the problem—if a woman is not economically weak and powerless, if she has all the wealth and prestige she wants, what would it mean to her? Through the course of the narrative, Austen seems to organize the plot to trace with a fine fidelity that even in such circumstances, a woman would still have to come to terms with her self. One has to become inwardly competent, to be integrated and disciplined, to know the weight and consequences of power, in order to achieve one's happy fate.

The plot shows a careful segmenting of the narrative material. At the beginning of the novel Emma has experienced the first grief, “a gentle sorrow” in her life when Miss Taylor, her governess and constant companion marries and moves away from Hartfield. In the melancholy of her lonely evenings, Emma begins to wish “for impossible things.” That Emma is an “imaginist” is established from the very first chapter. This quality, which might have been innocuous in somebody differently circumstanced, becomes dangerous in Emma because she believes she knows better than others and can manage their lives better than they could. Her capacity for self-delusion is established in the very first chapter. The hero is also introduced at the very beginning and the role he will play throughout, as Emma's mentor and the voice of reason is established likewise. In the dialogue between Emma and Mr. Knightley, Mr. Knightley dismantles Emma's tall claims of having made the match between Mr. Weston and Miss Taylor. Mr. Knightley points out, first, that such matchmaking was not suitable employment for a young lady, and second, that no endeavour of Emma had actually brought about the marriage. He also utters a warning, which, in the characteristic Austen manner, is an irony, its significance revealed later to the reader. He tries to dissuade Emma from following up her fantasies. Her interference denies others their independence, even their adulthood. The words prove themselves through the rest of the narrative :

“You are more likely to have done harm to yourself than good to them, by interference.” Emma however determines to make one more match—this time for Highbury's young clergyman Mr. Elton, despite Knightley's second warning, “...leave him to choose his own wife. Depend upon it, a man of six or seven and twenty can take care of himself.”

Beneath the light bantering talk of the first chapter runs one of the major themes of Emma. Emma, despite being intelligent and witty, cannot grasp the difference between a moral and a non-moral choice. Choosing what dishes to serve to Mr. Elton at a Hartfield dinner is a simple matter of taste; choosing a wife for him is a complex act involving economic and social factors as well as moral values. So the stage is set for Emma's first great mistake, which constitutes the first segment of the plot. The



lady whom Emma would have Mr. Elton marry is soon brought in. She is Harriet Smith, a boarder at the local school. She is the illegitimate daughter of somebody, her parentage not revealed till the very end. Harriet, pretty, placid and not overtly bright, feels honoured beyond measure by the notice of Miss Woodhouse. Emma takes her in hand and begins to turn her life upside down. In the next unit we shall see how recent feminist critics have interpreted this relationship, its development and repercussions. For now, you may notice how Austen subtly shows that at this stage of her life, Emma is incapable of true, disinterested friendship. Given their social disparity, we are at first not too concerned that what Emma first approves of is Harriet's "proper and becoming defence" (Ch. 3). But Emma's constant dwelling on Harriet's gratitude reveals a less than admirable appetite for subservience. In fact, by chapters 3 and 4, her constant awareness of and pleasure in her own superiority, the superiority of Highbury, which is her village, begins to sound not only snobbish but vulgar and silly (the word 'snob' was not used in Austen's time. The nearest equivalent Austen might have used for Emma is 'worldly', which meant a person who estimated others by their birth, breeding and wealth). While Emma thinks of herself as a benefactor, Austen stresses Harriet's usefulness to Emma: She is Emma's walking companion; she is "exactly the something her home required" (Ch 4). There is no reciprocity in the relationship. Emma remains the judge of what Harriet needs.

Within the Elton-Harriet—Emma subplot, Emma's first act of destruction is to quash the relationship between Harriet and the Martins of Abbey-Mill farm. Martin, a mere yeoman, did not read romances, only agricultural reports. He had still to make his fortune. When she meets Martin Emma's reaction is quite unfavourable, because the standards she uses to judge him are the standards of gentility. As she has already built up the fantasy that Harriet is the natural daughter of a gentleman, Emma persuades her that she must not think of marrying "a gross vulgar farmer, totally inattentive to appearances, and thinking of nothing but profit and loss."

Emma sets out arousing Elton's interest in Harriet & encourages Harriet to form an attachment to Mr. Elton. The narrator does not even need to comment on the effrontery of Emma's behaviour; she is condemned out of her own mouth. Every word she speaks shows what little respect she has for those she calms to be helping, that she confuses self interest with a disinterested concern for others. She also jumps to conclusions based on speculation rather than reason. Knightley's role in this part of the plot provides the opposite and corrective counterpoint to Emma's fantasy. It is he, rather than Emma, who shows a disinterested concern for Harriet, expresses fears that Harriet will be made unhappy by being socially displaced through Emma's efforts. Emma may add a little extra polish, but she cannot add strength to Harriet's character.

Knightley also underscores the moral implications for Emma herself—Harriet’s “delightful inferiority” will make Emma more conceited. She will not think she has anything to learn.

Emma’s matchmaking designs are initially presented with a lightness of touch. The entire affair between Emma and Mr. Elton is retrospectively ironic. Emma and we, the readers are both left in the dark until John Knightley’s first hint in ch 13, since Emma and the readers following her direction, pay little heed to the significance of Mr. Knightley’s warning in ch 8 : “Elton may talk sentimentally but will act rationally”, i.e. will think of the fiscal base of marriage. Notice also, how Austen subtly shows that Emma, when she ‘improves’, Harriet, actually tries to change subconsciously in her own image. This is conveyed in ch 6. As Emma draws Harriet’s portrait, she makes her taller and more elegant, makes her eyes almost like her own. Mr. Elton’s enthusiasm for the portrait lays another false trail. The charade of “courtship” in ch 9 is equally significant. Emma reads into the charade the meaning she wants to read in it and assuages her doubts about the reference to Harriet’s “ready wit” as a lover’s extravagance. However, to Emma’s growing frustration, the actual proposal to Harriet never materializes, although she repeatedly tries to leave them alone, even pretending to break her shoelace on one occasion. Elton’s behaviour at the Randall’s dinner party finally arouses her suspicions. On the return journey, as he makes his proposal, Emma discovers her mistake. Briefly, Emma glimpses herself as Mr. Elton has seen her throughout the affair. To Emma’s chagrin, he repudiates Harriet on the very ground of social inequality which Emma thinks exists between him and her, making her supposedly invulnerable. This episode is the comic acting out of the hidden and secret lone motif operative through the plot. But though comic, the characters involved suffer to some extent. Elton is so affronted that he feels mortified. Harriet is emotionally hurt. Emma is stunned. Significantly, Emma is the only character involved who learns something from it. She acknowledges her own fault : “The first error and the worst lay at her door. It was foolish, it was wrong... It was adventuring too far, assuming too much, making light of what ought to be serious.” (Ch 16) She is concerned about the blow Harriet would receive. But, in spite of such acknowledgment, Emma’s lesson, is not yet complete. She does not give up playing God. She begins immediately to think of some other suitable young man for Harriet, although she decides not to be so “active” or “tricky” as before, to promote Harriet’s matrimonial prospects.

### **The Emma-Frank Churchill—Jane Fairfax triangle**

The next section of the plot focusses on the second comic nemesis for Emma. The two parts of the plot are balanced by a fine counterpoint of symmetry. In her first

matchmaking Emma discovers to her dismay that unknown to herself, Harriet had been only a pawn to advance Mr. Elton's game of courtship of herself. In the next part she is to find that Frank Churchill uses her as a blind to carry on his courtship of Jane Fairfax. Like Harriet in the earlier chapters, she also must learn that while she has been thinking herself the centre of Frank Churchill's interest, another woman has been preferred to her.

Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill arrive at Highbury close on the heels of one another. Their arrival and that of Mrs. Elton shortly afterwards expand the social circle of Highbury. More importantly, none of these newcomers seems to accord to Emma the social precedence she has grown accustomed to think her birthright. Both Jane and Mrs. Elton moreover present a challenge to Emma. Mrs. Elton's challenge of course is comic and superficial, but it also has its significance as we shall see. Within the new comic love triangle Jane is however a serious rival to Emma. She is beautiful, her accomplishments are superior to Emma's. Emma is forced to admire her elegance (The word in Austen's vocabulary meant both physical beauty and mental excellence.) Emma had never liked Jane overmuch, although, in view of the fact that the two girls were of the same age and class, they ought to have been friends. Emma is initially sympathetic to Jane. since after this brief period with her family, she would have to take up employment as a governess. Jane herself is extremely pessimistic about the career she is going to follow. Emma had never liked Jane before and her dislike can be attributed to jealousy and guilt about the jealousy. Her initial sympathy this time soon peters out because she finds Jane reserved and reticent about her newly married friend and even Frank Churchill, whom she had met while on holiday with her friends in Weymouth. Emma's "imaginist" tendencies are immediately awakened. Earlier, on a burst of charitable feeling Emma the matchmaker had lamented that Highbury afforded no young man worthy of marrying Jane, "nobody that she could wish to scheme about for her" (Ch 21). But now she begins to weave a web of fantasy that Jane is secretly in love with Mr. Dixon, her friend's husband. Her fancy is spurred by the arrival of the piano—a gift for Jane from an unknown donor.

Emma's fantasy about Jane's secret, love life is fostered by Frank Churchill. Frank, who is ironically named, plays his own game. Emma is predisposed to like Frank even before he arrives. Mr. Knightley however, has reservations which later prove to be correct. When he finally arrives she does like him, both because he is so attentive to her and flatters her, both subtly and not so subtly, and also because of his apparent dislike for Jane. He criticises Jane's "deplorable want of complexion"—she is too pale—and flatters Emma by a suggested comparison. When Emma complains that she is put off by Jane's reserve, Frank is quick to agree. Reserve is a "most

repulsive quality. One cannot love a reserved person” (Ch 24). Frank’s behaviour and conversation are elaborate camouflages, and Emma, who prides herself on her powers of penetration, is completely taken in.

We notice that while in the first love triangle each of the characters—Emma, Harriet, Elton—was self-deceived, in the second Frank is the agent of deception. Frank deliberately flirts with Emma to divert attention from the secret arrangement between himself and Jane. He also encourages Emma’s scandalous fantasy about Jane and Mr. Dixon. However, it is Emma who unwittingly abets his plan by having revealed to him earlier her suspicions about Jane’s secret love life. It is fortunate for Emma that although for a little while she fancies herself in love with Frank, she soon recovers after Frank’s sudden departure, though when he takes his farewell of her she completely misunderstands his intended revelations. He was on the verge of telling her about Jane; she thought he was about to declare his love for her. She decides that she was “not quite in love” and resolves to be on her guard not to encourage him (Ch 30). Emma remains entirely oblivious to the hints about a greater intimacy between Frank and Jane. Mr. Knightley begins to suspect it after Frank’s chance reference to Mr. Perry’s carriage and the word game he plays (Ch 41). Thus sub-plot is resolved entirely by a chance solution. There is no inevitability. The absentee Mrs. Churchill dies most opportunely, thus the obstacle to the union of Frank and Jane is removed.

The Harriet element in this triangle is at the fringe. It helps however to lay another false trail and helps the plot movement towards the central love-plot. Emma, the inveterate matchmaker is encouraged by the memory of a chance phrase. Frank had referred to Harriet as her “beautiful little friend”. She begins to wonder if a match between Frank and Harriet might be a possibility—“stranger things have happened”. Emma thinks (Ch 31) that Harriet is far superior to both herself and Jane Fairfax, in “tenderness of heart” and the man who would change Emma for Harriet should be a happy person. Harriet’s chance encounter with the gypsies and her rescue by Frank provide Emma a cue for romantic speculations. “Such an adventure as this—a fine young man and a lovely young woman thrown together in such a way could hardly fail of suggesting certain ideas to the coldest heart and the steadiest brain”.

The incident is an elaboration upon the tangled web of false perceptions in which Emma enmeshes herself. She thinks that Harriet’s gratitude to Frank has matured into love. But when the revelation of Frank’s secret engagement dismays Emma because she is afraid of a second disappointment for Harriet, Harriet confesses to Emma’s total consternation that it was Mr. Knightley she loves, and who, she believes, returns her love. It is clear that Emma’s lessons in elegance had been ironically, successful

in a way not anticipated by her. Mr. Knightley was infinitely more gentlemanly than Frank, and Harriet has wisely placed his rescue of herself from a social embarrassment (Ch 38 when during the ball at Crown inn he had danced with Harriet after Elton had deliberately snubbed her) higher than her romance rescue by Frank.

**Emma—Mr. Knightley—Harriet triangle.**

The central love plot of the novel lies beneath the complicated surface triangles. Its links to the first one are loose, its links to the second one is intricate and complex. This central plot, like the first two triangles also turns upto a secret or hidden love revealed. But in the subplot of Frank and Jane the love is kept secret by conscious deception; in the central plot it is kept hidden by the unconscious self-deception by Emma herself. Significantly, again in contrast to the Frank-Jane affair, where more the lovers try to hide their secret, the more hints escape about a complicity, in the case of Emma's feelings for Mr. Knightley, the authorial narrator's submerged hints are grasped by the readers only retrospectively. Mrs. Elton's pretence about her great intimacy with Mr. Knightley annoys Emma. initially we may put it down to Emma's class pride. Later. We realize that it is her unconscious love which makes her particularly sensitive to this appropriation of him by a woman whom she particularly dislikes (Ch 32). She protests very strongly when like her, Mrs. Weston tries to play matchmaker between Mr. Knightley and Jane. Mr. Knightley must not marry. Her nephew Henry must inherit Donwell. She is sure that Mr. Knightley has "no occasion to marry, either to fill up his time or his heart" (Ch 26). Emma's strong sexual attraction to Mr. Knightley is gradually made apparent. At the crown ball, she watches his "tall, firm, upright figure", his "natural grace". She is struck by how young he looks (he is 38), compares him favourably with the much younger Frank and puts him in a different category from the husbands and fathers who surround him.

The resolution of the Frank-Jane subplot also brings about the resolution of the main love-plot. The Box Hill incident marks the counterpointing of the two plots. Frank, piqued with Jane for her refusal to walk home with him from Donwell, flirts outrageously with Emma in order to taunt and hurt Jane. He also delivers a private insult. Jane, wounded, answers with veiled bitterness, calling him weak and vascillating. Emma, intoxicated with vanity, behaves in a gay and thoughtless manner, which culminates in her heartless insult to Miss Bates. This calls forth Mr. Knightley's stren admonition to her. Emma is mortified, not only by an appalled realization of the horror of her own conduct, but by the thought of losing Mr. Knightley's affection and regard—"How could she have exposed herself to such ill opinion in anyone she valued! And how suffer him to leave without saying one word of gratitude, of concurrence, of common kindness!" (Ch 43).

Emma finally wakes up to her unrecognized love for Mr. Knightley by two consecutive shocks—that of the revelation of Frank and Jane’s engagement and by Harriet’s confession. Since Emma, like her male counterpart Frank Churchill, is fortune’s favourite, she is rewarded by the declaration of Mr. Knightley’s long-standing love for her. The concluding lines of the novel carefully demarcate the marriage of Emma and Mr. Knightley from the marryings of such people as the Eltons and promises “perfect happiness of the union.” Emma’s conscience is salved by the news that Robert Martin, having met Harriet in London had proposed marriage to her and been accepted.

The plot develops the two main themes of Austen : marriage and self-discovery by the heroine. But there are other them suggested through the text as we shall see later, in course of our discussion.

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## 2.7 Characters and characterization

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In all Jane Austen’s novels we find heroines, and also heroes who have high qualities of head and heart, but who, at the beginning of the narrative, have defective or inadequate view of society and men, some moral blind spot. We trace the course of their intellectual regeneration through the narrative. There are too, in each novel, a few comic monsters, —characters with monstrous egos who are either entirely amoral (for e.g. Lydia in **Pride and Prejudice**) or intellectually so deficient as to be unable to recognize, their shortcomings (for e.g. Mrs. Bennet in **Pride and Prejudice**, Sir Walter Elliot in **Persuasion**), and so wrapped up in self interest as to be incapable of redeeming themselves (Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*). Their objectionable features are portrayed comically by Austen, but she does not let us lose sight of the fact that they are also actually or potentially menacing to society. Mr. Collins or Lady Catherine do pose actual threats to Elizabeth Bennet. Mrs. Norris can, and does make Fanny Price suffer. In *Emma* Austen makes a bolder experiment. She presents the possibility that even a heroine is likely to have assimilated many of the more unpleasant qualities of human beings in society. In *Emma* we have a heroine whose personality includes some of the tendencies and qualities Austen showed as condemnable or at least dislikeable in all previous novels. Emma has downright bad qualities like self-complacency, malicious enjoyment in prying into embarrassing private affairs of others, snobbery, and a weakness for meddling in other people’s lives. Only, instead of attributing these evils to characters distanced by caricature, Austen has put them all, in subtle form, in the heroine, who in many other ways has admirably fine standards. Emma has all the above faults. But she is also beautiful, cultivated, intelligent. She is a loving and attentive daughter, a generous hostess. She can recognize and admire true elegance in Jane Fairfax.



But she is overly conscious of her superior position in Highbury. In fact much of what is unpleasant in Emma can be attributed to her awareness of rank. This awareness is not quite the product of her contemporary social milieu either. Two of the persons closest to her rebuke her for it. When she talks of the possible marriage between Mr. Knightley and Jane Fairfax as a “very shameful and degrading connection”, Mrs. Weston points out except for a disparity of fortune and a certain disparity in age, there was no other reason why they could not marry. Mr. Knightley, who is entirely ‘pure-blooded’ by Emma’s standards (read Ch 42), sharply criticizes her for her attitude towards Robert Martin and later for her behaviour with Miss Bates, at Box Hill. Her snobbery is Emma’s central comic defect. Her unpleasantness, her wish to dominate and control the lives of others, can all be attributed to her snobbery. Yet, as Mr. Knightley remarks (Ch 6) she is remarkably free of personal vanity. Although she is remarkably handsome, she is little occupied with her looks. Also, as Mr. Knightley points out (Ch 38), Emma has both a vain spirit, by which he means her wish to control the lives of others, and a serious spirit. The one may lead her wrong, but the other tells her of it. Unlike other Austen heroines like Catharine Morland or Elizabeth Bennet however, one epiphanic (one striking moment when the truth is revealed) moment of revelation of her misjudgment is not enough to set her on the path of self knowledge. Even after her first set of botched matchmaking efforts which hurt Harriet, Emma goes on misjudging people. Because Jane Fairfax is “disgustingly reserved”, has an “odious composure”, and Emma is a little envious of Jane’s accomplishments, she imagines a secret guilty love’ affair and even confides her unfounded suspicions to Frank Churchill, an act which is socially and morally unpardonable.

Emma’s moral defect is great in scale in the scheme of didactic concerns within which Austen operates. Unlike Marianne Dashwood in **Sense and Sensibility** Emma does not have to suffer the pangs and humiliation of unrequited love. At the beginning (Ch 5), Mr. Knightley, during a conversation with Mrs. Weston says, “I should like to see Emma in love and in some doubt of a return, it would do her good.” Emma is spared a heartbreak. She flirts with Frank Churchill and indulges in thoughts of marriage to him, but her heart is not engaged. Austen in fact seems to be extremely indulgent towards her least pleasant heroine, Emma suffers only for a short time, when Harriet confesses that she is in love with Mr. Knightley and she has hopes that he loves her. Emma’s first moral crisis was the result of discovery that the man she had planned Harriet should marry wanted in fact to marry her. Now, in a fine turn of events, the man she loves appears to be in love with Harriet. It is a neat reversal. The pain Emma feels shows her how wrong she has been to play with the feelings

of others. The terms Emma uses to express her faults are important (The passage, in Ch 47, is in free indirect narration). She has been “inconsiderate”, “irrational”, led on by “blindness” and “meanness”. These words suggest the lack of reason and understanding in her behaviour. Words like “inconsiderate”, “indelicate”, “unfeeling” acknowledge her selfishness. There is another significant word Emma uses. She thinks that the possibility that Mr. Knightley loves Harriet is “evil”—“why was the evil so dreadfully increased by Harriet’s having some hope of a return?” Emma in fact seems to be made aware of her only because of her feelings, not through intellectual and moral redemption. We, the readers are therefore left with a curious final irony—is a kind of selfishness still one of Emma’s prior motives? Would she have seen her “blindness” or “indelicate” had she not been in love with Mr. Knightley? In fact, while Elizabeth Bennet’s magnificent marriage seems the proper reward for the excellent, though not faultless personality she has developed through the narrative, Emma’s “perfect marriage” seems a glittering prize which Good Fortune bestows on her gratuitously and not a reward for her redemption of self. In her last conversation with Frank Churchill, Emma acknowledges that she, like Frank, is Fortune’s favourite :...“there is a likeness in our destiny, the destiny which bids fair to connect us with two characters so much superior to our own.” (Ch. 54)

#### **Jane Fairfax :**

The character of Jane Fairfax presents Austen’s experiment with a romance heroine and a romance plot. The end result is a fine subversion of romance. Jane is admirably suited to be a romance heroine. She is a penniless orphan, although her birth and family lineage are impeccable. She is involved in a love affair with the handsome, wealthy, well-connected Frank Churchill. There is the spectre of parental opposition to the union, in the perceived threat from the absent but menacing figure of Frank’s aunt, the domineering Mrs. Churchill. The engagement is clandestine and at one point there is a serious misunderstanding between the lovers. In other ways too Jane has been given a family resemblance to heroines of popular romance. She is beautiful, but her unhappiness makes her pale and wan. She eats very little and her health declines.

But there the resemblance ends. Austen treats the story of Jane Fairfax in a marked realistic and ironic manner. Jane is not the abnormally chaste romance heroine whose feelings and emotions are always pure and correct, and who is finally married to a paragon among men to live happily even after. On the contrary her clandestine love affair makes her resort to hypocrisy and dishonesty. We have to keep in mind that within the canon of morality operative in Jane Austen’s fictional world, a secret engagement was considered a major moral error. Jane has constantly to resort to half-



truths and subterfuges. For example, we notice that in Ch 28, just before the arrival of Emma and Miss Bates, there must have been a brief love interlude, possibly involving physical intimacy, between Frank and Jane, while old Miss Bates slept. She takes a long time to recover her poise. She has to exert herself very hard to prevent Mrs. Elton from arranging to collect her letters from the post office. Her reticence about Frank Churchill and the period of her stay at Weymouth makes her ignore Emma's overtures of friendship and Emma "could not forgive her" (Ch 20). The pressure of the secret and Frank's double game as he first with Emma and pretends to tease Jane about her love for Mr. Dixon makes her a bundle of nerves. She gets really angry when during the word game in Emma's presence, Frank pushes the word Dixon at her, apparently to enjoy her discomfiture (Ch 41). Under stress and in distress Jane does not stay an exemplary character, unlike romance heroines. She becomes jealous of Emma, repulses Emma's kindness, causes unhappiness to her own family by her "captious and irritable" behaviour. Above all, she suffers constantly from pangs of conscience. She confesses to Mrs. Weston (Ch 48) :

'The consequence', said she, "has been a state of perpetual suffering to me.... But after all the punishment that misconduct can bring, it is still not less misconduct. Pain in no expiation. I never can be blameless". Her situation forces her to refuse to walk home with Frank when she meets him on the way back from Donwell Abbey. This leads to Frank's calculated cruel treatment of her at Box Hill. She may talk of Frank's "playfulness of disposition" which she "ought to have made allowances for". But since she is endowed with good sense and delicacy, she must have been painfully aware that she was marrying not a perfect hero of romance but a spoilt and selfish man. As readers, we are apt to agree with Mr. Knightley's exclamation (Ch 49). "Jane, Jane, you will be a miserable creature!" When Jane rebukes Frank, after their engagement had become public, for teasing her about the blunder he had once made when he had referred to a news item from her letter (about Mr. Perry buying a carriage), Emma's sympathies are with Jane. That particular incident in the past was greatly embarrassing for Jane and Frank's deliberate dwelling on it shows his lack of sensitivity. We, as readers may also think that Jane agreed to the secret engagement and the long, indefinite period of waiting, because for her, the only other alternative was employment as a governess, which in Ch 35 she castigates as "offices for sale—not quite of human flesh—but of human intellect." There is a strong suggestion that it was not only Frank's sexual attraction, but the dismal alternative of being a victim of "governess trade" which decided her choice. Austen's presentation of Jane Fairfax is partially ambiguous. Is Jane a basically open hearted girl who is forced to a game of mystification and half truth because of her situation? Or is she secretive by nature?

From Emma's early reflections in Ch 2, it seems that there had always been a coldness and reserve in Jane's manner, even before she had met Frank. Mr. Knightley's comment in Ch 51 about "mystery and fineness" may be an indirect indictment of Jane, as well as of Frank whom he openly criticizes.

### **Mrs. Elton**

Mrs. Elton is a very interesting creation of Austen. She is one of female characters whom Austen uses in her novels to parallel and contrast her heroines. She is a wonderfully comic parody of Emma's worse qualities—her snobbery and managerial tendencies. She is an image of Emma, as seen through a glass, darkly, Mrs Elton too much dominates others, wherever she is. After a quarter of an hour's conversation with her, Emma is quite convinced "that Mrs. Elton was a vain woman extremely well satisfied with herself and thinking much of her own importance?.. that all her notions were drawn from one set of people and one style of living...". Ironically, these observations are equally applicable to Emma herself. Emma's opinions of the yeomanry (Ch 4), her assumptions about the Coles. (Ch 25), the irony of her thinking (first para of Ch 27) that her condescension must have delighted the Coles—all these are as much expressions of parochial thinking as Mrs Elton's claims about Maple Grove and Bath Society. Emma is infuriated with Mrs Elton for the same reasons as Mr. and Mrs. Elton are infuriated with her. Emma thinks that Mrs Elton presumes upon her actual social position by claims of social equality with herself and Mr. Knightley. She is disgusted when Mrs Elton aspires to familiarity by addressing her as "Dear Miss Woodhouse" and Mr. Knightley as "Knightley". Mrs Elton, in order to snub Emma, takes up Jane Fairfax as a protégé, exactly paralleling Emma's taking of Harriet as a protégé. But since Jane Fairfax is not a simple and unsophisticated young girl, Mrs Elton's patronage does her no harm. Emma's patronage of Harriet is potentially far more dangerous. Like Emma, Mrs Elton too makes up romance stories. Only, Emma imagines romances about other people, e.g, about Harriet's illegitimate birth (her father must be a gentleman), and Jane Fairfax's secret love for her friend's husband. Mrs Elton creates a romance about her own courtship and marriage, make believe that she made a great sacrifice in leaving her brother-in-law's house at Maple Grove and coming to Highbury.

The difference lies only in this that Mrs Elton does not have Emma's advantages. She has neither Emma's intelligence and breeding, nor her birth and rank. Emma, who has already had information about the lady before she arrived in person, knew that she was a tradesman's daughter, her uncle was in the law line (practitioners of law or medicine were social inferiors of the gentry) and her claims to social superiority depended on a brother-in-law who was "a gentleman in a great way... who kept two

carriages". Emma can therefore condemn Mrs Elton as "a little upstart vulgar things". But if Mrs Elton dislikes Emma because Emma spurns her efforts at intimacy. But Emma's dislike of Jane Fairfax is also partly because Jane proves indifferent to Emma's offer of friendship which was not unmixed with sympathetic condescension. Mrs Elton therefore, is like a caricature of Emma, with the defects exaggerated, and shows us how Austen's irony runs throughout the depiction of Emma.

### **Mr. Knightley**

Mr. Knightley is the realist in the novel whose clear eyed judgment of people and events provides the yardstick for the different characters. He also stands for an ideal—he represents Austen's concept of a civilized man in her society. His values are Augustan values. He is practical, but is capable of deep emotion. He is strongly traditional in his notions of the different classes and their roles in society; but he is by no means hidebound by narrow class pride. He is direct and straightforward in his behaviour, but is at the same time delicate and sensitive. He is very aware of the obligations his status imposes on him. He maintains a balance between feeling and judgment.

He plays Emma's mentor from the beginning, always trying to curb her romanticizing. He points out that contrary to what she thinks, she played no role at all in bringing about the marriage between Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston. He warns her about trying to make a match between Harriet and Mr. Elton. subsequent event prove his common sense and balanced view. His respect for existing social code is seen in his comments on Harriet and Robert Martin. To him, Martin is a hardworking prosperous farmer, open, straightforward and sensible. Harriet on the other hand is a nobody, an illegitimate girl with no prospects and little intelligence and qualities, even in people from lower social strata. After Mr. Elton's marriage he comments to Emma that Harriet would have been a better choice for Mr. Elton, because she has some first rate qualities which Mrs. Elton is totally without.

Mr. Knightley is developed as a polar opposite to Frank Churchill. For Frank life is a game, for Mr. Knightley, life is a responsibility, when (Ch 18) they discuss Frank, he dismisses Emma's attempts at exonerating Frank's remiss behaviour in not paying a visit to his stepmother : "There is one thing Emma, which a man can always do if he chooses and that is, his duty. According to him, Frank "can have very good manners and be very agreeable, but he can have no English delicacy towards the feeling of other people." That Mr. Knightley has an abundance of this 'English delicacy' is shown through incidents. At the ball at crown inn, he steps forward to dance with Harriet, who had just been insulted by Mr. Elton who deliberately declined to dance with her at Mrs Weston's request. Later, at Box Hill he takes charge of

looking after and keeping the company of the unattended women, Miss Bates, Jane Fairfax and Harriet, although Mrs Elton has organized the party. A fine distinction is drawn between the self-centered behaviour of Mr. Elton & Frank Churchill and the socially responsible behaviour of Mr. Knightley who is concerned about the plight of single women in society. As with Elizabeth Bennet's visit to Darcy's Pemberley, so too with Emma's visit to Donwell Abbey, Austen develops the portrait of a socially and morally responsible gentleman through a description of his estates. The house and grounds at Donwell lack smoothness which Emma thinks she prefers in men. (We remember her condemnation of the 'unpolished' Martin). Mr. Knightley on the other hand condemns overly smooth polish (when Frank goes to London to have a haircut, Mr. Knightley comments, "Hm, just the trifling silly old fellow I took him for). The house is "rambling, irregular, with many comfortable and one or two handsome rooms"; "it looked what it was the residence of a family of such true gentility ". Mr. Knightley too, looked rugged rather than gracefully handsome, his social footing in the county has a comfortable ease. He not only has the right moral values, but also social graces, in marked contrast with the cantankerous unsociability of his brother John Knightley. Finally, the unity of appearance and reality which he exemplifies and recommends complete the portrait of both house and man—Emma's unspoken observations (conveyed in free indirect narration) indicate that Emma too at heart appreciates and admires the values they stand for.

Generally characters of exemplary goodness presented in literature lack flesh and blood and are being. But in Mr. Knightley J. Austen has achieved a rare feat—she has created a character who is exemplary without being a stilted bore. This has been possible because Mr. Knightley is not cardboard perfection. He has his human weaknesses. Because of his secret love for Emma, he is prone to misunderstanding. His judgmental attitude to Frank Churchill is at least partly motivated by his suspicion that Emma is attracted to Frank. When, all the secret loves have at last been revealed, he tells Emma when they read Frank's letter together: "I was not quite impartial in my judgment Emma—but yet, I think—had you not been in the case—I should still have distrusted him (Ch 51).

At one point in the plot a fine irony is created because of the two hidden loves in the novel crossing one another. Mr. Knightley's sharp observation shows him that there was some kind of unacknowledged intimacy between Frank and Jane Fairfax. But when he suggests the idea to Emma, she opposes it with such confidence that he begins to suspect that Emma and Frank have an understanding, and so becomes despondent (Ch 41). That he is not above human weakness constitutes his strength as a character. Frank rises in his assessment from "villain" to "not desperate;" to "a

very good sort of fellow” when he learns that Emma is not in love with Frank. These human failings show that the role of authority he is given in Emma is not overdone by Austen. We also notice that unlike in **Pride and Prejudice**, Mansfield Park. The hero and the heroine co-exist on the same Socio-economic level. The social and financial inequality which gives a fairytale colouring to Elizabeth’s marriage with Darcy or Fanny Price’s with Edmund Bertram is avoided here. Significantly, it is Mr. Knightley who would be residing at Hartfield, not Emma at Donwell, even if the arrangement is temporary. Also, Knightley’s values instilled in Emma do not destroy her playfulness or self confidence. In Chapter 54 she pertly tells him : “Oh! I deserve the best treatment because I never put up with any other...”

### **Frank Churchill**

Compared to the other negative male characters in Austen’s fiction Frank Churchill appears innocuous. Unlike Willoughby (*Sense & Sensibility*), he does not break any heart within the scheme of the novel, although some critics have raised the extra-textual question as to whether he would ultimately have married Jane Fairfax if Mrs Churchill had not died conveniently. Unlike Wickham’s (**Pride and Prejudice**) his sexual manipulation of women (in this case, of both Jane and Emma) hasn’t a mercenary motive; unlike Mr. Elliot (in **Persuasion**), he is not a false, heartless wretch. Since the novel operates within a comic schema, Frank’s manoueverings are handled lightly and a benign Providence in the end rewards him instead of giving him his deserts. But there are suggestions, subtle but definite, about his essential and potentially dangerous amorality. Using one of her favourite techniques of characterization, Austen gives us an anticipatory impression of Frank’s character, even before he himself arrives at Highbury through Mr. Knightley’s observations on Frank’s repeated failures to pay a courtesy visit to his stepmother (Ch 18). He comments, rightly, as we shall find, that a young man, brought up by people like the Churchills who were “proud, luxurious and selfish”, should himself be the same. That Frank does not do his duty to his father and stepmother, suggests his faults—selfishness and want of consideration. Austen’s irony is in full swing throughout Emma’s and the readers’ interaction with Frank. Initially he seems to refute the negative anticipation. But the positive assessment that counters it is Emma’s and therefore shortsighted (Ch 24) : “Emma watched and decided, that with such feelings as were now shown, it could not be fairly supposed that he had even been voluntarily absenting himself; that he had not been .acting a part, or making a parade of insincere professions.”

Soon however, we the readers are first alerted by a want of decorum and delicacy in his comments on Jane Fairfax’s complexion and in his quick acceptance of and

agreement with Emma's suspicions about Jane's secret connection with Mr. Dixon. Frank not only encourages Emma to think that the piano was a gift from Mr. Dixon, he teases Jane with the supposed secret most unmercifully in public. It is significant that the author's plan is to let Emma suffer very little. Unlike Marianne Dashwood, she doesn't fall a victim to Frank's wiles. But the arguments in self-justification Frank advances in his revelatory letter to Mrs. Weston are specious. He assumed for his own convenience that he flirted with Emma because he had been "convinced of her indifference". He even surmises that Emma, suspected the truth of the connection between himself and Jane. As Mr Knightley, the magisterial character in the novel comments: Always deceived in fact.

Frank in fact becomes the purveyor of the novel's didactic point through his transgression of its code. His letter occasions the important comment of Mr. Knightley : "...Mystery, Finesse—how they pervert the understanding! My Emma, does not everything serve to prove more and more the beauty of truth and sincerity in all our dealings with each other?"

Significantly, like Mrs Elton, Frank too is presented as a parody of some of Emma's worst qualities. Emma says to him at the end (Ch 54) : "I think there is a little likeness between us". Emma, like Frank, is a pampered only child in a rich home. She also is a manipulator of people. Again, like Frank she too hurts people—Harriet and Robert Martin, Jane Fairfax, Miss Bates. But in fact Frank is much worse than Emma. He is irresponsible. He torments Jane and repeatedly puts her in an embarrassing position. He does not really care while he plays a game of duplicity for his own ends, that he might seriously hurt Emma through his flirtation, when his double game is first revealed, Emma's righteous indignation voices the narrator's viewpoint:

"Impropriety! Oh! Mrs Weston-it is too calm a censure...so unlike what a man should be! None of that upright integrity, that strict adherence to truth and principle, that disdain of trick and littleness, which a man should display in every transaction of his life" (Ch 46).

Emma, less culpable, fares better too. We have the impression, at the end of the narrative, that Emma has been allowed to grow up and mature. Emma's triumph—the end of her story—is a not a deusex machine happening, as is Mrs Churchill's death. From one stage of development to another, Emma has faced moral choices, and though she has repeatedly failed the test—with Harriet first and at Box-Hill next she finally learns her lesson. At Box Hill Jane too delivers a veiled reproof of Frank, calling him weak and irresolute. This angers Frank into further hurting her. Emma on the other hand has the courage and desire to accept Mr. Knightley's rebuke. As



the final appearance of Frank in Ch 54 shows, he remains an irresponsible boy, who is fortune's favourite Emma has matured into sensitivity as her feelings for Jane show (Ch 54).

### **Mr. Woodhouse and Miss Bates**

Walter Scott in his review of Emma in the Quarterly Review had said about Mr. Woodhouse and Miss Bates :

"...characters of folly and simplicity, such as old Woodhouse and Miss Bates are apt to become tiresome in fiction as in real society." Scott's view is superficial, he did not take into account the significance of their roles. Both are used by Austen, with her usual economy of craftsmanship, to a purpose. At the same time they do not remain mere fictional devices. Both are of course types, i.e. they display a single trait of character whenever they appear. Mr. Woodhouse constantly speaks of his health or the health of others and Wants to preserve the even tenor of his existence. Miss Bates is a continual speaker whose speech is marked by a perfectly free association of ideas. To be sure, both of them are foolish. But each has been given a significant role to play.

Mr. Woodhouse is one of Austen's many failed parents, affectionate, indulgent and with no real authority over his daughter. The reader begins with the impression that Mr. Woodhouse's self-centred view of the world around him and his self-absorption have been inherited by Emma. He thinks Miss Taylor is unhappy because he does not like that she has disturbed the staid Hartfield life by marrying Mr. Weston and moving away. Emma thinks that because she dislikes Robert Martin's yeoman status and his lack of polish, Harriet too will be made unhappy if she marries Martin. Mr. Woodhouse is used to pose the final test for Emma's maturity. Even in her mood of great, fulfilling happiness, she puts her father's welfare, rather than her own happiness, first. While he was alive, she would not quit him.

Austen's presentation of Miss Bates's character is also a complex achievement. Miss Bates, the impecunious elderly spinster of Highbury, is another reminder in Austen's fiction of the tenuous economic position of women in contemporary society. Mr. Knightley's rebuke to Emma, after Emma's insult to Miss Bates at Box Hill shows that Miss Bates has gone down the social ladder because she has not married and has no money of her own: "you whom she had known from an infant, whom she had seen grow up from a period when her notice was an honour, to have you now, in thoughtless spirits,... laugh at her, humble her..." (Ch 43).

But apart from this, Miss Bates is a brilliant example of two aspects of Austen's masterly narrative skill. First, notice how her speeches are a marked contrast to the

formal syntax of other characters' speeches. Her unfinished sentences, with bits of important information submerged in inconsequent chatter seem to represent Austen's experiment with direct unsummarised representation of spoken speech. Later novelists like Henry James were to make significant use of this technique, to represent naturalistic speech fading off into air. Second, and more important, as Mary Lascelles, a major Austen critic has shown in her book **Jane Austen and Her Art**, Austen uses Miss Bates's speeches in such a way that we, the readers, while getting the necessary information and being subtly directed towards the response the narrator wants us to make, are hardly aware of the narrator. One important incident and its consequences for example, is entirely narrated in this way. After the veiled quarrel and misunderstanding between Frank and Jane at Box Hill, Frank abruptly leaves Highbury. He allows Jane to learn, through the talk of servants, at Mrs Elton's, that he had gone away not because he had been summoned by Mrs Churchill, but voluntarily. She therefore decides to end the engagement and accept Mrs. Elton's proposal for taking a governess's job. Emma visits Miss Bates to ask her pardon about her misbehaviour. She hears about Jane's decision and feels genuinely sympathetic towards Jane. In answer to her polite question Miss Bates tells her that Jane's decision was not only sudden, but directly opposite to her mood "the day before yesterday". Since Miss Bates's inconsequential details submerge the important information, Emma thinks her chatter so meaningless that she does not get the significance. Likewise, we too are like readers of detective fiction, who miss the clues given in the text until they are explained in the end. Jane Austen can thus simultaneously give important information and get by a false trail. Lascelles labels Miss Bates's function as the cobweb lightness and finess of Jane Austen's craftsmanship.

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## 2.8 Narrative Devices

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Plato in Book III of the Republic distinguished three kinds of narrative techniques : (a) diegesis (description of action by authorial narrator); (b) mimesis (representation of action through limited speech of characters); and (c) a mixture of the two. Drama is pure mimesis. But the novel descending from the epic tradition, is generally written in the mixed style, i.e. there are two diverse modes of utterance: (a) The narrator's utterance; (b) The utterances of the various characters. Generally, two different stylistic norms are followed for these two types of utterances. The narrator's speeches and comments conform to a standard of regular, correct, intelligent prose. In dialogue of the characters there may be infinite variety, ranging from the formal to the colloquial or even vulgar. A look at any novel of Austen would show you that the narrative is heavily dependent on dialogue, i.e. it primarily follows the mimetic method, with a



minimum of authorial description or comment. However, Austen's handling of the mixed style of fictional discourse is immensely complex and multi-layered. The total effect of Austen's novels is built up by the many pointed interrelationship between the characters' speeches and the narrator's voice. Let us take a look at Austen's handling of the different kinds of narrations used in *Emma*.

### **1. Dialogue :**

The largest proportion of *Emma* is made up of dialogue. Although we have no definite evidence about the conversational language of Austen's times, all readers of Austen get the impression that her dialogues are extremely authentic, i.e. they capture the tonalities of actual spoken speech. We also notice that the characters speak true to type. Their speeches are formal or affected, cultural or vulgar, silly or witty, in keeping with what kind of people they are. But at the same time, her dialogue in general is not naturalistic. For one thing, Austen is severely economical. The conversations are confined to a point predetermined by Austen. For example when Emma and Mrs. Weston speak, they do not talk about housekeeping, or dresses, or gossip about other neighbours, which would have been natural. Often, with slight variations, very different characters use the same standard syntax and vocabulary. For example, we can distinguish the dissimilarity between Mr. Knightley's measured speeches and Frank's impetuous speeches. But we cannot always distinguish between Mr. Knightley's observation, which operate as the moral judgment in the novel and the speeches of less reliable characters like Mr Weston or Jane Fairfax. Since Austen's range of characters is narrow, there are no wide variations within the language of spoken speech. But there are subtle touches. Notice how Emma's self-centredness and her absolute faith in her own ideas is conveyed in the way she speaks to Harriet (Ch 4) : There are too many first person phrase— "I would have you...", "I want to see you...", "I say that...", "I wish...". There is no reference to what Harriet feels or thinks. Only with Miss Bates does Austen seem to have taken the art of authorial self-effacement to a fine point, by attempting to reproduce the actual way of speech. (Read the section on Miss Bates in 1.7).

Austen's dialogues are not merely suited to characters, they have deeper significance. Let us analyse the dialogue between Frank and Emma in Ch 28. They are discussing the piano and the music sent to Jane Fairfax. Frank, it seems to Emma, wants to torment Jane with references to Mr. Dixon. Emma "wished he would be less pointed", and whispers to him : "You speak too plain. She must understand you". Frank replies : "I hope she does. I would have her understand me. I am not in the least ashamed of my meaning". Emma is misled into thinking that Frank thinks it is justified in trying to embarrass Jane because of her illicit love for her friend's husband.

But the whole dialogue is ambiguous. Frank actually means that he wants Jane to understand that he has gifted her the piano and he loves her. He wants indirectly to speak of his love for Jane. So he is not ashamed.

But the dialogue has more layers. We, the readers, are deceived, along with Emma into misunderstanding Frank's intention. Also even after we have understood the true state of affairs and what Frank had actually meant when he spoke, we can discern an extra dimension of meaning. Although he is not ashamed, Frank's devious and double game are shameful.

## **2. Free Indirect Discourse :**

This is a very important narrative device in Austen. Fanny Burney had used it before Austen. But Austen uses it more extensively and to sharper effect. One Austen critic has called this device, more accurately, "Filtered inward speech and thought". Through this device the Austen narrator filters the consciousness of a character, or mediates it for the reader by transforming the character's inward speech and statements (Austen uses this narrative device primarily for her heroines) from the first person and present tense into the third person and past tense. Emma's thoughts on Mr. Elton's treachery in daring to make her the object of his courtship and her attempts to justify her misunderstanding about Mr. Elton are conveyed mainly in free indirect speech (Ch 16). But there are subtle variations. Notice how passage A below seems almost a speech transcript; but passage B is like the narrator's comment.

A : "The picture—How eager he had been about the picture! and the charade! and an hundred other circumstances,—how clearly they had seemed to point to Harriet."

B : "Certainly she had often, especially of late, thought his manner to herself unnecessarily gallant, but it had passed as his way, as a mere error of judgement, of knowledge, of taste..."

When Fanny Burney's narrator filters the inward speech of characters, it is direct and unambiguous. Austen's narrator is more subtle. The reported speeches vary in tone, from unironic straight representation of the heroine's point of view, to ironic distance. The free indirect discourse relating Emma's thoughts on Donwell Abbey and the pure blooded Englishness of the Knightley family is obviously something the narrator identifies with. But sometimes the indirect discourse is entirely ironic. The narrator does not even have to comment. A skilful selection and pinpointing of part of an inward speech is enough to judge and condemn Emma out of her own mouth in a sense. In Ch 27, the irony is evident in the indirect discourse conveying Emma's opinion about the party at the Coles : "She must have delighted the Coles—worthy

people, who deserved to be made happy!” We are at first undecided about whether the last sentence is free indirect speech or the narrators ironical comment; and then comes the next sentence which sounds definitely like free indirect speech—“And left and name behind her that would not soon die away.” And Emma’s ridiculous self-esteem is made evident through her own words.

Although free indirect speech is mainly used for the heroine, it is also used sometimes for other characters as well, especially if the narrator wants to present those characters in an ironic manner. For Mr. Elton, “making violent love” to Emma in the carriage, the narrator uses this mode : “...ready to die if she refused him, but flattering himself that his ardent attachment unequalled love and unexampled passion could not fail of having some effect...”

### **3. Objective narration :**

In this narrative device, the narrator acts as a historian, presenting facts free from any particular point of view. Such facts are to be accepted as true, since they are uncoloured by either the narrator or any of the characters. There are many such passages, but they do not dominate the narrative. They are used to set a scene, to introduce a character, explain an event or some particular circumstances.

The first ten paragraphs of the novel are mostly of this kind. They give us information about Emma’s family, her circumstances, her village Highbury. Apart from giving information, objective narration is also used for conveying the right judgement and correct interpretations. For example, Ch. 1, para 4—“The real evils indeed of Emma’s situation...” judgment rather than information. Unlike Emma’s many misguided judgments throughout the narrative, and even unlike Mr Knightley’s partially prejudiced judgment about Harriet and Frank Churchill, The value judgements of objective narrative are the product of discrimination and are irrefutable. Sometimes, we are not entirely sure about the voice of the objective narrator. For example, when we read : “Mr. Knightley, in fact, was one of the few people who could see faults in Emma and the only one who ever told her of them.”—we are not sure whether it is objective narration or Emma’s opinion. Marvin Mudrick, an important 20th century critic, is of the opinion that the voice of the objective narrator is ironic throughout Emma. For example, since he thinks Emma undergoes no regeneration, but like Frank, remains a confirmed exploiter till the end, the concluding objective narration about the “perfect happiness” of the union between Mr. Knightley and Emma is ironic.

### **4. The narrative coloured by a characters point of view :**

In all Austen’s novels, the action is extensively portrayed from the heroine’s

point of view. This point of view, especially with particularly fallible heroines like Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse is gradually and continually modified, through revelations of hidden facts and also by constant improvement in the heroine's powers of discriminations. Emma's early views of Mr. Elton or Elizabeth's early impression of Wickham, are later modified. But such a heroine is not necessarily always wrong. For example, when Emma reflects on Frank Churchill's essential levity and contrasts it with Mr. Knightley's seriousness, the point of view is identifiable with the objective narrator's. More often however, the coloured narrative is initially misleading & ironic, we get the real interpretation only in retrospect. In Ch. 26, the narration about Emma's state of mind is from Emma's point of view, and therefore, misleading : "Emma continued to entertain no doubt of her being in love. Her ideas only varied as to how much." This kind of coloured narrative has a special relevance in Emma. Emma, the central character begins with a number of faults which threaten serious harm to people around her. But unless we, the readers remain sympathetic to her, we would want to see her punished, rather than reformed. So we must simultaneously laugh at her follies and also wish to see her reform herself to earn her reward of a happy marriage. This is the novel's dilemma. If we fail to see Emma's faults revealed through the ironic texture of the narrative, we do not appreciate the comedy. If we fail to love Emma we cannot accept her marriage with Mr. Knightley as an honest conclusion. By showing most of the happenings through Emma's eyes the author provides us an inside view of Emma, so that the evidence of her redeeming qualities carries force and conviction. So while we see and condemn Emma's rudeness to Miss Bates at Box Hill; but her remorse and act of penance in visiting Miss Bates are also experienced vividly by us.

#### **5. The authorial voice :**

This is distinct from the voice of the narrator. The author's voice is generally used for reflection which is directly addressed to the reader. Such passages stand apart from the narrative, but they also exist for the narrative. They are ironical, epigrammatical and amusing. The famous first line of **Pride and Prejudice** is one of the best examples of the authorial voice. In Emma the first lines of Ch. 22 provide another example : "Human nature is so well disposed towards those who are in interesting situations, that a young person, who either marries or dies, is sure of being kindly spoken of..." The "Kindly spoken of" is ironical, its implied meaning being mere gossip. The "well disposed" is obviously hollow, since to the outsider a marriage or a death are all the same, both merely arousing a temporary interest.

#### **6. The use of letters :**

The use of letters for narration was Austen's 18th century inheritance from the

novel of Richardson. She had rejected the epistolary method after experimenting with it in her **Juvenalia**, for being too cumbrous. But she does use letters at strategic points in her narrative, to illustrate or reveal character (Mr. Collins's letter in **Pride & Prejudice**) to disclose hidden or misunderstood facts (Darcy's letter to Elizabeth, Frank Churchill's to Mrs. Weston). In *Emma* there is only one full text of a letter—that from Frank Churchill to the Westons, revealing his secret engagement and exculpating himself with regard to Emma. But there are several references to letters, their contents, summarized and style discussed as a focus on the writer's personality. The first such reference is to Robert Martin's to Harriet, proposing marriage (Ch 7). Emma is surprised by its language: "Though plain... strong and unaffected" It was short, "but expressed good sense, warm attachment, liberality, propriety, even delicacy of feeling." The letter in fact is a reflection of Robert Martin's character, Emma, though she is impressed by the letter, thinks first that Martin's more-educated sisters had helped him, and then typically, persuades Harriet that even though Martin might write a tolerable letter, he would still have "Clownish manner."

Frank's last letter is read by Emma and Mr. Knightley together. Emma's first response of 'thinking well' about the letter is modified by Mr. Knightley's more discriminating judgement over it. We are reminded of Mr. Knightley's comment on Frank's earlier letter (Ch 18). "He can sit down and write a fine flourishing letter, full of professions and falsehoods, and persuade himself that he has hit upon the very best method of preserving peace at home..." That the same judgment would hold substantially good for the final letter shows that Frank Churchill undergoes little change in the course of the narrative.

### **Irony :**

Austen's mastery of Irony is one of the givens of the large body of Austen criticism. Her ironical presentation is the primary reason for readers and critics continuing interest in her, bridging the divide of two centuries, changed life styles, social modes and literary taste. It is possible to read many meanings into an Austen text, other than the canonically determined ones. Austen's use of irony gives to her narratives a special flavour. In any Austen novel there are continual slight shifts in points of view, 'with the narrator overviewing the whole, using wit and insight one moment and at the very next momentarily becoming another character by entering into his or her being. The range and subtlety of her irony are immense.

The irony is primarily occasioned by the opposition of what appears on the surface and what is real. C.S. Lewis, in an essay on Austen says that the theme of four of the major novels (**Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, Emma**) is disillusion—the awakening from a false view of things to things as they

really are. This is certainly Emma's major theme. Emma makes a series of misjudgments because she builds up a series of illusions. The unwary reader will participate in her mistakes. The alert reader will look out for the signal of irony whenever a judgment or an opinion is presented from an unreliable characters (notably Emma's) viewpoint, whether in speech or in interior discourse. The irony is continually operative through Emma, because the central character is so entirely unreliable. Even the verbal ironies of Emma have a remarkable capacity. If we think of the irony in the celebrated first line of **Pride and Prejudice**—its surface meaning is transparently deceptive, and real meaning is perfectly understood. It has an Augustan clarity. But for the ironies in Emma,—we sometimes suspect them, very often overlook them and can recognize them only retrospectively. One major example of this is Mr. Elton's riddle (Ch 9). Again in the account of Emma's first visit to Jane Fairfax after her return to Highbury (Ch 20), we mark the irony of Emma's misimagining, as she determines not to dislike Jane any longer, in sympathy for the drab future life she must live as a governess, and for Jane's secret "successless" love for Mr. Dixon. Emma, very "nobly", decides to "acquit Jane of having seduced Mr Dixon's attention from his wife." The narrator seems to exonerate Emma of her earlier unkind thoughts about Jane's secret, unlawful love affair. We realize only later that the exoneration itself is ironic, because Emma's sympathy is dependent upon her misimagining.

The juxtaposing of the disinterestedness of the narrator and the interested voice of a character, create the ironic texture. For example, when Frank teases Jane about the piano (Ch 28), there are quick shifts, from what is admirable in Emma (she wished Frank would not do so), to what is malicious (she could not help being amused), from reliable report (Emma caught the remains of a side), to what is possible reliable (it had been a smile of secret delight) to what is a believable supposition (Jane was apparently cherishing reprehensible feelings about Mr. Dixon). The quick glide from one viewpoint to another, the smooth blend of the different angles make us see as Emma sees. But even if we suspect that Emma's views about Jane are wrong, we would still be wrong. Because Jane does smile, in secret delight, she does cherish reprehensible feelings, only, they are for Frank, and not for Mr. Dixon. The irony is double irony. We must be wrong even if we are not. Again, in the same scene, when Frank says "I am not in the least ashamed of my meaning", such is the complex irony, that even if we guessed Frank's meaning right—that it was he who had given Jane the piano because he loved her—we would still have guessed wrong; because within the context of moral values in Austen's fictional world, Frank's hidden engagement and duplicity are both shameful.

The ironies grow more and more complex as the narrative progresses. Frank's



conversations with Emma, after she had revealed to him her suspicions about Jane, are always full of double meaning, and Emma's memory of their ironical import is part of her punishment. Emma's fondness for riddles and similar word games are ironically used to show her misjudgment. Emma guesses the right answer, courtship for Mr. Elton's charade. But again, in a double irony, mistakes the object of the courtship. Frank's long letter is another example of the multi-layeredness of the ironies in Emma. The letter simultaneously leads Emma and us, the readers, to retrospectively reread and reevaluate previous words and happenings, correcting Emma's and our misreadings of his proposal to her, his comings and goings. But it also, ironically tempts both Emma and us to another misreading. The letter, packed with self-blame, full of sincerity, subtly defuses our attempted judgment on Frank. Emma "was obliged, in spite of her previous determination to the contrary, to do it all the justice that Mrs. Weston foretold." It is only when Mr. Knightley reads it, that we and Emma learn how we have misread. Mr. Knightley reveals Emma's and our moral complacency.

The major effect of this multi-layered ironic text is that the novels never become one dimensional, didactic or doctrinaire. The ironies, embodying the contradictions of human experience, can be read at many levels and yield various interpretations.

### **2.9.1 Let us sum up**

Emma is a complex novel in which Austen presents a central character who is a mixture of some admirable and many unpleasant qualities. The narrative traces, through misinterpretation and misjudgments of the heroine, a complex fabric of experience, with several major themes: disillusion, the conflicts faced by creative women in the 19th century; the plot operates on the comic motif of hidden love, and the strongly ironic narrative militates against a simple interpretation of either the characters or the concluding marriages rounding up the two plots revolving round Frank Churchill and Jane, or Emma and Mr. Knightley.

### **2.9.2 Question**

1. "We end by liking Emma". How far would you agree with this statement and what relevance do you think it has to Jane Austen's purpose?
2. Emma has been likened to a detective story because of its complicated plot and the importance of suspense. How far do you see the comparison to be true?
3. Consider the way Jane Austen presents the Eltons and their importance to the novel as a whole.
4. Would you agree with Scott that characters like Mr. Woodhouse and Miss Bates are as boring in life and in fiction. Are such characterizations to be avoided?

5. Discuss the different technical devices used by Austen to construct her narrative.
6. How does the irony in Emma contribute to the complex meaning of the narrative?
7. What is the significance of Harriet's role vis a vis Emma's character?
8. "My Emma, does not everything serve to prove more and more the beauty of truth and sincerity in all our dealings with each other"—How far can we apply this criterion to our judgment of the characters in Emma?
9. Discuss the view that Jane Austen's achievement as a novelist is inevitably limited because of the restricted world she presents.
10. Would you agree that Emma and Frank Churchill are spared their due punishment because the novel has been given a comic structure?
11. Dialogue & narration—which is the predominated mode in Emma? Show how they complement one another.
12. One of the kindest, most gentle men in English fiction, yet he always gets his own way". Discuss this view of Mr. Knightley. Is he 'too good to be true'?

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## 2.11 Introduction

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In this unit we shall try to provide you with an idea of the various recent approaches to Jane Austen's work. We shall take a look at changing attitudes to Austen, which often challenge previously held opinions about the novels. In course of our discussion there may be several references to other novels of Austen. Please try to read the other novels, all of which are easily available in cheap paperback Indian editions. Your acquaintance with them will help you to understand and interpret Emma at a deeper level.

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## 2.12 Restructuring of critical opinion : The influence of F.K. Leavis

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Throughout the 19th century and in fact also through the 20th, Jane Austen's stature as a novelist has always been immense. She is one major author whose fame has never been successfully challenged by succeeding generations, despite adverse voices like that of Charlotte Bronte. Critics however have often referred to and tried to resolve the contradiction between her scale and her stature. Can we really call a writer great who only accommodates limited and trivial material? Austen after all had advised her niece Anna, who was writing a novel : "3 or 4 families in a country village is the very thing to work on." The problem was compounded by the fact that



her first publishers emphasised that the novels were written by “A lady” and her early biographies by her relatives attempted to make of her an iconic ladylike figure. As a result, much of 19th century and early 20th century criticism was inadequate. They either dismissed her, as Charlotte Bronte or Sheila Kaye-Smith did, as cold and passionless; or were superficial, as E.M. Forster who wrote : “I read and re-read [Austen], the mouth open and the mind closed; or hagiographic, idealizing Austen as a delightful, genial, perfect, but undisturbing miniaturist.

Critical approaches began to change in the 1940s and 1950s. F.R. Leavis, the famous critic and the editor of **Scrutiny** (a literary periodical which approached literary texts with close attention to both the language and the values writer propagate) identified Austen in his book on the English novel, **The Great Tradition** as “one of the truly great writers”. In a comment on Emma, Leavis has said : “When we examine the formal perfection of Emma, we find that it can be appreciated only in terms of the moral preoccupations that characterize the novelist’s peculiar interest in life.” Two major deavisite critics, introduced a different critical approach to Austen. D. W. Harding’s essay, “**Regulated Hatred : An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen**” was published in scrutiny in 1940. Harding, through extensive analysis of Austen’s Irony showed the disturbing undercurrents of meaning running below the smooth surface of the narratives. Harding shows how generations of Austen criticism had developed the idea that within her restricted scope Austen had admirably succeeded in expressing the Augustan idea of the virtues of a civilized social order. In reaction Harding develops the oppositional view of Austen as a potentially disruptive figure. Austen meant her books to be read and enjoyed by precisely the sort of people she disliked. It would not be correct, Harding says, to call Austen’s work satiric, since she has none of the underlying didactic intention of the satirist. He sees Austen as recording what he calls “eruptions of fear and hatred into the relationships of everyday life.” In other words, she used her novels to channel and express her frustrations with her society.

Morvin Mudrick’s book, **Jane Austen : Irony as Defense and Discovery** was published in 1951. Mudrick also focusses on Austen’s irony and sees Austen as showing to negative qualities like hatred, fear, compulsion and enforced submission in the portrayal of everybody life and relationship. Austen’s irony, according to Mudrick incorporates a strong dislike and contempt not just for society in the abstract, but also for individual follies and foibles Mudrick, in his discussion of Emma shows, how, behind the apparently mild and relaxed comic structure, in which the plot is rounded up by placing all characters where they wish to be, are signals of subversion. He focesses on the unpleasantness of the characters beneath their surface amiability

and acceptability, he also reads a complex socio-psychological meaning into the friendship of Emma and Harriet. According to him, the marriage of the confirmed exploiters like Emma & Frank to two good people shows that in their defective social milieu charm counts for more than moral integrity. Both Harding and Mudrick are Leavisites, whose judgments about a writer's form and method are made in terms of that writer's moral seriousness. They however show a lack of consciousness about the historical context of Austen or relevance of gender in the reading of a text. But interestingly, both Marxist and Feminist critics have been influenced by their judgements.

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## 2.12 Marxist perspective

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Marxist criticism has an orientation towards the historical context. It focusses on the conditions of production of a literary text, the issue of class as it appears in the text and in the milieu which produces the text. Marxist reading of a text would analyse the relations of exploitation and domination, because, according to Marxist thought such relations determine the cultural life of societies. Traditional marxist criticism in England examines how literary text get published; how they deal with different social classes, and interprets form, language and meaning in terms of social, historical and economic conditions. Marxist critics are concerned with the ways in which literary works perpetuate or disrupt the dominant power structures in society.

The major marxist critics in general agree that Austen's novels express the ideology of the English landed gentry as perceived by a loyal female member of their class. It was Austen's disapproval of radical and revolutionary ideas, not her ignorance of them, which kept her novels free of any reference to such issues.

In his **The Improvement of the Estate : A study of Jane Austen's Novels** (1971) Alistair M. Duckworth reads Austen's fiction in terms of the contemporary practice of property 'improvement'—the creations of the country estates which are the main setting of Austen's novels. If you read **Mansfield Park**, you will find that landscape design is made an important focus of moral and political debate (in the conversation between Mary Crawford and Edmund Bertram). Duckworth maintains that Austen was "an author whose deepest impulse was not to subvert but to maintain and properly improve a social heritage." If you carefully read Ch 44 in *Emma*, in which Emma and others go to Donwell for a strawberry picking party, you will find a long passage in which Emma waxes eloquent on Mr. Knightley's estate—"It was a sweet view—sweet to the eye and to the mind..." Such passages would support Duckworth's views. Duckworth stresses Austen's commitment to "an inherited structure

of values and behaviour". According to him, Austen's moral position must be understood in terms of the preoccupations and practices of her times.

Roymond Williams uses Austen's novels as an important point of reference in his seminal study of cultural & social change in England in the 19th century. I quote below a passage from his **The Country and the City** (1973).

"...history has many currents, and the social history of the landed families, at that time in England, was among the most important. As we sense its real processes, we find that they are quite central and structural in Jane Austen's Novels. All that prevents us from realizing this is that familiar kind of retrospect, taking in *Penshurst* and *Saxham* and *Buck's Head* and *Mansfield Park* and *Narland* and even *Poynton*, in which all country houses and their families are seen as belonging effectively, to a single tradition: that of the cultivated rural gentry. The continual making and remaking of these houses and their families is suppressed...and Jane Austen's world can then be taken for granted, even sometimes patronized as a rural backwater, as if it were a simple, traditional setting... the paradox of Jane Austen is then the achievement of a unity of tone, of a settled and remarkably confident way of seeing and judging, in the chronicle of confusion and change."

[Note 1. The names in the passage, are those of country houses, real or fictional, celebrated in literature.

Note 2. Read in Ch 25 of **Emma** how the Coles rise in social status]

William's subtle study uses Austen's fiction to understand the terms in which the ruling class justified its position, i.e. the ideological process through which social power relations were maintained. Judging *Emma* from this viewpoint, we may say that Mr. Knightley, being the most important representative of the ruling class, has the moral basis of his authority justified not only because he is an affluent and important landowner, but because of his paternalistic responsibility towards the powerless and the disadvantaged. This is shown in the way he takes Miss Bates, Jane and Harriet under his protection at Box Hill; his of unobtrusive help to Miss Bates and Jane; his saving of Harriet from social embarrassment, his interest in furthering the happiness of his tenant farmer Robert Martin. He reminds Emma of the concomitant obligations of her social position (Ch 43). William's comment on the different attitudes of Austen's characters to the city are also relevant to *Emma*. Notice how Emma's good opinion of Frank is shaken by his going off to London to have a haircut. It signified "vanity, extravagance, restlessness of temper". Mr Elton dashes off to London to have Emma's, portrait of Harriet framed, to show his high regard for Emma. Mr Elton's silly snobbery is marked by her vanity regarding the pseudo sophistication she acquired in Bath. She speaks of Highbury as a backwater in

comparison with the “parties, balls, play” of Bath”. William’s perceptive study however does not merely read Austen as a representative of ruling class values. He also looks at Austen alongside the contemporary political activist William Cobbett who in his **Rural Rides** spoke of the rural working class and whose writings offer a different perspective on the same agrarian landscape.

Marilyn Butter is another marxist critic. In her **Jane Austen and The War of Ideas** (1975) Butter finds in Emma’s character and actions, in the laconic authority of Mr. Knightley, who as the local landlord is the repository of political and moral authority, a reflection of Jane Austen’s conservatism—her “anti-Jacobinism” (The Jacobins were the left wing faction in the French Revolutionary Assembly, and the word was loosely applied to all redical thinking or reformist tendency in the early 19th century). Butter, interprets the conclusion of **Emma** as :

“When she marries Mr. Knightley, her rank will be secured, and she will become involved in the land by sharing in its ownership. The land too will have a wholeness it never had, since Hartfield is but a sort of notch in the Donwell estate to which all the rest of Highbury belonged. At the end of the novel Emma is about to assume a clearly defined and permanent role in the community...”

Arnold Kettle’s essay on **Emma** in his **Introduction to the English Novel** is also from the marxist viewpoint. According to Kettle, Austen can succeed in combining “intensity with precision, emotional involvement with objective judgment” because of her “complete lack of idealism, The delicate and unpretentious materialism of her outlook.” Kettle is scrupulous in recognizing the artistic merits of Austen, praising Austen’s passionate, yet critical precision in examining the actual problems of her narrow world. He ascribes the narrowness of the Austen world, e.g. Highbury, to the limitations of a class society. Austen accepted class society and so her depiction of Highbury is inadequate. For Kettle, so far as **Emma** reveals Austen as a conventional member of her class, blindly accepting its position and ideology, the value of **Emma** is limited. Austen does not tell the truth about injustices inherent in a class society, in which it would have been much better for Harriet to have been the illegitimate daughter of a gentleman than of a tradesman. In Ch 10, Emma visits a sick cottager and indulges in some complacent and smug reflections. Kettle points out that Austen accepts the assumption that it is right and proper for a minority of the community to live at the expense on the majority.

Kettle’s criticism is not biased by a political theory however; since he judges **Emma** as a “living, vital novel”. He condemns it for its blind spots, subjects it to immediate standards of social and moral responsibility. But he also subscribes to the transhistorical idea of art when he praises the artistic success of Emma. Kettle’s

criticism satisfies two different criteria—the liberal humanist one which believes that human nature and moral issues are universal, and the socialist materialist or marxist position which claims that human nature is historically constructed and it is different for different groups and at different historical times.

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## 2.13 Feminist criticism: Gender-based Readings

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Critical perspectives often have overlapping areas. Kettle is a Marxist critic who lists among the positive forces of Austen “...her highly critical concern over the fate of women in her society, a concern which involves a reconsideration of its basic values”. Feminist critics share with Marxists the concept that literature is an ideological practice. Austen’s fiction is ideal territory for Feminist criticism, since all the novel’s focal point is the heroine; the status and education of women is one of Austen’s main subjects. While conforming to the established framework of fictional narrative, Austen managed to introduce into her novels some of the ideological debates of her times, which questioned the implied assumptions behind the gender based codes of conduct. For example, even a radical writer like Jean-Jaques Rousseau had written in his **Emile or An Essay on Education** “...Woman is framed particularly for the delight and pleasure of man.” On the other hand the pioneer Feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft said that women should be granted the same rationality and autonomy as was given to men. She also said that women should have proper education so that they did not have to be artful to captivate men. Each of Austen’s novels presents, in some form or other, the deep-seated contradiction inherent in the social standard which judged the conducts of men and women in different scales. A number of ‘conduct books’, such as by the 18th century popular writer Mrs. Hannah More, in her *Essays on Various Subjects Principally Designed for Young Ladies* argue that women are naturally delicate and their natural and moral weakness points out the necessity of a “superior degree of caution, retirement and reserve.” Several Austen heroines, eg. Catherine Morland, Elizabeth Bennet and Emma are robust and forthright. Austen contrasts them with women characters who exploit or make a show of their weakness to gain power, e.g. Isabella Thorpe (Northanger Abbey) Miss Bingley (Pride and Prejudice). Elizabeth and Emma in fact show an independence and an autonomy of judgment even in the company of suitable marriageable man.

Critical writings began to focus on the feminist aspects of Austen’s fiction from the 1908s. The seminal book was Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guber’s **The Madwoman in the Attic** (1979), analysing the works of 19th century women writers. In 1982, Margaret Kirkham’s **Jane Austen : Feminism and Fiction** placed Austen in the mainstream of 19th century feminism.

Gilbert and Guber argue that in Austen's time "the fundamental definition of literary authority are... both overtly and covertly patriarchal." Since authorship suggested masculine authority and ownership of a text, women found it difficult to think of themselves as authors. They also found it difficult to express themselves openly and directly within existing literary forms, which were also patriarchal. As a result, 19th century women's writings are characterised by strategies of subversion—irony, symbolism etc., through which they found a way of expressing female identity, frustration and anger. Gilbert and Guber see the compromises and submissions of the Austen heroines as a "cover story". The submission of the heroines is actually a covert victory. They seem to submit as they get both what they want and need.

Gilbert and Guber stress the likeness between Elizabeth and Emma. In their interpretation, Emma most successfully demonstrates Austen's ambivalence about her creative imagination, since she suspected that no one but herself would like this heroine Emma, as a player of word games, a painter of portraits and a spinner of stories (about Harriet's birth, about Mr Elton and Harriet, Jane, and Mrs. Dixon, Frank and Harriet) is seen as a reflection of Austen herself as an artist. Like Austen, Emma has at her disposal worn-out stories of romance that she is smart enough to resist in her own life. If Emma is seen as an artist who manipulates people as if they were characters in her own stories, Austen emphasises both the immorality of the activity and its cause or motivation. The intelligent, active, imaginative Emma has nothing to do—hence her impatient attempts to transform the dull reality. But Austen humiliates Emma, "bullies her into sense" (G & G) Emma finds that she has all along been manipulated by Frank in his fiction. She has to learn her commonality with Jane Fairfax, "her unlearnability as a female". Gilbert and Guber invite us to see the ambivalence of the conclusion with reference to the important section in Ch 49, after Emma has conveyed to Mr. Knightley her love for him, but kept silent about Harriet's confession about her feeling for him. "Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth "belong to any human disclosures,..." This silence is actually a strategy. But the adoption of a strategy of acceptance and subterfuge has two sides. On the one hand this doubleness is psychologically and ethically beneficial, a boon to women; on the other it is a painful degradation for the heroines.

Feminist criticism often combines with the Marxist approach, as in Mary Poovey's **The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer** (1984) Poovey tries to work out the complex and often contradictory relationships between ideologies of gender and class. As a marxist feminist Poovey focusses on how fictional women are persuaded to accept ideologies of gender which perpetuate inequalities between sexes. She argues that women accepted and believed in the ideal of the "proper lady", which was



actually constructed by male authority, because such acceptance offered them an illusion of power within the family structure. The ideology of romantic love was meant to condition women to accept an ideology which ultimately favoured men. Poovey points out that one of the main reasons for the general and continuing popularity of Austen's novels is that they are romantic love stories. The average reader avidly wonders whether the marriage between Elizabeth and Davy would take place or whom Emma ultimately marry. For feminist critics, this has been one of the worrying aspects of Austen's fiction that they seem to perpetuate a conventional view of man-woman relationship. Gilbert and Gubar, as we have already pointed out, try to solve this problem by a perceived ambiguity: the 'official' plot shows a rebellious, imaginative girl mastered by a sensible man (in Emma), but there are subversive undercurrents. For Poovey, Austen's romance plots perpetuate both a conventional view of sexual relationship and bourgeois society itself. The ideology of romantic love supported the new bourgeois society. The basis of that society was an absolute separation of the public and private worlds, work and home, production and consumption. Within this division women are restricted to power over the private domestic sphere only and romantic love persuades them to accept that role as natural. If we read the conversation between Emma and Harriet in Ch 10, we find evidence to support Poovey's view. Emma rejects marriage for herself because a few married women were half as much masters of their husband's house as she was of Hartfield. She also says, that if she were to "fall in love", it would be a different thing. In Ch 54 we notice a sea change as Emma even defers to Mr. Knightley's judgment in regard to Harriet's marriage with Martin. Her only wish was "to grow more worthy of him, whose intentions and judgment had been ever so superior to her own."

In Nancy Armstrong's **Desire and Domestic Fiction** (1987) feminism combines with Michel Foucault's post-structuralist concepts to redefine Austen's status as a woman writer. Armstrong is particularly interested by Foucault's idea that power does not just operate from the top downwards, thus creating a new opposition between the powerful and powerless, as both marxists and feminists believe; power operates on all levels of society in the struggle between different 'discourses' (see note below) for the status of 'truth' or what Foucault would call 'Power Knowledge'. (see note below). According to Armstrong, such a struggle began in the 18th century when a female discourse embodied in Domestic fiction and the Conduct Books challenged the aristocratic male discourse of the romance. By the middle of the 19th century, the feminist ideal embodied in Domestic fiction was accepted as the "truth by man as well as woman, with the result that private life became the dominant social reality. Armstrong rejects the notions of Austen as either as "little Toy" or a "proto-feminist".

She cites examples from *Emma* to show how **Emma**, for all her mistakes, makes gender matter more than social or class signs of identify. Armstrong bases her arguments on the post structuralist idea that language “constitutes” experience. Events, experiences, personal identity can only be understood and in that sense, only exist—when they are given meaning in language. So, according to Armstrong, Austen’s novels exert “a form of political authority” which works, not through political and social institutions, but through ‘literacy’. By Austen’s time sexual relations were assumed to be the specialized knowledge of the female. So novels came to exemplify the conduct of relationship between men and women. They taught men what kind of woman to desire, and taught women what to desire to be. So Austen was one of the writers responsible for producing a new social group at the beginning of the 19th century—a group located in the language of ethical and social refinement to which the readers aspired to belong and through which they identified themselves.

[Note 1. “Discourse” is a structure of systematic thought process shaping our social practice. This structure generates, and is generated by power, such as the old discourse of imperialism, or the new discourse of marxism. Foucault uses the word as a term to mean ‘thought as a social practice’.

Note 2. In Foucault’s idea of power/knowledge, power and knowledge are complementary. Knowledge ‘gives both power to and power over people. Power! knowledge operates within a discourse at a particular historical time, identifying what its possessor wants, as ‘truth’]

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## 2.14 Post-colonial approaches

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Post colonial theory attempts to understand the impact and effects of European colonisation and its aftermath. Since the 1980s, a growing body of critical writings has debated questions about the hegemony (control, domination) of western discourses and the possibilities of resistance to that hegemony. Post-colonial theory looks at the way in which different cultures constitute themselves through the projection of ‘otherwise’, and at the process of ‘canon formation’ (authors officially recognized, for example by academics / and / or critics as major ones in a language) and marginalisation (denying the value or importance of authors or literary works). Edward Said, in his **Orientalism** (1978) examined the construction of the. oriental “other” by European discourses of knowledge. Said has also discussed how English authors have often marginalized the important role of colonial economics in the formation of English social prosperity and English culture. Since then, intellectuals from post-colonial societies have often questioned and challenged western eye view of literary canons, humanitarian values etc. In literary criticism the post-colonial approach has



attempted to establish the idea that there is a major connection between a certain kind of Industrial well-being and cultural identity on the one hand, and on the other, the subjugation of the imperial realms overseas..." (Edward Said in an essay on **Jane Austen and Empire**). Raymond Williams, in his *The Country and the City* has shown how, from the mid 19th century ideas and images of emigration to the colonies enter the English novels.

Said argues, in his essay mentioned above, that even before mid-19th century, imperial images and ideas begin to form a vital part of the texture of linguistic and cultural practice of English literature. Said's essay is a fine analysis of **Mansfield Park**, with its explicit references to Sir Thomas Bertram's plantation in Antigua or Lady Bertram's fitful wish for an Indian shawl. While such definite reference are absent in Austen's other novels, the empire itself is not a peripheral concern. The colonial world, as Said argues, circulates in the shadowy margins of most cultural narratives produced by imperialism. The economic references open up interesting vistas. We notice in *Emma*, for example, that the smallness of the Hartfield estate—which is "but a notch" in the large estate attached to Donwell, would not account for the affluence of the Woodhouse family. There are also references to affluence and stature acquired from trade—in the case of the Coles and Mrs. Elton's father. There is also, an interesting oblique reference by Jane Fairfax to the slave trade (Ch 35), with Mrs Elton hastily disclaiming any connection of her rich friends, the sucklings (to whom Jane is to go as a governess) with the slave trade. In the historical context, by Austen's time, much of contemporary economy was already determined by overseas commercial interests. We also notice that *Emma* contains an emphasis on "Englishness"—extolling its superiority.. For example, in Ch 12, when the two Knightley brothers greet one another, the narrator comments on their calm, but sincere feelings as "the true English style". There is also the remarkable rhapsody at Donwell (Ch 42) over "English verdure, English culture, English comfort...", which shows, as Said would say, a construction of "English" as the ultimate value, while its true makers, the merchant colonizers remain invisible.

Another issue in post-colonial studies is the decentring of the canon of English literature. The intellectuals in the ex-colonies often point out that the colonizing was not only geographical and economic. There are internal colonizations, whereby we the Indians, reading English literature in an ex-colony, think along the guidelines laid down by the English canonical ideas.' In Upamanyu Chatterjee's **An English August** there is an interesting question : "What is Jane Austen doing in Meerut?" In other words, what relevance has Jane Austen, the most English of authors, to a students studying English literature in a dusty North Indian city. You might ask yourselves,

what we distanced from Austen by time, geography, economics and culture, find of interest in an English author, who builds up, through a very subtle use of the English language of the Augustan period, a nuanced framework of meaning and values meant to be of relevance to English gentry of two centuries ago. Indians often find parallels between Austen's society and Indian society as it is now, with a class/caste structure gradually being remodelled on economic privilege rather than on birth, and also with regard to the restrictions placed upon women. Some critics have also pointed out how Austen's themes often surface in Indian novels—for example in Vikram Seth's **A Suitable Boy**, which focusses on the links between money and marriage.

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## 2.15 Let us sum up

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In this unit we have tried to introduce you to recent critical perspectives on Jane Austen. For a long time, with some notable exception, critical opinion in English tended to look upon Austen's fiction as a perfectly finished work of art within a narrow scale. Austen's own deceptive references to her work, e.g. the famous quote above working on a two-inch bit of ivory, further encouraged the view of her as a miniaturist who ignored the turbulent historical process of her own times, one who advocated standards and values of English country gentry. From the 1903s and 1904s critical perception focussed on the subversive elements discernible beneath the smooth surface of the narratives. Elaborate analyses of her irony were followed by different approaches from marxist, feminist, post structuralist and post-colonial angles. These have reaped a rich harvest of multiple meanings of Austen's novels.

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## 2.16 Questions

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1. Do you think that in **Emma** Jane Austen's view of ethical values are dependant upon her perception of the class division in contemporary society?
2. Is Austen really a "little Tory" who unequivocally supports class division and class privileges?
3. Do you think that the human relationships in Austen are constructed on the basis of a conservative view of the relative importance of men and women in society?
4. How far is the theme of marriage in *Emma* a reflection of gender-dominated concepts?
5. Discuss the view that Austen's achievement as a novelist is inevitably limited because of the restricted world she presents.
6. "Using her characters to castigate the imaginative invention that informs her

own novels, Austen is involved in a contradiction...” How far is this view of Gilbert and Guber true about **Emma**?

7. As Indian readers, would we arrive at a different understanding of Austen’s novels, from that of her. English admirers?

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## **2.17 Suggested reading**

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1. Park Honan: Jane Austen, Her Life (Weidenfield and Nicolson, London, 1987).
2. Arthur Walton Litz : Jane Austen, A Study of Her Critical Development (O.U.P. London 1965).
3. Marvin Mudrick : Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery (University of California Press, 1952).
4. Arnold Kettle: An Introduction to the English Novel volume I (1951)
5. Tony Tanner : Jane Austen (Macmillan, London, 1986)
6. David Grey ed. : The Jane Austen Handbook (London: Athlone Press 1986).
7. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guber : The Mad woman in the Attic : The Woman Writer and the 19th Century (Yale University Press, 1979)
8. Casebook Series ed. David Lodge.
9. New Casebook Series ed. David Monaghan.

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## Unit 3 □ Great Expectations : Charles Dickens

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- 3.0 Objective
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Charles Dickens : Life and Works : A Brief Glimpse
- 3.3 *Great Expectations* : Background
- 3.4 *Great Expectations* in Relation to Dickens's Other Works
- 3.5 Reading the Textbook
- 3.6 Social Criticism
- 3.7 Psychological Perspective
- 3.8 Narrative Art : Style and Devices
- 3.9 Sample Questions : Long Answer Type
- 3.10 Sample Questions : Short Answer Type
- 3.11 Suggested Readings

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### 3.0 Objective

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The objective of this unit is to introduce you to the author and the subject. First we shall place the text in the life and the canon of the author. This is to give you an idea of the context of the text. This unit is expected to help you in understanding, and critically responding to the novel only after you have read the original text.

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### 1.1 Introduction : *Great Expectations*

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In this unit, we shall discuss Charles Dickens's novel *Great Expectations*. We shall have a quick look at the life and works of Dickens and the background of the novel. We shall also place *Great Expectations* in the Dickens canon with reference to some of his recurring preoccupations. This will be followed by a critical summary of the novel, and critical examination of the various aspects of the novel.

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### 3.2 Charles Dickens : Life and Works : A Brief Glimpse

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Charles John Huffam Dickens was born at Portsea on 7th February, 1812. Charles was the second child of John Dickens, a minor clerk in the Navy Pay Office, then at Portsmouth. Charles spent the happiest period of his boyhood at Chatham. But this was followed by a period of intense misery which left its indelible mark on the man

and writer. His father had a congenital incapacity to manage his financial affairs. As a result the childhood of Dickens was spent under the shadow of economic insecurity. The shadow grew darker every year as the family moved from London to Chatham and again back to London. There was a time, around 1824, when it seemed that the boy Charles would never get the chance to build a successful career. At the time the steadily declining fortune of the family had reached its nadir. Charles's father was imprisoned for debt in the debtors' prison of Marshalsea. Charles's mother Elizabeth, along with four of her children went to join her husband in prison whereas young Charles, aged twelve at the time, went to work at a blacking warehouse. For six shilling a week the boy had to stick labels on pots of paste-blackening. Later he remembered this period as one of utter misery, humiliation and despair. He could never really shake off these memories of this painful period which resurfaced in much of his fiction later. However, a legacy came to the rescue; it enabled John Dickens to leave prison, and to send Charles to a school at Hampstead.

In 1827, at the age of fifteen, Charles joined a solicitor's office as a junior clerk. It was also at this time that he could begin to indulge his taste in theatre which he retained all along. He learnt shorthand and in 1829 became a reporter of debates in the Commons for the *Morning Chronicle* at the respectable salary of five guineas a week. In 1833, Charles wrote his first sketch for the *Old Monthly Magazine*. He contributed other sketches to the *Monthly Magazine* (1833-35), to the *Evening Chronicle* (1835), and to other periodicals. Soon the name of Boz was attached to them. In 1836 the first series of *Sketches by Boz* appeared in volume form and earned immediate recognition. The same year Chapman & Hall approached him for writing a series, and the result was the creation of Mr. Pickwick in twenty monthly number. *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* was published in volume form in 1837. The series gained immense popularity, and flagged off its author on a promising future, admired by readers, appreciated by celebrities, courted by publishers.

Dickens's rise from obscurity and poverty to eminence and wealth can make a story itself. After Pickwick he became within years the most popular novelist of the country, the *most* prolific writer, and continued on the height of glory till his death in 1870. *Oliver Twist* came out in 1838, *Nicholas Nickleby* in 1839, *Master Humphrey's Clock*. in three volumes, containing *Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge* in 1841.

In 1842 Dickens made his first tour of America and Canada. *American Notes* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843) followed on his return. 1843 also saw *A Christmas Carol*, the first of Dickens's Christmas books. Dickens reached the height of his literary fame with *David Copperfield* (1849). His subsequent major works included *Bleak House* (1853), *Little Dorrit* (1857), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *The Uncommercial Traveller* (1866), and *Great Expectations* (1861).

With growing reputation and popularity also came increasing pressure of work which eventually undermined his health. In 1858 Dickens had started public reading sessions of his own works which proved a tremendous success but also shattered his health in the long run. After his second, American reading tour—a long triumphal performance—he was completely exhausted, and finally died of a cerebral attack on 9 June, 1870.

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### 3.3 *Great Expectation*; Background

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Dickens chalked out his plan for *Great Expectation* and wrote it for publication as a serial in weekly installments in the period between December 1860 and August 1861. Indeed, by the time Dickens came to write this novel, he was already famous as a writer. *Great Expectations* was written between *Bleak House* (1853) and *Little Dorrit* (1857) on the one hand, and his last completed novel *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) on the other, and thus reflects many of the major thematic and stylistic features of Dickens's mature work.

By the time Dickens came to write *Great Expectation* he was already settled at Gadshill, the place of his boyish dreams. It is assumed that the story was thought out as he strolled along the lanes or roamed in the marshlands around. The dreary landscape around him that stretched towards the river and the sea, left its impact on the setting and mood of the novel.

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### 3.4 *Great Expectations* in Relations to Dickens's Other Works

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After what E. A. Baker calls the 'hardness' of *Hard Times*, the 'inequality' of *Little Dorrit*, and the 'grandiose artifice' of *A Tale of Two Cities* (See *History of English Novel*, Vol. 7, ch. 6) *Great Expectations* brings back once again the freshness and spontaneity of Dickens's previous autobiographical novel, i.e., *David Copperfield*. But whereas *David Copperfield* was a comparatively simple history of childhood evolving into youth with a loose plot, here we have a much more planned and well-designed work. *David Copperfield* was mainly a domestic story; but *Great Expectations* is in a way a novel of adventure, in which a boy gets mixed up with questionable characters and has to go through traumatic experiences. Although comparable to *David Copperfield* in many points, it is unmistakably a much more controlled narration, indicating a much more mature mind as well as a much better handling of the subject operating behind the narration. Indeed, in many ways *Great Expectations* remains an unusual novel of Dickens.

### 3.4.1 Element of Mystery or Detection

Perhaps owing to the compulsion of serial writing to keep the reader interested over a prolonged period, *Great Expectation* like so many of Dickens's novels, depends upon an element of mystery or detection. Who are the parents of Estella? Who is the benefactor of Pip? Who is the housekeeper of Jaggers? Dickens has tactfully used this popular method of narrative suspense to lead the reader to other more serious, profounder issues.

### 3.4.2 Fictional Autobiography

*Great Expectations* can be placed in the genre of fictional autobiography or *bildungsroman* like *David Copperfield*. In both these novels of Dickens, the protagonist narrates his story in the first person; as he narrates he looks back to his childhood and youth, and makes out how he eventually grew up through various experiences into a mature identity. In both these novels Dickens uses the experiences of his own childhood. However, in *Great Expectations* he does it rather obliquely; here he tries to recapture some of the intense feelings of his childhood rather than its actual events. The time-frame of the novel too synchronises with the 1820s, that is, the period of Dickens's own boyhood. The setting of the early chapters corresponds to Dickens's own setting; as a child he had lived in the marsh country in Kent, and again in 1857, had returned to that region. Details like the clustered gravestones of dead children in the churchyards, the original of the Satis House, the original of the local town have been identified. Pip's infatuation with Estella has also been traced back [by John Mepham] to the author's own unhappy love for the young actress Ellen Ternan with whom he was miserably preoccupied at the time of writing this novel.

*Great Expectations* can be considered Dickens's serious study of the growth of personality.

### 3.4.3 The Orphan Child as The Hero

The orphan hero or heroine was a common feature of many nineteenth-century English novels. Pip is an orphan with his own sorrows of being unwanted and helpless. He is bullied and tormented. His sister acts as if "I was a young offender whom an accoucheur policeman had taken up (on my birthday) and delivered over to her, to be dealt with according to the outraged majesty of the law. I was always treated as if I had insisted on being born in opposition to the dictate of reason, religion, and morality, and against 'the dissuading arguments of my best mends.'" Pip thus becomes a representative figure whom we often meet in Dickens's novels as well as in the other novels of the period. As a child Pip has to undergo the ordeals



of terror and resentment; he gets an early taste of helplessness and desperation of a lonely child vis-a-vis the big bad world. He has also his moments of guilt, anger vengefulness. Though Dickens himself was not an orphan, one can guess the desperation and misery of the poor child, with his father rotting in the debtors' prison, and mother abandoning him to hateful labour.

Again, Pip can be seen as a sort of Oliver [*Oliver Twist*]. Like the other orphan boy Pip is also fatherless, motherless, low-born, but rises out of the cheerless degradation of poverty-stricken orphaned childhood to wealth and social position. Both the boys are befriended by outlawed people. Both seem to offer that popular pattern—'from rags to riches' through some unaccountable caprice of fortune.

### **3.4.4 The Child's Perception**

As in many of his other novels Dickens here reminds us through subtle touches that children's perceptions, interests and feelings have their own scale and intensity, which is different from that of the adults. These show how emphatically he enters the child's mental world. For example, one can recall Pip's description of Mrs. Joe washing his face : "I suppose myself to be better acquainted than any living authority with the ridgy effect of a wedding ring passing unsympathetically over the human countenance." Or Pip's observation of Mr. Hubble—"a tough, high-shouldered, stooping old man, of a sawdusty fragrance, with his legs extraordinarily wide apart : so that in my short days I always saw miles of open country between them when I met him coming up the lane". Pip's childish deductions from the tombstones of his parents and siblings are so plausible in their irrationality' and bafflement.

"The shape of the letters on my father's, gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly hair. From the character and turn of the inscription, '*Also Georgiana Wife of the Above*', I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. To five little stone lozenges, each about a foot and a half long, which were arranged in a neat row beside their grave, and were sacred to the memory of five little brothers of mine—who gave up trying to get a living exceedingly... a belief I religiously entertained that they had all been born on their back with their hands in their trouser-pockets, and had never taken them out in this state of existence..."

There can be a long list of such examples which show Dickens's perfect ease and mastery in rendering the texture of the juvenile mind. Dickens re-creates the experiences and feelings of childhood, and thus makes the reader more fully and sympathetically aware of the children's world, of their own fears and wonders.



### 3.4.5 Poverty and Ambition

Poverty and social ambition appear as related factors in Dickens's fictional world. Here, too, the author makes a sensitive treatment of the same relationship. Pip cringes under a sense of inferiority when he comes to encounter the 'elite'. Dickens gives a very convincing account of Pip's class shame when confronted by the snobbery and contempt of Miss Havisham and Estella. It is mainly this inferiority complex that brings about undesirable changes in Pip until he learns to redeem himself through love for an outlaw and loving admiration for a simple rustic.

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## 3.5 The Story

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In this Unit we shall try to help you read the text. First you'll be introduced to the story, along with a gist and a general outline.

This will be followed by

- (i) a look at the three divisions or 'stages' made by the author.
- (ii) a quick survey of the setting, and the characters, and identifying certain themes.

It is a fast-moving tale, carefully set in time and place, which takes place between Pip's seventh and twenty-third birthdays. Pip, a grown up youth, looks back on his past and recounts the story of his growing up. Pip, a poor innocent orphan, brought up by a severe sister and a kindly brother-in-law, once helps a runaway convict. As he grows up he feels dissatisfied with his social situation, and consequently makes certain mistakes, surrenders to temptations and morally bad ways. He comes to believe that he is destined for great expectations—which mysteriously come his way—and deserves better things. As he becomes a proud, snobbish social climber Pip becomes insensitive to, and unappreciative of, the genuine goodness of genuine good people like Joe or Biddy. He becomes ungrateful to Joe, and foolishly persuades himself to believe that Miss Havisham, a rich proprietress, is his mysterious benefactor. He also gets infatuated with Estella, a cold unresponsive girl at Miss Havisham's. However, eventually he realises his errors, reforms himself, makes it up with Joe and Biddy, arranges for Herbert's career, learns to be protective and sympathetic towards Magwitch, and thus Pip grows up by redeeming himself.

The narrative exhibits a tight plot, and a closely organised and interwoven structure. The time is the early nineteenth century and the locale is England.

### 3.5.1 Gist

Pip helped an escaped prisoner hiding in a marsh. Miss Havisham was deserted on her wedding day. From these two events Dickens weaves an amazing story of gratitude on the one hand and vindictiveness on the other. Both these motives affected Pip's life; for the prisoner had sworn to reward the small boy who had helped him in the marsh with food and a file to cut his legiron, whereas Miss Havisham had chosen him as one of her victims. It is an absorbing though gloomy tale, with few moments to relieve the reader from the pressure of the problems facing Pip.

### 3.5.2 Story-Outline

Little Pip had been left an orphan in his early childhood. His sister, much older than Pip, had reared him in her cottage, but apparently without affection or kindness. On the other hand, Pip's brother-in-law, Joe Gargery, a blacksmith by profession, was kind and loving to the boy. Pip used to wander alone in the marsh country where he lived with his sister and brother-in-law. In course of one such lonely wandering one day he meets a wild-looking man who demands food, a file, and secrecy from the child. Pip is too scared to refuse. When he returns with the desired articles, Pip finds another mysterious man in the marsh; the two strangers engage in a fierce fight, and then the second stranger disappears into the fog. The first man is arrested by the police, but he promises to repay Pip for his help.

After some time Pip is sent by his sister to Miss Havisham, the strange dweller in the large mansion, called Satis House. Miss Havisham lives a secluded life in a gloomy house where all the clocks have stopped at the hour her would-be bridegroom had failed to appear on the morning of her marriage. The wedding breakfast, laid out on that morning, is still left mouldering on the table in a deserted room; the lady herself often dresses up in the bridal robe. Pip begins to go there every day to meet the old lady and a beautiful young girl living with her, the latter often torments the shy boy. Miss Havisham only watches, and encourages Estella in this cruel entertainment.

Pip suffers from self-consciousness as a poor boy without education. One day a solicitor from London, named Jaggers, brings him the opportunity and also an offer to go to London and make himself a gentleman. Joe and Pip accept the proposal. Pip imagines that it is perhaps Miss Havisham who is behind this development; perhaps the lady wants to make a gentleman of him so that one day he would be a suitable boy for marrying Estella.

Coming to London Pip finds a small apartment set up for him; he also finds a

young companion, Herbert Pocket, a young relative of Miss Havisham. Pip is instructed to see Mr. Jaggers when he needs money. Pip wants to know who is his benefactor, but Jaggers tells him not to make inquiries, and to wait for the appropriate time instead, when the mysterious person will disclose his identity.

Soon Pip becomes habituated to the ways of the parasitic life in London, and strikes friendship with other London dandies, including an unpleasant youth named Bentley Drummle. Around this time Joe once comes to visit Pip, but Pip feels embarrassed at Joe's simple manners. By now Pip had outgrown his rustic beginnings, and had become quite a snob. But his companion Herbert Pocket willingly helps Pip to accommodate Joe in their apartment. Joe feels uncomfortable, though he loves Pip too much to take offence. Pip, of course, feels ashamed of himself after Joe's departure. Joe had brought the message that Miss Havisham wanted to see Pip, and accordingly Pip returns with Joe. When he meets the old lady she tells him that he must win Estella, her adopted daughter, and when the latter comes to London, Pip must see her. This makes Pip more convinced about the identity of his secret benefactor and her motive in helping him.

Eventually Estella arrives in London, and before long she has many suitors, including Drummle whom she favours, Although Pip meets her frequently, and she receives him in a kind and friendly manner, Pip knows he stands no chance in the race.

On his twenty-first birthday an ugly and coarse stranger calls on him, who turns out to be the man Pip had helped in the marsh so many years ago. At last Pip comes to know his benefactor. He is shocked and horrified to learn the truth, that he owed actually, and owed so much, to Abel Magwitch, the crude ex-criminal. He discloses to Pip that he had 'been sent to the convict colony where he had grown rich; that he wanted Pip to enjoy the fruits of this wealth and live the kind of life Magwitch himself had been denied. He tells Pip that he had returned to England specifically for the purpose of seeing the boy to whom he wanted to be a second father. At the same time he urges Pip for strict secrecy regarding his presence since the discovery of his presence would mean death; that was the punishment for the prisoner who came back from a convict colony. Pip feels disgusted, trapped, desperate. He also realises that Miss Havisham had done nothing to promote his career or expectations; rather it was this man who had been instrumental in his progress. Anyway, disturbed and baffled as he is, Pip decides not to forsake this man to whom he owed so much. In the new situation Magwitch adopts the name Provis to escape detection. Provis also discloses the name of the man with whom Pip had seen him fighting in the marsh. The name,

Arthur Compeyson, tallies with the name of the lover and betrayer of Miss Havisham, which Pip had learnt from Herbert Pocket.

Pip now goes to see Miss Havisham and seeks a clarification regarding her treatment of him,—why did she encourage him to believe that she was helping him when this was not the fact. Reaching her place Pip learns that Estella is going to marry Drummle. He also comes to understand that Miss Havisham, who had been betrayed by a faithless man, wanted to use Estella as an instrument for wreaking her revenge on men. Estella, too, reminds Pip about her previous warning to him against loving her. After Estella's marriage Pip comes once more to visit Miss Havisham. But owing to an accident a fire breaks out in the old house; in spite of Pip's attempt to save the old woman she dies in the fire which also ruins the house.

From Provis's stories about Compeyson and from other evidence Pip comes to realise that Estella's father was none other than Magwitch or Provis. Pip reveals this only to Jaggers, whose mysterious housekeeper, an ex-murderess, turns out to be Estella's mother. Pip also comes to know that Compeyson is in London, and plotting to kill Provis. In order to save the man, who has now virtually become his foster father, Pip arranges to smuggle him out to France where he plans to join the old man. Herbert and Pip together make the elaborate secret plan. But unfortunately as they are setting Provis on the boat, Compeyson overtakes them at the last moment. After a last desperate battle in the water Provis kills his enemy, but gets imprisoned once again. Here he dies before there can be a trial.

Shortly after this Pip falls ill, and it is Joe who comes to nurse him. By now Pip has been made wiser by his experiences, and knows the worth of Joe. He is not ashamed of him any more. Pip's sister has died in the meantime and Joe has married again, this time very happily. Pip returns to Joe's country home and stays there for a while. But he cannot get over his desolation and unhappiness. After a time Herbert and Pip together set up a business in London.

Years later Pip comes to see Joe once again. While idly walking he comes to the site of the former Satis House, Miss Havisham's mansion. There he finds Estella too wandering over the ruins. Estella had had a bitter taste of married life with a cruel man. Now she is widowed. The chastening experiences have changed and softened her. There is a mutual avowal of affection. Pip thinks perhaps they may not have to part again.

### **3.5.3 Stages**

The Major structural feature of the novel is its division into three distinct 'stages'. The kind of planned control Dickens exercised over his tale is evident from the 'three

stages' pattern. The novel is distinctly arranged in three distinct 'stages of Pip's expectations.' three large sections of virtually equal length, which correspond to the phases of Boyhood, Youth and Maturity of the narrator-hero. It is, in a way, like a three-act drama, the first act depicting the child's life of industrious obscurity, the second his self-abandonment to wilful public idleness, the third his resigned, modest acceptance of his true place in society.

At the end of each 'stage' the author brings down 'the curtain' with an appropriate/significant touch.

### **3.5.3.1 Chapters 1-19 : First Stage**

The first nineteen chapters describe the childhood of Pip in the countryside where he 'had been so innocent'. Stage one ends with Chapter 19. Here the narration trembles with the sadness of parting, of bidding farewell to past/Paradise/innocence for ever. The penultimate paragraph finely brings out the moment, when for a brief time Pip is caught between the opposite pulls of motion and retrogression. "So subdued I was by those tears, and by their breaking out again in the course of the quiet walk, that when I was on the coach, and it was clear out of the town, I deliberated with an aching heart whether I would not get down when I changed horses and walk back, and have another evening at home, and a better parting. We changed, and I had not made up my mind, and still reflected for my comfort that it would be quite practicable to get down and walk back, when we changed again. And while I was occupied with those deliberations, I would fancy an exact resemblance to Joe in some man coming along the road toward us, and my heart would beat high—As if he could possibly be there!" Finally, of course, Pip goes ahead, with the big world spreading 'before' and the mists' already on the rise. A hint of the forthcoming 'misty' days in the big bad world! "We changed again, and yet again, and it was now too late and too far to go back, and I went on. And the mists had all solemnly risen now, and the world lay spread before me." (Ch. 19).

### **3.5.3.2 Chapters 20-39 :Second Stage**

The second stage ends with a mood of despair as Pip faces the ruin in his fortunes; "the clocks of the Eastward churches were striking five, the candles were wasted out, the fire was dead, and the wind and the rain intensified the thick black darkness" (Ch.39). Nine brief paragraphs sum up the action of the novel up to this point. Pip and Magwitch are cut off from the world. Drowned in his compulsive isolation Pip remembers his childhood once again, as his 'dreadful burden' sleeps on with 'a pistol lying on the pillow'.

### **3.5.3.3. Chapters 40-59 : Third Stage**

In the third stage the narrator appears to re-live the past as he tells it. By the time we reach the end all the minor characters have been dismissed or suitably paired off. Joe and Biddy get married, as do Herbert and Clara. Satis House has been pulled down. Echoes of crime and punishment have fallen silent. Thus the ground is prepared for a final meeting between two lonely people—Pip and Estella. The end of the third stage carries echoes of the end of the first stage; only the morning mist is now replaced by evening mist. But the assurance is clearly there that this journey will continue. “I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so, the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her.” (Ch. 59).

### **3.5.3.4 Backdrop : Temporal and Spatial**

Dickens places each of the three stages against clear-cut well-defined temporal and spatial backdrops. The backdrop of Stage One is provided by the marshland, the forge, the inn, the small town and Satis House. Events take place at a leisurely pace as Pip begins reminiscing about select childhood events. The metropolis of London is the general setting of Stage Two; space here becomes much more expansive and also labyrinthine. Stage Three opens out more to the big world to which Thames becomes the gateway. Finally, Dickens brings the reader back to the point of rest (in time and place)—the forge, now turned into a happy family home—where the story had begun.

### **3.5.3.5 Characters**

The characters in the novel also show the kind of planning that has gone into the making of the novel. They appear better fitted to each other and to the story than is usual with Dickens. They combine to produce the unity of impression that the novel leaves on the reader, whereas individually many of them rank among the most original of Dickens’s creations. The characters here seem to fall into two divisions : the malignant and the friendly. Among the first group Miss Havisham and Estella may appear to be half-realised fantasies. Miss Havisham is a psychological case of obsessive fixation, whom we find in many of the tales of Dickens—a woman who remains indoors for years, either by compulsion or by choice, and lives in dirt and gloom, shut out from fresh air, sunshine, the joys of life. Estella seems a bit artificial in the earlier part with her cold stiffness, and unquestioning complicity with the old woman. Baker is of the opinion that Estella remains as impenetrable to the reader as to the



unfortunate Pip. However, she is shown mellowing and maturing through suffering. Among the other malignant characters are Pip's sister Mrs Joe, the violent dominating woman, the bullying old Pumblechook, posing as the boy's patron, Mr. Wopsole, Sarah Pocket, the rest of the snobs who dislike the boy's social promotion, Drummle the "Spider", Trabb's boy, the relentless persecutor of Pip. There are also the fearsome murderous pair,—Orlick and Compeyson.

There are also people belonging to the other side. Among them first come Joe and Biddy, followed by the unfortunate outlaw Magwitch, and the men of law like Jaggers and Wemmick. Jaggers is a powerful creation with his extraordinary clairvoyance, the way he turns one 'inside out'. As Wemmick says, "There's only one Jaggers". The daring figure comes alive through a few masterly narrative strokes :

"If anybody wouldn't make an admission", he said, "I'll have it out of you!" and if anybody made an admission, he said, "Now I have got you!" The magistrates shivered under a single bite of his finger. Thieves and thief-takers hung in dread rapture on his words, and shrank when a hair of his eyebrows turned in their direction."

*Wemmick*, however, has been made deliberately quaint, with his little castellated mansion, his fixed phrases and mannerism. Still Wemmick reminds us of some other Dickensian characters who live in their own world of fancy. Wemmick manages to build a pastoral idea into his domestic arrangements. Wemmick's retreat at Walworth Castle is an example of escape artistry, perhaps the best one in Dickens's novels. At Jaggers' office in London Wemmick is almost a piece of office furniture. But when he goes home and shows Pip his ingenious drawbridge, he smiles "with a relish, not mechanically" (Ch. 25). Wemmick's confession suggests a happy balance rather than an absurd split, when he says, "When I go into the office, I leave the castle behind me, and when I come into the castle, I leave the office behind me" (Ch. 25). However, his delight is evident when in his pastoral enclave complete with its fruits, flowers and drawbridge, whereas his proximity to the city makes him proportionately "drier and harder". *Herbert Pocket who helps Pip to turn into a gentleman leaves a charming impression as also his nice girl Clara. Clara's father Bill Barley is one of the typical Dickensian eccentrics, who is more audible than visible from his room upstairs busy with his grogs. But when it is the question of choosing the best of the lot, critics and readers are unanimous in their selection of Joe Gargery. Biddy mentions him as the "worthy, worthy man". Indeed Joe manifests the innocence of a child combined with saintly integrity, unselfishness and goodwill, and emerges as a most lovable character. Indeed, Pip's final evolution to self-knowledge is measured against his ability to appreciate and honour Joe's sweet, humble self-respect. It is to Dickens's credit that in spite of embodying so many qualities Joe still remains charming and credible.*

Joe's simple philosophy has been finely expressed in one speech that the narrator recalls later :

“Pip, dear old chap, life is made of ever so many partings welded together, as I may say, and one man's a blacksmith, and one's a whitesmith, and one's a goldsmith, and one's a coppersmith. Divisions among such must come, and must be met as they come. If there's been any fault to-day at all, it's mine. You and me is not two figures to be together in London; nor yet anywhere as else but what is private, and be known, and understood among friends. It ain't that I am proud, but that I want to be right, as you shall never see me no more in these clothes. I'm wrong out of the forge, the kitchen, or off the meshes. You won't find half so much fault in me if, supposing as you should ever wish to see me, you come and put your head in at the forge window and see Joe the blacksmith, there, at the old anvil, in the old burnt apron, sticking to the old work. I'm awful dull, but I hope I've beat out something nigh the rights of it at last. And so God bless you, dear old Pip, old chap, God bless you!”

The narrator can be eventually redeemed because in spite of his snobbery he has flash of recognition of the innate dignity of the man who can speak so.

“I had not been mistaken in my fancy and there was a simple dignity in him. The fashion of his dress could no more come in its way when he spoke these words, than it could come in its way in Heave. He touched me gently on the forehead, and went out. As soon as I could recover myself sufficiently, I hurried out after him and looked for him in the neighbouring streets; but he was gone.”

*Pip* is the one character who undergoes significant change and development, as he evolves from childhood to youth, and from snobbery and illusions to self-knowledge and wisdom. Humphry House's observation in this regard is illuminating.

“The final wonder of *Great Expectations* is that in spite of all Pip's neglect of Joe and coldness towards Bidley and all the remorse and self-recrimination that they caused him, he is made to appear at the end of it all a better person than he was at the beginning. It is a remarkable achievement to have kept the reader's sympathy throughout a snob's progress (*The Dickens World* P. 156.)”.

What is the secret of this sympathy? Of course, at the start we meet Pip as a small boy in a desolate churchyard, scared and defenceless, yet compassionate and generous. He is also ill-treated by his own sister as well as the visitors to her house. And in spite of all the difficulty he tries to learn to read and write. These factors naturally draw the reader's sympathy. But after Pip meets Estella and gets infected by her contempt towards his commonness, and quickly turns a snob, this sympathy recedes. However, the figures against whom we have to measure Pip put him in a



better light by comparison; they are the savage Orlick with his murderous violence, the hypocritical Compeyson with his dark crimes, the surly Drummle with his brutal arrogance. Also Pip is soon remorseful after his nastiness to Joe, and is consistently unhappy owing to his anxious ambitions, as well as his hopeless longing for Estella's love. It is because of this unhappiness that he continues to retain our sympathy, without which the book would have failed to make much of its effect. For Pip's wishful assumptions about Miss Havisham being his benefactor. other people—including Mrs. Joe, Pumblechook, Jaggers, and Miss Havisham herself—are no less responsible than Pip himself. Moreover, Pip's bad luck, the terrifying odds against him make us sorry for the boy.

As the first person narrator, Pip makes a clean breast of his badness in thought and action. This mainly consists of ingratitude and snobbery. As Christopher Ricks puts it. "We do not, in the ordinary way, have much difficulty in liking someone who tells us how bad he has been; we are perhaps less sympathetic to someone who talks about his good deeds. And, Conversely, we are likely to feel sympathy with a man seen from the outside as acting well, but not otherwise. Goodness should not talk about itself, but badness may be absolved, or mitigated, by doing so" (Gross and Pearson, pp 203-04). It is to the credit of the author that the confession always rings true, and does not sound like dishonest breast-beating. One can cite for example that dry, terse passage admitting Pip's feelings on the eve of Joe's arrival in this London home.

Let me confess exactly, with what feelings I looked forward to Joe's coming.

Not with pleasure, though I was bound to him by so many ties; no; with considerable disturbance, some mortification, and a keen sense of incongruity. If I could have kept him away by paying money, I certainly would have paid money (Ch. 27).

Thus most of the time Dickens seems to catch the right tone for Pip's confessions or admissions. But what about his good actions? In deed Pip does so very few good actions that after the confession of many bad things one or two good actions come quite handy and convincing. One can contrast Pip with David [*David Copperfield*] in this respect. Pip's three important good actions are his secret act of kindness in buying a partnership for Herbert, his final refusal to accept money from Magwitch and Miss Havisham, and his eventual love for Magwitch, which finally redeems him. In securing help for Herbert Pip has to set aside his pride and ask a favour .from the woman who had tricked him in the past. The simple dignity with which Pip can now refuse the lady's offer to promote himself shows how he has matured.

‘Can I only serve you, Pip by serving your friend? Regarding that as done, is there nothing I can do for you yourself?’

‘Nothing. I thank you for the question. I thank you even more for the tone of the question. But there is nothing.’ (Ch. 49).

That Pip should refuse to take any more money from Magwitch after the striking disclosure is understandable. His repugnance is sufficient reason. By the time Pip comes to feel love for Magwitch, the latter’s wealth is forfeited to the Crown. At this time Pip might not have qualms about taking money from him. And, therefore, he does not renounce the money; rather he firmly resigns himself to the fact of losing it. It is this resignation instead of renunciation that makes him both plausible and admirable.

Jaggers did not conceal from me that although there might be many cases in which forfeiture would not be exacted, there were no circumstances in this case to make it one of them. I understood that very well... I had no claim, and I finally resolved, and ever afterwards abided by the resolution, that my heart should never be sickened with the hopeless tasks of attempting to establish one (Ch. 55).

Finally, it is Pip’s loyal love for Magwitch at the end that redeems him most. When

Magwitch first returns Pip feels only repugnance. This is what makes his final love so moving and convincing.

For now my repugnance to him had all melted away, and in the hunted wounded shackled creature who held my hand in his, I only saw a man who had meant to be my benefactor, and who had felt affectionately, gratefully, and generously, towards me with great constancy through a series of years (Ch. 54).

Dickens often enjoyed his characters so much as to let them grow out of proportion. But this novel is not more than half as long as his average novel. And “it is a sign that Dickens kept his characters in their place, and did not let them display themselves for the sake of display, as was too often his wont” (Baker 313). Furthermore, “each character speaks a language of its own, and behaves, however farcically, in its own peculiar fashion. Round each there circles a distinctive atmosphere made up of the humorous, dashed, more or less largely, with the sentimental or the frightful” (*Dickens : The Critical Heritage*, p. 435).

### 3.5.3.6 Themes

The themes that emerge from the novel can make an almost endless catalogue. To cite a few :

- (i) crime and punishment;
- (ii) natural justice and the law;
- (iii) predestination and free will;
- (iv) the outcast and society;
- (v) dignity of labour and the acquisitive society;
- (vi) the schism between one's private and professional lives;
- (vii) instincts and affections;
- (viii) the operation of the subconscious mind;
- (ix) education and self-progress/self-awareness;
- (x) violence and gentility;
- (xi) appearance and reality.

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## 3.6 Criminal Law and Prison Life

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Dickens gives a detailed and vivid picture of society, including the criminal world and the legal system of the time, and exposes many murky aspects of contemporary criminal law and prison life. Through the Magwitch plot Dickens dramatises social attitudes and legal practices of the time; the use of old ships as prisons, or the system of transportation of prisoners to Australia, for example. He brings out the anomalies of the law by focusing on the disproportionate relationship between guilt and punishment.

### 3.6.1 The Ideal of the 'Gentleman'

Like a typical mature work of Dickens *Great Expectations* explores and criticises contemporary social institutions, issues, and attitudes. Here Dickens questions some of the basic contradictions of Victorian social values. The concept of 'social respectability' is thus subjected to ironical examination. Hence the emphasis on the question of the definition of 'gentleman' : who is a gentleman, and what constitutes the quality of a gentleman? It is this question that surfaces in course of the narrative, and constitutes one of the central themes. Pip's great expectation is to become a gentleman, and Magwitch's great hope is to help him in the process. But can a gentleman be made, or should one be born with the gentlemanly virtues? Pip comes

to know some so-called young gentlemen in London, who do not have these virtues; they are idlers enjoying the leisure of unearned income and cultivating self-importance and laziness. The story seems to question the validity of the idea that birth or money could make a gentleman; instead, charity and generosity of nature make one noble. In this sense Joe Gargery appears to be a much better gentleman than any in the novel. Mr. Pocket and Herbert too represent the unpretentious, honest, kind and hard-working types. Such people are naturally dignified. But Pip's social ambition—that he must become a gentleman—proves morally corrosive. Virtuous people in the world of the novel are not socially ambitious.

### **3.6.2 The Ideal of 'Self-Help'**

Samuel Smiles's book *Self-Help*, published in 1859, underscored the Victorian idea of social nobility through sheer hard work and talent. The book further proclaimed the message that it was possible for people of humble origin to achieve social success and financial prosperity by 'self-help'. Though Dickens's own life can be cited as an illustration of the idea, the present novel does not bear out the same. For example, neither Pip nor Herbert would have been able to attain the kind of successful middle-class life they eventually attained without external aids. Finally it IS good luck which seems to be crucial for success, though strong Christian virtue is important for happiness.

### **3.6.3 Not Just Social Criticism**

Even as a moral fable *Great Expectations* cannot be consistently read as a satire or critique on contemporary society. In the words of R. George Thomas; the novelist

“Appears to have taken great pains to remove his story from the area of contemporary observation—if not of possible living memory—and so to concentrate any social criticism implicit in his tale against the more timeless defects in human society, which arise when moral values and social aspirations have gone astray” (24)

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## **3.7 Psychological Perspective**

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Here we will briefly introduce you to the psychological perspective that has been increasingly brought to bear on the novel by a school of later critics, though Dickens's contemporary readers and critics were not much concerned with this aspect.

### 3.7.1 Guilt

The settings and characters of the novel are realistic. At the same time they provide material for fantastic and symbolically suggestive elements; thus they help to bring out Pip's unconscious fears and desires. For example, Magwitch emerges as the magnified image of guilt and punishment in Pip's mind. John Mepham in his "Introduction" to *Great Expectations* (Wordsworth Classical edition, 1992) finely sums up this aspect of Pip's story. Mepham claims that there are various aspects of his [Pip's] account that suggest that he has all along been in the grip of unconscious forces of which he has been unaware. "Perhaps the story is, then, that of obsessive desires and unconscious feelings which Pip himself never really understands? Pip suffers from what seems to be an inappropriate sense of guilt. He is haunted by the idea of being a criminal and of being hung. His encounter with Magwitch seems to confirm this sense of himself as a criminal which derives from his unexpressed but violent anger and resentment against his sister. Orlick, who seems to act as Pip's bad side, which has split off and become a separate character, does the things which Pip would unconsciously like to do but cannot admit to. He sexually harasses Bidley and he kills Pip's sister. Pip's rejection of his family and fiends, his desire to replace them with the ice-princess Estella and the godmother Miss Havisham, all betray a fairytale aspect to his life through which he reveals to us, but not to himself, a life of fantastic infantile desires and inadmissible wishes. So his story is not so much, or not only, the moral tale it seems at first sight, but a story of anxiety, of unconscious guilt, of fixation and obsession. These unconscious forces come back, in the climactic scene with Orlick, and almost kill him" (ix-x). However, the question that we have to consider is whether Pip is eventually cured of his neurotic obsessions at the end?

### 3.7.2 Good People

In the world of the novel there are some virtuous characters, Joe and Bidley, for example. They are not socially ambitious. They are very charming no doubt. But the question remains whether, or how far are they psychologically convincing. Joe is unchanging with his unfailing kindness from the beginning to the end, without showing any hint of inner conflicts, or any development. So is Bidley uniformly good, modest, and uncomplaining as she is.

### 3.7.3 Doubtfulness

Unambiguously good lives in this world of the novel are to be found in the countryside, whereas London seems to foster confusion and moral contradiction. As a result we have split personalities; people who are basically good in their private

lives maintain a different standard in their professional life. Wemmick and Jaggers represent this fascinating doubleness. At the place of work they are severe, rule-bound, and cynical; but as private persons they show the propensity towards warmth and kindness. [Also see 2.5.6]

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## 3.8 Narrative Art : Style and Devices

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### 3.8.1 Plot

Here we shall try to consider different aspects of the narrative style and some of the narrative devices which Dickens has used to tell his story of Pip.

In September 1861, immediately after the book had been published, E.P. Whipple wrote in his review of the book in *Atlantic Monthly* : “In no other of his romances has the author succeeded so perfectly in at once stimulating and baffling the curiosity of his readers. He stirred the dullest minds to guess the secret of his mystery; but... the guesses of his most intelligent readers have been... wide of the mark ...[Yet] each surprise was the result of art, and not of trick; for a rapid review of the previous chapters has shown that the materials of a strictly logical development of the story were freely given. ...the first, second, third. and even fourth of these surprises gave their pleasing electric shocks to intelligent curiosity... The plot of the romance is... the best that Dickens has ever invented. Its leading events are, as we read the story consecutively. artistically necessary, yet, at the same time, the processes are artistically concealed. We follow the movement of a logic of passion and character, the real premises of which we detect only when we are startled by the conclusions” (Excerpt in *Dickens : The Critical Heritage* [Ed. P. Collins], p. 428).

Gissing also insisted, “no story in the first person was ever better told”. Indeed, the narrative never flags; because all the time Dickens is either leading us to new incidents or filling in the gaps of what we already know. Numerous flashback narratives have been used here to clarify some of the mysteries in the plot.

### 3.8.2 The Inset Story

*Great Expectations* illustrates a carefully organised unitary narrative. ‘Inset tales’ are used in a planned way as part of this total narrative instead of digressions. These tales are utilised to give the sense of pre-destined events.

The device of ‘inset story’ was commonly used by Dickens’s favourite eighteenth-century novelists. One of the vestigial narrative. methods employed here is the ‘inset story’. In Chapter 42 we have the most significant inset story, i.e., Magwitch’s story of his own life, “put at once in a mouthful of English”. It seems to carry the essence

of all the picaresque tales in currency in England or France: “In jail and out of jail, in jail and out of jail, in jail and out of jail”. The device has been woven into the thematic and structural pattern of the novel.

### 3.8.3 Combining Realism with Fantasy

As in all of his major novels, Dickens appears to write here in the celebrated realistic tradition, so characteristic of Victorian fiction. At the same time he also ushers in a more fantastical and symbolic aspect. Thus he uses realistic characters and setting to bring out Pip’s unconscious fears and wishes, sometimes in almost surreal form.

### 3.8.4 Planning

Critics have noted the artistic unity and clear purpose of the plot which have been only enhanced by the absence of overmuch sentimentalism or surplus details. Indeed the book bears evidence of some careful planning on the part of the author.

Butt and Tillotson in their book *Dickens at Work* cite from the author’s personal memoranda the notes he made toward planning this novel. These notes show how carefully the book was planned down to its details. The author makes a note on the ages of the characters. He also makes a calculation on the state of the tides for use in the dramatic scene of the recapture of Magwitch. There is a sketch titled ‘General Memo’ which shows the author engaged in solving the problem of winding up the many loose threads. The sketch reads as follows :

Miss Havisham and Pip, and the Money for Herbert. So Herbert made a partner in Clarriker’s.

Compeyson. How brought in?

Estella, Magwitch’s daughter.

Orlick and Pip’s entrapment—and escape

—To the flight

Start

Pursuit

Struggle—Both on board

together—Compeyson drowned [sic]—

Magwitch rescued by Pip. And

taken

Then :

Magwitch tried, found guilty, and left for



## Death

Dies presently in Newgate

Property confiscated to the Crown.

Herbert goes abroad :

Pip perhaps to follow.

Pip arrested when too ill to be moved—lies in the  
Chambers in Fever. Ministering Angle Joe.

recovered again, Pip goes humbly down to the  
old marsh Village, to propose to Biddy.

Finds Biddy married to Joe

So goes abroad to Herbert (happily married to Clara Barely), and becomes his clerk.

The one good thing he did in his prosperity,  
the only thing that endures and bears good fruit.

The notes show how Dickens handled the ‘unimaginably difficult’ tasks of ‘the planning out from week to week’ (*The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Ed. Walter Dexter, 1938, III, 216-17) over a period of 19 months. For example, it was in Chapter 37 that Pip had started the work of buying Herbert a place in the business of Clarriker, and in Chapter 49 the transaction was completed by Miss Havisham. But it continues to be a live issue; and that this should be so was indicated in the sketch, “the one good thing he did in his prosperity, the only thing that endures and bears good fruit”. The sketch shows that this was not a mere afterthought, but one of the morals of the book, as already anticipated at the end of Chapter 37 :

At length, the thing being done, and he having that day entered Clarriker’s House, and he having talked to me for a whole evening in a flush of pleasure and success, I did really cry in good earnest when I went to bed, to think that my expectations had done some good to somebody.

Not that these notes determined the pattern of the novel, nor did they define the path of the story, but they ensured that the pattern once determined, the threads did not go awry, and the path once set, there was no serious deviation in a course of as much as nineteen months. They also shed light on the design in the pattern and served to show the measure of control that Dickens exercised by revealing “a calculated emphasis at one point, a calculated suspense at another, a problem of arrangement solved or a conclusion settled” (Butt and Tillotson 34). In comparing the novel to



*David Copperfield* it becomes apparent that “this time the plot is fundamental.” [Baker].

### 3.8.5 Balancing

Humphrey House says, “tis novel [*Great Expectations*] never became rank, it never got out of hand” (69). Part of the careful planning is the neat pattern of balancing which can be noted in the structural plan of the novel. Firstly, there are three sections of virtually equal length corresponding to three phases of the hero’s life. Secondly, the sub-divisions within each stage show a repetition of the same careful balancing. Thus, for example, stage One can be subdivided into four parts: Chapters 1-6, 7-11, 12-17 and 18-19. Three subdivisions can be noted in Stage Two : Chapters 20-27, 28-35 and 36-39. Again, Stage Three can be divided in to four subdivisions : Chapters 40-46, 47-51, 52-56, and 57-59. According to John H. Hagan (“Structural Patterns in Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. E.L.H. XXI, I; 1954), consciously or unconsciously, Dickens had imposed on his novel a balancing external appearance of symmetry which becomes significant when the various sub-divisions are regarded as reflecting images balanced around the central point of the narrative. For example, whereas Chapters 1-6 include the first encounter between Pip and the convict, Chapters 40-46 describe their second meeting. Again, Pip is introduced to Miss Havisham and Estella in Chapters 7-11, and these are balanced against Chapters 47-51 in which Miss Havisham begins to change and Estella’s parentage is disclosed. Pip departs from the old Forge in Chapters 18-19. This is balanced in Chapters 57-59 by Pip’s return to the Forge as an experienced, disillusioned man. Thus subdivisions in the first stage of Pip’s expectations are counterbalanced by corresponding sections in the third stage.

Again, the superb account of Magwitch’s final attempt at escape in Chapter 54 may be balanced against the melodramatic sequence of Orlick’s attempted murder in the previous chapter. Miss Havisham’s credibly eccentric life may be considered alongside the shadowy life of the ex-murderess housekeeper of Mr. Jaggers. The list can be long.

This balancing is, of course, not just a mechanical clever device. This is related to the basic theme. As Pip rises to a position of prosperity, his success itself seems unstable, balanced as it is on a series of self-deceiving acts. And it does not surprise us when we see this being counterbalanced by his eventual return to the real world of hard work and honest reward. Thus, after completing the novel one is not left with the impression that Dickens has finely manipulated his plot, but rather with a satisfying sense of its completeness and organic unity.

### 3.8.6 Memory Novel / ‘Music of Memory’

*Great Expectations* can be considered a memory novel. Whereas the social and spatial boundaries of the story have been kept confined within narrow limits, Dickens explores Pip’s memories in depth. He even plumbs the half-recollected depths of memory and brings them up to the surface of consciousness. He then releases the full flood of detailed interconnected events that lay bare the springs of conduct and choice. To put it in the words of R. George Thomas [See the reading list], “The entire novel is constructed like a series of radiating spokes which move away from a single remembered experience and which are held in place and perspective by the fully rounded circumferential knowledge of the mature Pip” (26).

The three emergent stages in Pip’s recollection help the reader to share Pip’s overdepending probe into the suppressed layers of recollection. “The simplicity of the relation of childhood memories in Stage One is reflected in a general directness of style : the texture of Stage Three is much more complex, for, as the action speeds up, it is accompanied. by substantial revelations about the pre-history of Magwitch, Compeyson, Miss Havisham and Estella, which are reflected in more frequent echoes of images and scenes from the two earlier stages. Graham Greene believes that this novel was written in delicate and exact poetic cadences, the music of memory, that so influenced Proust” (Thomas 44).

### 3.8.7 Setting

Usually we find in Dickens’s novels old towns, and streets, lanes, by-lanes, the various nooks and corners of the metropolis. But this is the only novel where the scenic features of a tract of rural England ‘enter so intimately’ (Baker) in the human chronicle. The small villages, the churches and graveyard, the lonely huts, the spots close to the convict-ships, and all the associated details appear vividly and set the tone, mood, as well as an appropriate atmosphere for the human story. The very opening sets the tone as the screen rolls up to reveal a tiny churchyard amidst the expanse of bleak and desolate marshes, and an orphan weeping alone by the graves of his parents and siblings trying to imagine what they could have been like, when he is suddenly terrified by a run-away convict.

### 3.8.8 Symbol

Dickens makes use of a few simple symbols here, which seem astonishing in their accumulated effect. For example, you can consider the use of ‘hands’. Mrs. Joe raises the boy. ‘by hand’. Pumblechook gives the absurdly sycophantic shakes with

a “May I?”. When Magwitch first returns the one-sided relationship between the old man and Pip “I reluctantly gave him my hands.... Once more he took me by both hands and surveyed me with an air of admiring proprietorship”. But towards the end when Pip has learnt to love the ruined man, he “held my hand in his”; in court he sits “with his hand in mine”, on his death-bed “I pressed his hand in silence”, which is reciprocated by “a gentle pressure on my hand”, “a stronger pressure on my hand”, “he raised my hands to his lips”.

You can also consider the symbolic use of some recurrent images like the ‘mist’, the ‘marshland’, the ‘handcuffs’, the ‘spider’, the ‘clock’ [s], the houses—Joe’s Forge, Wemmick’s cockney ‘palace’, ‘Satis House’, the hugely evocative symbol of the river Thames, etc.

### **3.8.9 The Ending**

The ending of *Great Expectations* has been a matter of controversy ever since the first serialized publication of the novel. Originally Dickens had plans for another ending where the lovers should have bidden farewell to each other and parted ways, presumably for ever. According to this plan Pip, while taking a stroll in Piccadilly with Joe’s child, meets Estella by chance. He comes to learn that Estela is now married to a doctor who had treated her first husband Drummle during his fatal illness. Experience of unhappiness and suffering has apparently mellowed her.

“...the lady and I looked sadly enough on one another. “I am greatly changed, I know; but I thought you would like to shake hands with Estella too, Pip. Lift up that pretty child and let me kiss it!” (She supposed the child, I think, to be my child.) I was very glad afterwards to have had the interview; for, in her face and in her voice, and in her touch, she gave me the assurance, that suffering had been stronger than Miss Havisham’s teaching, and given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be.”

Perhaps there could not be a more tired sentence indeed!

However, at the suggestion of his friend Edward Bulwer Lytton, Dickens rewrote the ending before sending it to the press, and we have the present ending with its promise of a happy ever after. In the changed ending Estella, who had gone through a most unhappy marriage, and is a widow now, meets Pip, again by change, in the “cleared space” of the former Satis House. Pip notes, “the freshness of her beauty was indeed gone, but its indescribable majesty and its indescribable charm remained”. Estella confides to Pip that suffering has “taught me to understand what your heart used to be”. She wishes to “continue friends apart”. But Pip takes her hand in his and sees no shadow of another parting from her.

Critics have been debating over the ending's of *Great Expectations* for more than a hundred years. There are takers for both. However, one point is worth consideration. This appears to be the most consciously organised novel of Dickens, as we have already discussed. So, it seems a bit unlikely that, just at the suggestion from a friend, Dickens should alter the original ending. It is then possible that Dickens had his own doubts regarding his original conclusion? This is what Bernard Shaw suggested in his long preface to his 1937 edition of Dickens's novel. Shaw said, "Dickens must have felt there was something wrong with this [original] ending, and Buhver's objection confirmed his doubt". Again, John Forster, Dickens's friend and biographer, was one of the first to express regret that Dickens had changed the original sad ending for a conventional happy ending. He thought that the first ending was more consistent with the drift, as well as natural working out, of the tale. Bernard Shaw, who regarded *Great Expectations* as a very serious book, "all-of-one piece and consistently truthful", and found Pip's world "a "melancholy place, and his conduct, good or bad, always hopeless", was of the opinion that unfortunately "Dickens wrote two endings, and made a mess of both". Thought Shaw held *Great Expectations* as "the most compactly perfect" novel of Dickens, still he was upset by what he considered a "manufactured" happy ending. Shaw conceded that Dickens gave a fine artistic touch to the ending by replacing the Picadilly scene of the original with "a perfectly congruous and beautifully touching scene and hour and atmosphere"; he also approved the deleting of the Shropshire doctor and the little boy. But Shaw thought that Dickens had ruined the whole thing by presenting Pip and Estella as reunited lovers. "It is too senous a book", he said, "to be a trivially happy one. Its beginning is unhappy; and the conventional happy ending is an outrage on it" Moreover, for Shaw, "the notion that he (Pip) could ever have been happy with Estella : indeed that anyone could ever have been happy with Estella, is positively unpleasant." On the other hand, Shaw conjectures, if Pip, after this chance meeting with Estella, "had said, 'Since that parting I have been able to think of her without the old unhappiness, but I have never tried to see her again, and I know I never shall,' he would have been left with at least the prospect of a bearable life." To Shaw, therefore, the first ending, in which Estella "just says how d'y' do to Pip and kisses the little boy before they both pass out of one another's lives" is quite "true to nature", even though married by Pip's pious hope that suffering has given Estella a heart to understand 'what my heart used to be'. Shaw here seems to judge Dickens by the twentieth century standards of psychological realism. But Dickens himself had perhaps other priorities and preoccupations than sheer psychological credibility. How can one explain away so may unlikely scenes and characters in the book? Often it so happens that Dickens's

novels create their own conventions, and in accepting them we escape seeing the part for the whole. And the novel can be more consistently read as a fairy tale or a moral fable than as a study in psychological realism, or even as merely a satire on contemporary society.

Again, Shaw reads *Great Expectations* as a “tragedy”, since any happy ending to so melancholy a book would be an outrage on it. But is the happy ending so very happy after all, or is the rest of the book so utterly melancholy? Furthermore, Pip’s relentless self-criticism amidst all his falseness, frivolity, aberrations, generate in the reader a trust in him as an honest interpreter of personal actions, and thus prepares us for some hope. As Christopher Ricks rightly points out :

We do not, in the ordinary way, have much difficulty in liking someone who tells us how bad he has been, and we are perhaps less sympathetic to someone who talks about his good deeds... Most of the time Dickens gets exactly the right tone for Pip—open but not abashed, willing to admit faults, but not positively enjoying it (Gross & Pearson; p.203).

Similar signs of hope can be traced in the eventual self-realisation of Miss Havisham and Magwitch before they die.

Another typical view regarding the ending is that it is inconsistent with the theme of Pip’s disillusionment with his great expectations. John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson represent these critics when they say, “It was at least more appropriate that Pip, who had lost Magwitch’s money, should also lose his daughter, than that he should marry her in the end” [*Dickens at Work* (1958) p. 33]. John Mepham also disapproves the ending in his Introductory note to *Great Expectations*. Mepham contends, “Pip’s situation at the end is very peculiar. He has not, in fact, found for himself a settled place in society. He has been living abroad and working at some modest clerical level, hardly a situation that promises personal contentment. Although he is no longer economically parasitic, he does seem to be so socially, for he has no family of his own but lives as a confirmed bachelor as an appendage to the Pocket household. He is also parasitic upon Joe and Biddy whose child Pip he uses as his surrogate son. All of this suggests an unsettled and unresolved life, an unhappy ending. Pip has not yet understood who he is. It seems as if many part of his life and personality are still unsettled and would not magically be settled by a fortuitous meeting and marriage with the reformed Estella. Does this not seem too much like the author tagging on an implausible but sentimentally consoling conclusion?”

On the other hand, R. G. Thomas contends that “the original, discarded ending does not develop organically out of Pip’s narrative” (58). In this context it may be

helpful to remember Dorothy Van Ghent's observation that "the apparent coincidences in Dickens actually obey a casual order—not of physical mechanics but of moral dynamics" (*The English Novel : Form and Function*, 1953, p. 203.). Seen in this perspective the present ending seems to be quite in harmony with the restrained tone and controlled beauty of the whole book. Pip's expectations have been ruined enough already, and by providing the possibility of a slighter and more natural hope Dickens only carries the "moral dynamics" of the book to its logical conclusion.

Again, the happy ending of a novel, which was the accepted convention of an earlier century, may seem a bit unfashionable to the modern taste, in the words of Monroe Engel, "There is a tendency to consider the conventional unhappy ending serious, the conventional happy ending frivolous. The distinction is questionable however; and it is certain that the creation of a credible happiness is more difficult." (*The Maturity of Dickens*, 1959, p.7). Dickens appears to have done this difficult job here. Whereas the original ending is probable, [Shaw's "true to nature"], the second ending seems more appropriate to the moral dynamics, and more in consonance with Dickens's world-view. It is to be noted that there is no gaiety or exuberance in the last scene where Pip and Estella meet by chance. The shadow of the past sadness, if not trauma, still hangs over them, and but naturally leads to a longing for love and security in each other. Yet the happiness is but a muted happiness, which is a result of reconciliation with knowledge. The knowledge has taken away the freshness of youth and hope from both, though it has made them sadder and wiser. Both have learnt the lesson of humility, and consequently have come out of the narrow cell of the self.

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### 3.9 Sample Questions : Long Answer Type

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1. Dickens's focal subject is the "human individual imprisoned in the mechanism of the social system". Amplify with particular reference to Magwitch and Pip.
2. Examine Dickens's art of characterisation in *Great Expectations*. Do you consider the characters 'flat'?
3. Comment on the role of the underworld characters in *Great Expectations*.
4. "Dickens's finest work is developed according to metaphorical principles." Discuss in this context the function of the poetic devices like images and symbols in *Great Expectations*.
5. Show how Dickens develops his "grotesque, tragi-comic conception" into a taut structure in *Great Expectations*.

6. Critically examine the significance of the theme of 'expectation' in *Great Expectations*.
7. Does Pip impress you as a 'snob' or as a 'gentleman'? Give reasons for your answer.
8. "The main female characters—Mrs. Joe, Estella and Miss Havisham—are tamed to improve." Critically examine the above statement.
9. Would you agree with the view that the plot of *Great Expectations* is 'too full of complicated coincidences'?
10. Show how almost every character in *Great Expectations* is practically caught in a groove.
11. Critically comment on the ending. Do you find it convincing?
12. Critically examine *Great Expectations* as a 'memory novel'.
13. Analyse the structural pattern of the novel.
14. Discuss the novel as a study in 'crime' and 'criminality' in Victorian England.

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### **3.10 Sample Questions : Short Answer Type**

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1. Who 'expects' what in *Great Expectations*? Are the 'expectations' really 'great'?
2. Who may be called the best gentleman in *Great Expectations*, and why?
3. What did Magwitch command Pip to do?
4. What does the name 'Estella' etymologically mean? What is its bearing on *Great Expectations*?
5. What are the two phrases with which Dickens makes Mrs. 'Joe Gargery a living character'?
6. What was the card game that Pip and Estella played together?
7. What is Wemmick's motto? What is his double life?
8. Pip and Drummle are given nicknames be Herbert and Jaggers respectively. What are they? What do they signify?
9. Why does Jaggers wash his hands?
10. Who is always dressed in her wedding finery in *Great Expectations*? Why does she do so?
11. Who are Estella's parents?
12. Who is the mysterious benefactor of Pip?



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### 3.11 Suggested Reading

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1. Collins, P. : *Dickens : The Critical Heritage*, (1971).
2. Ford, Madox Ford : *Great Expectations and its Early Readers*, (1940).
3. Gross, J. and Pearson, G. (Eds.) : *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, (1962).
4. House, A. H. : *The Dickens World*, (1941).
5. Thomas, R. George : *Dickens : Great Expectations*, (1964).



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## Unit 4 □ Middlemarch : George Eliot

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- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Background
- 4.3 Brief Notes on the Author
- 4.4 Brief Notes on Text
- 4.5 Outline Story of the Novel
- 4.6 Characters in the Novel
- 4.7 Critical Analysis
- 4.8 Questions
- 4.9 References

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### 4.1 Introduction

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George Eliot can be considered as one of the proto-modern writers for more than one reason. Her novels are always overcrowded with different sets of ideas. And the ideas are always true to their own sociological construct. Unlike Hardy, she never tries to go beyond the obvious; at the same time she never fails to address the crises. *Middlemarch* is a representative text; at the same time it marks a new departure for the English novel.

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### 4.2 Background

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*Middlemarch* is not a historical novel in the sense in which the novels of Scott are historical. But there are numerous allusion to a number of historical and political events. *Middlemarch* was serialized from 1870 to 1872, but the actual action antedates the time of publication. George Eliot has set the story of her novel firmly in the years 1828-1832. So, it includes both The Tory and The Whigs on the throne and the controversy over the Reform bills. As a matter of fact in *Middlemarch*, Eliot has not only depicted a provincial society but also used it to illustrate a great historical crisis. It was an era of crisis—an era of transition from the old to the new. Historical parallels between the story of the novel and current history are too common to be merely accidental. George Eliot's notebook contains not only lists from the *Annual Register*; but precisely dated events for the unwritten novel. "This critical balance is characteristic of even the minor crisis of the book. Casaubon's scholarship hangs posthumously over Dorothea in her decision to marry Ladislaw. Lydgate voting for

tyke, is voting, he thinks, in the interest of progress, but they turn out to be the interests of Bulstrode; he accepts Bulstrode's saving loan, and Raffles is given medical treatment acceptable in current obsolete medical opinion, but to Lydgate's new knowledge dangerous. A good deal of the corruption, impotence and ineffectiveness of characters in *Middlemarch* is imposed upon them by a dying but stubborn past, and they are part of the price one pays for living in an age of transition. The scientific figures which, as has often been observed, penetrate the texture of this novel are not arbitrary reflections of the author's own interests : they establish the modernity of the problem, and they also, by indicating the tone of the future, judge the moral effectiveness of the characters who faced it then as we must now, and suggest the consequences of a failure such as Lydgate's." (Frank Kermode) It was also an era of bitter religious controversies. The traditional Anglicanism was being threatened by the rising force of Evangelicalism, Increasing dissent posed a threat to the established order. There are frequent rumblings of these controversies in the novel.

★ The Victorian period was one of the most intellectually vigorous times. George Eliot herself was influenced by the movement known as 'Higher criticism' which applied scientific attitudes to the study of the Bible. Instead of accepting the Bible as a sacred and therefore infallible text scholars examined it as a text, of history and concluded that, among other things. Jesus was not a supernatural being but a historical figure who has subsequently been given legendary status.

★ The disciplines of what we today call anthropology were also raising unsettling questions of more direct importance to the readers of *Middlemarch*, as was the founding of the provincial Medical or Surgical Association in 1832 which was later to become the British Medical Association.

★ The publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859 was to bring these debates to a climax.

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### 4.3 Brief Notes on the Author

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Mary Ann Evans, later to become famous as George Eliot, was the daughter of Robert Evans, a land agent for Sir Francis Newdigate's Arbury Hall Estate. Robert Evans was a self-made man who was greatly admired for his physical strength and respected for his knowledge in Warwickshire community. People respected his opinion on land and its ownership. Mary Evans was born on 22nd November, 1819, at Arbury Farm. She was the youngest daughter of her father, who dominated her early life. She herself writes, "I considered him a parent so much to my honour that the mention of my relationship to him was likely to secure for me regard among those to whom

otherwise a stranger..." At the beginning and end of her career we see portraits of Robert Evans appearing in her novels, for instance, *Adam Bede* in the novel of that name and Caleb Garth in *Middlemarch*. The birth of Mary Ann left her mother Christiana Evans broken in health. She was disappointed in her plain faced youngest child. Her favourite was her son Isaac and she was very proud of her pretty, well behaved elder daughter Chrissey. Mary Ann, consequently, felt insecure and unhappy and she began early to create a world of her own for herself. Her brother, Isaac, was her closest companion and on him she showered all her love and affections. Mary Ann enjoyed the beauty of the countryside and thus acquired intimate knowledge of the life of the country folk. She grew familiar with all the neighbouring farms and the early impressions of the countryside and the country folk left an indelible mark on her. This countryside and the people, whom she loved, she constantly used in her novels. Sometimes Robert Evans left the young child with the servants' gossip, to their dialect, and observed the mannerisms of the peasants who frequently stopped to talk to her father to seek his advice. The mannerisms, dialect and superstitions of these people were later realistically presented in the novels. Born on a farm of early nineteenth century rural England, her roots were down in the pre-railroad, pre-telegraphic period. She was brought up at *Arbury Farm*, somewhat similar to the *Hall Farm* of the Poysers, amid the everyday sights and sounds of farm life. The early impressions were never forgotten. Says Leslie Stephen "in her childhood, of course, she took the colouring of her surroundings and it is this fact which makes her a great regional novelist." Mary Ann's school education came to an end early, because of the illness of her mother whom she had to look after and also do housekeeping for the family. But the education she received from the book of nature and the countryside was lasting and permanent. This countryside always fascinated her and she returns to it again and again in her novels. She was intimately familiar with the scene and sights of the English Midlands and the customs and mannerisms of the rustics colour even her *Romola* which has a Florentine and Renaissance setting. As they grew up, books now became a passion with her and she read everything she could lay her hands upon. Her favourites were *Aesop's Fables* and later, like Maggie Tulliver, she became fond of the *History of the Devil* by Daniel Defoe. She also read *The Vicar of Wakefield* with pleasure as also Joe Miller's *Jest Book*, *The Pilgrims' Progress* and *Rasselas*. But the author she loved most of all was Sir Walter Scott. Sir Walter Scott first introduced her to the writing of fiction. Sir Walter Scott influenced her profoundly. F. R. Leavis rightly says, "The precedent of Scott was obviously strength to her. Scott was deeply affected by the romantic history of his beloved Scotland. He loved his country and was familiar with all her legends and folklore."

At the age of thirteen, Mary Evens was sent to Miss Rebecca Franklin's school in Coventry. One of the first things that Mary Ann learnt was a different type of pronunciation. The broad Midland dialect that she had spoken all her life had been much modified by Miss Lewis and now it was completely banished by the cultivated speech at the new school. After her stay there she came to be admired by her friends for her 'low, well modulated musical voice'. She was given lessons in music, drawing, English, History, French and Arithmetic. Miss Rebecca Franklin made her translate pages of Maria Edgeworth's novels into French. She read avidly the novels of Miss Edgeworth—the first regional novelist. In 1836, the novelist's mother died and her formal education came to an end. Her sister was already married, and so she ran their house now. She was never close to her mother; her father was 'the one deep, strong love I have ever known'. Her father missed her mother and Marian tried to fill her place as best as she could. In the evenings, she would read to him the novels of Sir Walter Scott, for he liked them. Though she was no longer at school, her education continued without interruption for she read incessantly while housekeeping and cooking. Her Evangelical fervour began cooling in the year 1893. She revelled in her study of the Romantics and enjoyed reading Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Coleridge and Southey. Wordsworth was now her favourite poet. She was impressed by Wordsworth's philosophy and his respect for the common man. His humble people, 'The Reaper', 'The Leech Gatherer' all gained strength from the land they worked on. Wordsworth's influence can be traced in George Eliot's works. Even though Mary Ann read voraciously, there was little to satisfy her imagination and release it from construction of Griff (her home so far). But the release came in 1841 when her father decided to retire in favour of his son, Isaac. Robert Evans and Mary Ann now moved to a house called *Bird Grove*, in Coventry. This change meant an immense widening of Mary Ann's mental horizon. It was now that she came into contact with the Brays and their circle of friends. Charles Bray was to have most profound influence on Mary Ann's thinking. He had been a fervent Evangelicalist who had married into a Unitarian family and later had become a religious skeptic. Through this new circle of friends Mary Ann was introduced to a completely different world of thought and it was during this period that the foundations of her mode of thinking were laid. She thus came into contact with men and women who had dedicated their lives to the pursuit of intellectual honesty and truth. She was now an educated young lady who made friends with intellectuals and dared to form her own religious beliefs in direct opposition to her father's faith. She now discarded her old beliefs and stopped attending church. This brought her into direct conflict with her father who was a staunch churchman. He and other relatives were outraged by her skepticism. Robert Evans blamed the Brays for this rebellion. But Marian remained adamant in her

beliefs and finally left her father to live with her brother Isaac. Her father was persuaded by Isaac, Miss Hennell and the Brays to take her back. Though, later, she returned to church going, she did never return to her old beliefs. Robert Evans died on the night of May 31, 1849. In this time of grief and despair, the Brays came to her rescue and took her with them on a tour of Europe. When the Brays returned, she stayed behind in Switzerland. On her return to England on March 23, 1850, she found conditions at home much changed, and she missed the work and duty of caring for her father. She felt lonely and constantly visited the Brays, where she met John Chapman, a young publisher, who was about to buy the *Westminster Review*, a contemporary periodical. He wanted to revive it with articles from eminent critics and writers. Chapman was impressed by Marian's intellect and persuaded her to join him as assistant editor. Thus she became a frequent visitor to 142 Strand, London, and the office of *Westminster Review*. Her position as one of the editors *Westminster Review* brought her into contact with a large number of distinguished visitors. At different times, she met Dickens, Thackeray, Carlyle, Emerson, Harriet Martineau, Mrs. Gaskell, Forster and Louis Blanc. The most celebrated men of the day accepted her as an equal and at gatherings of intellectuals she was often the only woman. Her conversation astonished all, and she was treated as an equal. In October 1851, she met Herbert Spencer who had just brought out his *Social Statistics*. He was an important contributor to *Westminster Review*. He was attracted by Marian's intellect and became intimate friend of hers for life. Intellectually he and Marian had everything in common and Marian was emotionally attracted to him. He never offered her marriage and she had to be contented with friendship. With the death of George Henry Lewes on the 30th November, 1878, the literary career of George Eliot came to an end. It was a heavy blow to her. Her letters of this period are touching and reveal her sense of loneliness and desolation. Later, in May 1880, she married J. W. Cross, who was much younger than herself. This marriage came as a complete surprise to everybody, but George. Eliot, even at this stage, wanted someone whom she could love and whom she could depend upon. Rev. J. W. Cross was twenty years her junior.

★ [However, in 1842-42, she participated in a Freethinkers circle of discussion and reading of the Bible which led her to reject its supernatural content. This only widened the range of her intellectual pursuits which are reflected in the choice of her early projects which include translations of Strauss' *Life of Jesus*, Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* and Spinoza's *Ethics*.

★ George Eliot enjoyed the friendship of many of the men and women of intellectual circles of Victorian England, but the relationship that had the most profound influence on her writing is her long relationship with the philosopher, social

communication and writer George Lewes. George Lewes was a married man, but they called each other wife and husband. And George Eliot insisted on being called Mrs. Lewes. They lived together from 1854 til Lewes' death in 1878. Because of this adulterous relationship, the morally conservative Victorian society shunned the couple initially but gradually both of them gained in reputation, and a grudging acceptance of their way of life made their house a centre of intellectual activity. George Eliot began writing fiction after her relationship with Lewes began, and he is often credited with encouraging and supporting her fictional creativity.]

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#### 4.4 Brief Notes on Text

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This novel, regarded by many as George Eliot's masterpiece, was published in eight parts—the first on 1st December, 1871, and the last in December, 1872. Nearly twentyfive thousand copies were sold at once, and it raised her to the rank of a major living novelist of England.

The novel takes its name from the town of Middlemarch in the Midlands where the scene of the story is laid. Says Leslie Stephen, "*Middlemarch* is primarily a portrait of the circles which had been most familiar to her in youth, and its second title is 'a study of provincial life'. Provincial life, however, is to exemplify the results of a wider survey of contemporary, society. One peculiarity of the book is appropriate to this scheme. It is not a story, but a combination of at least three stories—the love affairs of Dorothea and Casaubon, of Rosamond Vincy and Lydgate, and of Mary Garth and Fred Vincy, which again are interwoven with the story of Bulstrode. The various actions get mixed together as they would naturally do in a country town. It is tiresome, of course if a reader is to think only of the development of the plot. But when the purpose is to get a general picture of the manners and customs of a certain social stratum, and we are to be interested in all the complex play of character and opinions of neighbours, the method is appropriate to the design. The individuals are shown as involved in the network of surrounding interests which affect their development."

*Middlemarch* gives us George Eliot's most characteristic view of such matters. It is her answer to the question, what on the whole is your judgement of commonplace English life? For provincialism is not really confined to provinces. The personages who carry out the various plots of *Middlemarch* may be very life-like portrait of real life, but they are seen from a particular point of view. The 'prelude' gives the keynote. We are asked to remember the country of Moors. There are later born Therasas, who had 'no epic life with constant unfolding of resonant action'. They have had to work



amid ‘dim lights and entangled circumstances.’ They have blundered accordingly; but “here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heart beats and sobs after and unattained goodness tremble off, and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centering on some long recognizable deed.” We are to see how such a nature manifests itself—no longer in the remote regions of arbitrary fancy, but in the commonplace atmosphere of a modern English town. In *Middlemarch* there is a full picture of the element of stupidity and insensibility which is apt to clog the wings of aspiration.

*Middlemarch* is a work of extraordinary power, full of subtle and accurate observation; and gives a melancholy, yet and undeniably truthful portraiture, of the impression made by the society of the time upon one of the keenest observers, though upon an observer looking at the world from a certain distance, and rather too much impressed by the importance of philosophers and theorists.

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## 4.5 Outline Story of the Novel

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*Middlemarch* is a complex novel made up of a number of stories (1) Dorothea-Casaubon story, (2) Lydgate-Rosamond story, (3) Mary Garth-Fred Vincy story, and (4) Bulstrode and Featherstone episodes. All these varied strands have been skilfully welded to form a single whole.

The novel opens with a brief Prelude or introduction in which the readers are introduced to Dorothea Brooke, a cultured and high-minded young lady with lofty aspirations. She is referred to as a later day St. Theresa—Theresa of the Midlands—who could not achieve anything noble because of the lack of opportunity, because her environment was unfavourable and repressive.

[★ Martyrdom and renunciation were the factors that attracted George Eliot to Saint Theresa and the various ramifications of these virtues are analyzed in *Middlemarch* not only in the character of Dorothea as the ‘Prelude’ to *Middlemarch* point out but also in the lives of other characters where ‘the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur illmatched with the means of opportunity’ (Prelude) leads to tragic consequences.

★ However, the ‘Prelude’ suggests that the novel, Wordsworthian like the early Eliot novels, although in less obvious ways, is intended to be more than a life-like picture of a Midlands community. The description of Saint Theresa whose ‘passionate, ideal nature demanded and epic life’ introduces the themes of martyrdom and vocation.

★ This passage prepares us for the tragic tale of some noble character who is unable to fulfill his or her yearning for a life driven by idealism because of the lack

of suitable social, political or religious circumstances. George Eliot goes on to tell us that this problem especially affects the women of her society as they live where the opportunities for self-fulfilment are very few.]

Dorothea and her sister Celia live with their uncle, Mr. Arthur Brooke, at Tipton Grange near the Midland town of Middlemarch. Celia is more practical than her elder sister who is idealistic, dreams of lofty achievements, and seeks an outlet for her aspirations in improving the living conditions of the poor. She is loved and courted by Sir James Chettam, a wealthy Baronet, and Edward Casaubon, a middle-aged clergy, old enough to be her father. But Dorothea prefers him to Sir Chettam because he is a devoted scholar and is at the time working on a scholarly work to be called *The key to all Mythologies*. Despite the opposition of her sister and uncle and other well-wishers, Dorothea marries him, for she feels that she would be able to find fulfilment for her aspirations by helping him in his work.

But she is soon disillusioned. For their honeymoon they go to Rome, and Dorothea stays all alone at home, while her husband goes out to study rare manuscripts. She realizes that he is a self-centred pedant, incapable of love, and without any zest for life. Her frustration is complete when one day Will Ladislaw, Casaubon's close relative, comes to visit them and tells Dorothea that the work of Casaubon will have no value at all, for it has already been done by some German scholars. Ladislaw is an artist, and has been supported so far by his cousin, but now he declines to accept his help in order to stand on his own feet. Both Dorothea and Ladislaw are attracted towards each other from the very beginning. They are in love, though they do not realise it for quite a long time.

After an unhappy and wretched honeymoon, the Casaubons return to their home *Lowick manor*, near Middlemarch. Dorothea leads a miserable life, she is sad and lonely, and still she tries to do her duty by her husband. Ladislaw also returns to England but Casaubon forbids him to come to his home, and so the young man stays with Mr. Brooke who engages him as an assistant to help him in conducting his journal, *The Pioneer*. Casaubon is soon ill and Tertius Lydgate, a newly arrived doctor in Middlemarch, diagnoses it to be a case of heart trouble. Soon Casaubon is dead and poor Dorothea falls ill and suffers from delirium for some time. Then for a few months she goes to stay with her sister who is by now married to Sir Chettam. Later it is discovered that by his will Casaubon has left all his property to Dorothea on condition that she would never marry Ladislaw. This is an insult to Dorothea.

Lydgate is young and charming. Like Dorothea he also has lofty aspirations and dreams of noble achievements in the field of medicine. Soon he is in love with the beautiful Rosamond Vincy, the daughter of Mr. Walter Vincy, a prosperous businessman



and Mayor of Middlemarch. Rosamond is a beautiful butterfly with little brains and entirely incapable of appreciating her husband's ideals and aspirations. She compels her husband to maintain an extravagant style of living, much beyond their means. The result is financial ruin and bankruptcy. It is only with Dorothea's generosity that he is able to pay off his debts, and then move to London and practice there in a conventional way like any other ordinary doctor. His noble ideals are thus shattered through his imprudent marriage.

Rosamond Vincy has a brother Fred Viney, a good-for nothing young man. He is given to gambling and is constantly in debt. But he has high hopes of inheriting Stonecourt, the property of one of his uncles, Featherstone, who has been ill for some time and is likely to die at no distant date. He is nursed tenderly by Caleb Garth's daughter, Mary Garth, with whom Fred is in love, and whom he hopes to marry after he inherits Stonecourt. At present Fred is unable to pay his debts, and so he approaches Mary's father, Caleb Garth, who stands surety for him for one hundred and ten pounds. When the time for paying off the loan comes, Fred makes frantic efforts to arrange for the amount and when he fails to do so, the amount has to be paid by Caleb Garth, who himself is in great financial difficulties. It causes great misery to the Garth family. Fred falls ill, suffers from typhoid, and his life is saved only because of Lydgate's care and treatment. However: the shock has a salutary effect on Fred who now agrees to go to the University and complete his education.

The relatives of old and miserly Featherstone wait eagerly for his death, each one of them being hopeful of getting the lion's share of his wealth. The old man does die, but to their great disappointment the relatives discover that the miser has left *Stonecourt*, his farm and all other belongings, to one Joshua Rigg who is to assume the name of Featherstone. Soon after, the rich banker Bulstrode purchases Stonecourt from Joshua Rigg and appoints Caleb Garth as its manager. Thus Caleb is able to overcome his financial difficulties, and Mary is now able to live in comfort with her parents. When Fred returns from the University, Caleb Garth appoints him as his assistant, in which capacity Fred does very well, and is ultimately able to marry Mary Garth.

The banker Bulstrode, related to the Vincys by marriage, has had a shady past. First, the wealth he has inherited has come from a receiving house for stolen goods. Secondly, rightfully it belongs to Will Ladislaw. All this story of Bulstrode's past is known to one drunkard Raffles who now blackmails Bulstrode and frequently comes to Middlemarch for the purpose. During one of his visits, he falls ill at *Stonecolurt* and is treated by Lydgate. Raffles raves during his delirium. Raffles dies and then it is discovered that he had gossiped about Bulstrode's past during his drinking bouts at the local taverns and soon the story is all over Middlemarch. Lydgate returns the

cheque, for he would have nothing to do with Bulstrode's tainted money, but he too declines to accept it. When Mr. Brooke's political ambitions come to nothing and *The Pioneer* is closed, Ladislav goes to London to make his living there.

Ladislav cannot remain away from Middlemarch for long, for he pines for Dorothea. He returns to Middlemarch, and after some misunderstanding—Dorothea mistakenly believes him to be in love with Rosamond—they confess their love for each other. Dorothea gives up the property of Casaubon, and they are happily married. Ladislav has a successful political career, and is soon elected to parliament.

Thus in the Victorian-tradition of the novel, all the difficulties and complications are resolved in the end, and all the characters are happily united. Even Bulstrode, who had suffered disgrace and gave up all his public offices, at last achieves a measure of serenity. His wife who had been much shocked by the discovery of his past, remains loyal to him and does much to console and comfort him in his time of trouble.

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## 4.6 Characters in the Novel

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### (1) DOROTHEA BROOK, and Theresa Complex

Dorothea Brooke is a young and fascinating lady who lives with her younger sister Celia at Tipton Grange, near Middlemarch, the home of Mr. Arthur Brooke, their uncle and guardian. Her physical beauty and fascinating personality have been stressed in the very beginning of the novel. We are told, "Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters, and her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain more dignity from her plain garments, which by the side of provincial fashion gave her the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible—or from one of our elder poets—in a paragraph of today's newspaper."

Dorothea Brooke is the first major character to be introduced to us, and *The Prelude* to the novel creates the impression that she is its heroine. But is not so. She is, no doubt, one of the most important characters in the novel, and it deals with frustration of her aspiration. Still, she is not the heroine, for *Middlemarch* is the story of Middlemarch society, and if anyone is its hero it is Middlemarch itself. Says A.O.J. Cockshut in this connection, "Emma is on every page of the story of *Emma*, even when she is most misguided. *Middlemarch* is the story of Middlemarch even when for the moment, Dorothea's concerns are the centre of attention."

Dorothea Brooke is a lady with noble aspirations. She wants to lead a higher life,

to achieve something really noble. She is the extraordinary individual thrown upon a commonplace world. She seeks an outlet for her higher aspirations in doing humanitarian work. Thus she makes plans and projects to improve the living conditions of the tenants on the estate of the Baronet, Sir Chettam. She is different from other young ladies of her age, and this is an ordinary normal girl, with a girlish fondness for jewellery and fine clothes. Dorothea looks down upon such feminine frivolities. Celia notices Casaubon's age and his 'two white moles with hairs on them'; Dorothea remains completely oblivious to such physical details. She sees in him a reflection of Locke or Milton, and accepts him as her husband in preference to young and handsome Sir Chettam, for she thinks. (mistakenly) that through marriage with a scholar like him, she would be able to achieve her aspirations.

Dorothea has what has been called, the Theresa Complex, i.e., "*a yearning to do good in the world which is so intense that it must answer to some emotional need in the Theresa herself.*" Theresa was a Christian Saint who had such a yearning. Dorothea has been referred to in the Prelude as a later born Theresa. We are told, "Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing whose loving heart beats and sobs after and attained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centering in some long-recognizable deed." She is Theresa in her lofty aspirations. 'Struggling under dim lights and entangled circumstances', to achieve her aspirations. But she lives in a society in which there is no particular demand for Theresa. It is a repressive environment which allows no scope for lofty ideals, where such idealistic natures are frustrated, crushed to atoms, or compelled to compromise with their environment.

The most that she can do in the society of Middlemarch, is to make projects for building better cottages for poor tenants and thus ameliorating their lot. It is this inner frustration which makes her seize any opportunity which offers her a chance of selffulfilment. It is this which makes her accept Casaubon in place of Sir Chettam, despite his age, and his physical unpleasantness. She marries him not because of any sexual consideration but because, "She has vague religious aspirations, looks down upon the excellent country gentleman, Sir James Chettam, and fancies that she would like to marry the judicious Hooker or Milton in his blindness."

In her view, "The really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it." The word Father here is important. It is both an early signal to the reader of what will follow when Casaubon comes on the scene, and a revelation of what is lacking in Dorothea, which any other girl would have. She is deeply conscious of gender, leading to a complete difference of intellectual and spiritual function. She is scarcely at all, this

stage, conscious of sex. But perhaps no persons then living—certainly none in the neighbourhood of Tipton—would have had a sympathetic understanding for the dreams of a girl whose notions about marriage took their colour entirely from an exalted enthusiasm about the ends of the life, an enthusiasm which was lit by its own fire, and included neither the niceties of the trousseau, the pattern of the plate, not even the honours and sweet joys of the blooming matron.

She is lofty, idealistic, straightforward and honest and also self-deluded and self-deceived. Carried away by her lofty ideals, she fails to see the reality, she remains blind even to the most obvious truths. She fails to understand Casaubon. This self-delusion is her 'spot of commonness', and the real cause of the tragedy of her life. As a loyal wife, she does her duty to her husband, and after his death remains loyal to his memory, till she discovers that he insulted her in her Will. Her marriage to Ladislaw is a compromise with reality. It is a climb down from her lofty idealism, but such is, after all, the way of the world. She is self-deluded in another way also. She thinks that she is entirely free from the little vanities and frivolities of the fairsex, but such vanities still lurk within her. This is clearly brought out through the scene in which the two sisters divide their jewellery. The episode shows that she is self-centered and self-deceiving, and as a consequence, often inconsiderate and harsh. Celia, the simpler nature, with her perfectly normal and unconcealed wish to wear splendid jewellery, is here the more objective of the two.

It is for this reason that Leslie Stephen goes to the extent of saying that Dorothea is a satire on young ladies with noble aspirations. Ladislaw may not be worthy of her, but certainly Dorothea was quite content with her lot. But that seems to imply that a Theresa of our days has to be content with suckling fools and chronicling small beer.

Many a St. Theresa, no doubt, is martyred, as Dorothea is martyred, but the sacrifice of such idealists is not futile. As T. S. Eliot has told us the martyrdom of the Saint—the uncommon individual—fertilizes the life of the common people and makes the progress of human culture and civilization possible.

## (2) EDWARD CASAUBON, the pseudo-scholar

Edward Casaubon is a prosperous country squire in addition to being a member of the clergy. At the time of the opening of the story, he is forty years old. He knows Lowick Manor, his residence, and the estate round it. In personal appearance he is far from handsome. He is rather ugly, and his physical unpleasantness is stressed from the very beginning. Celia points to his shallow complexion, sunken eyes, and 'two white moles with hair on them', She comments, 'How very ugly Mr. Casaubon

is'. But Dorothea prefers him to the young and handsome Sir Chettam, and it is soon obvious that the marriage is a mistake. She adores him, for she believes that through this great man she would be able to realize her noble aspiration, at least in part. But again, as we shall soon see, she is mistaken about his scholarship. However, even if he had been a scholar in the true sense, it would not have mended matters. For Casaubon is a tired mummy, with no capacity for love or any zest for life. He marries, because he wants female tendance for his declining years. His petty jealousy and snubbing of his wife is all in character. Now we can pity a man for making a blunder, and perhaps, in some sense, we ought to 'pity' him for having neither heart nor passion. But that is a kind of pity which is not akin to love. Dorothea's mistake was not that she married a man who had not read German, but that she married a stick instead of a man.

Edward Casaubon is not a scholar in the real sense, but a pedant, a dried up and lifeless book-worm. He says : "I have been little disposed to gather flowers that would wither in my hand, but now I shall pluck them with eagerness, to place them in you bosom." It is a measure of his pedantic nature that he always talks, 'in a measured, official tone as of a clergyman,' and proposes that Dorothea should have a companion during their honeymoon. They lead together a life of mutual disappointment, in which her self-forgetful compassion for his broken health and his fear of intellectual wreck, gradually overpowers her own regrets, and she is on the very eve of promising him to carry out his work after his death, from his voluminous notes,—his hopeless intellectual design without the slightest remaining faith, on her part, in its value,—when his sudden death relieves her of the necessity of making the fatal promise.

The portrait of Mr. Casaubon is a sympathetic one. His futile researches into comparative mythology are viewed in the context of contemporary interest in the study of this particular branch of pseudo-learning and research. In the age, "Most mythographers, like Casaubon, faced with a great diversity of material, sought a single key—a single original culture, into which all myths are reduced to the *Bible* Story." Ladislaw refers to the backwardness and futility of Casaubon's scholarship; unable to read German, Dorothea's husband is ignorant of the fact that the whole concept of trying to relate diverse myths to a Hebrew origin had been exploded by German Scholars. Thus, to the end of his life, Casaubon remains lost in the labyrinth of a discredited pseudo-science.

Sympathy for Casaubon is aroused by the skill with which his 'soul', his psyche, is laid bare before the readers. George Eliot is at her best as a psycho-analyst in her study of her inner conflicts, doubts and frustrations of Mr. Casaubon. We are made

to feel that he is not a bad man, a hard-hearted schemer who delights in inflicting pain on others, but a misguided man, essentially noble, tortured with inner doubts, suspicions and jealousies. His jealousy of Ladislav is of a peculiar kind. It is not sexual jealousy, but rather an expression of his fears that Ladislav would sow the seeds of doubts in the mind of Dorothea, and as a consequence, she would lose faith in him, and may even turn away from him. The nature and the limits of his jealousy are given thus : “Suspicion and jealousy of Will Ladislav’s intentions, suspicion and jealousy of Dorothea’s impressions, were constantly at work. What he was jealous of was her opinion, the sway that might be given to her ardent mind in its judgements, and the future possibilities to which these might lead her.” It is important to notice not only that he does not suspect that Dorothea and Ladislav are or will become lovers, but also that his suspicions of each are not the same. He distrusts Ladislav’s intentions—that is, he might hope to marry a wealthy widow; he suspects in Dorothea only her impression—that is the doubt of his own intellectual powers and achievements which might be sown by Ladislav’s sneers. His fears and jealousies make him a tyrant and he seeks to control Dorothea’s conduct even after death, and so insults her in his will. But the irony is that the alteration in the will directly leads to a revival of Dorothea’s interest in Will and her marriage with him.

Casaubon is a tragic, lonely soul, unable to share his feeling with his wife or anyone else. He is one of the four characters in the novel, through whom the novelist has depicted the tragedy of noble, though misguided, aspirations.

### (3) NICHOLAS BULSTRODE, the Arch Hypocrite

Nicholas Bulstrode is a rich banker and philanthropist of Middlemarch. He has pale blond skin, light grey eyes, and a large forehead. He speaks in subdued tones, which people call an ‘undertone’ and which carries a suggestion that he is not open and frank but has something shady to hide from the public eye. The fact is that Bulstrode is a fine, realistic and life-like study of hypocrisy. Bulstrode, too, has an ideal of kind; only it is the vulgar ideal which is suggested by the low form of religion. George Eliot shows the ugly side of the beliefs of which she had more frequently emphasized the purer elements. She judges but without bitterness, and thus gives a most satisfactory portrait of religious hypocrisy.

Bulstrode has a shady past. He is an orphan who was educated at the charity school. He becomes a Methodist, and impresses everybody by his fluency of speech. He wanted to become a whole time clergy and would have been eminently successful had he done so; instead he became a clerk and rose to be the confidential partner of one Mr. Dunkrik whose real business was dealing in stolen goods. His conscience is troubled and uneasy, but again he is able to satisfy it by his plausible reasoning—



that she would have surrendered it away lightly. While he himself would be able to devote it to the service of God and the good of his fellow-beings. Thus his charity and his philanthropy are compensations, So to say, for his past misdeeds.

Bulstrode has a sensitive conscience and cares for his reputation which he has so painstakingly built up in Middlemarch. His shady past constantly haunts him. One Raffles knows all about his past, and is a constant threat to his reputation, when he falls seriously ill, he is tempted to hasten his end giving him wine which the doctor, Lydgate had said would be the poison for him. He does not poison him but allow the nurse to kill him.

But Raffles had already gossiped and had already divulged everything, and so Bulstrode, despite his death, has nothing but disgrace and humiliation in store for him. This is sincere; he really feels the unfairness of one fault outweighing a lifetime high-toned effort. It is at this terrible moment that he is supported beyond his expectations by his wife. There is something tragic in his downfall. Here George Eliot show us in contrast the strong and loyal side of the religious tradition of which Bulstrode is such an unpleasing example.

Bulstrode, according to David Daiches, “is not an arrant hypocrite, an unredeemed villain, the stock figure of literature but everyman, and a mingled web a good and evil like of us.” Bulstrode in short ‘is a masterly study in the evasion of a charged conscience’

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## 4.7 Critical Analysis

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Critics have always seemed uneasy about this novel. This problem can be traced to the disjuncture between the full name of the novel *Middlemarch*—a study of provincial life and the claims of the ‘Prelude’ of the novel.

All the characters are intrinsically interwoven to present a dense portrayal of the provincial town of Middlemarch in scenes like the dinner party in Chapter X where the social snobbery and gossip and interactions between the characters are vividly rendered. The description of Lydgate’s impact on Middlemarch as a doctor with new fangled ideas in Chapter 45 also shows the way opinions are formed and judgements made by the various characters in society. These scenes show George Eliot’s realist style at its best.

George Eliot seems to suggest Victorian women had only a few options open to them to change their lives of which one was marriage.

Despite, the scope and range of the novel, most critics have more or less agreed with Henry James’ comment on it: “A treasure-house of detail but... and indifferent

whole.” F. R. Leavis in *The Great Tradition* suggests that the weakness of the novel stems from the fact that George Eliot identifies herself too closely with the heroine. Thus “we have an alteration between the poised impersonal insight of a finely tempered wisdom and something like the emotional confusions and self-importances of adolescence, when the author fails to treat Dorothea with the same irony reserved for the other characters in the novel.”

Other critics like Arnold Kettle have argued that the root of the weakness of the novel lies in George Eliot’s deterministic and static view of history. Although the ‘background Middlemarch has become the subject the Middlemarch world is the given static reality; the characters of the novel must be seen as at its mercy.

Human aspirations fare poorly in the novel, either from lack of choice or from not exercising choice.

In fact one of George Eliot’s strengths is the subtle analysis inherent in her characterization.

George Eliot also uses her position as the omniscient narrator to comment on these characters effectively. This novel is an extremely moral novel in that it deals with the moral choices made by each of the characters or, as in the case of Lydgate, not appropriately made. George Eliot’s uniqueness is that she always shows us the process by which these choices are made and the psychological reasons behind the actions of the characters. Unlike the omniscient narrator in most novels George Eliot deliberately chooses to speak in a number of voices and the transition from one to another is so subtle that only a careful reading alerts us.

This style is developed throughout the novel to show simultaneously the inner compulsion of the characters and the responses of the community or of other characters. Rather than a single, unified point of view of narration, George Eliot combines several points of view to produce a complex moral tone.

Virginia Woolf called *Middlemarch* “the magnificent book which with all its imperfections is one of the few English novels written for grown up people.” This is in part because *Middlemarch* is a novel so concerned with morality. George Eliot’s concept of morality is not conventional, rather she is concerned with her protagonists’ struggle to break free of narrow bounds of egoism of various sorts to a life of sympathy with fellow men. The characters who are most corrupted in soul by egotism are the most repulsive like Bulstrode and Mr. Casaubon. Even Rosamond’s egoism, which seem relatively harmless, is actually deadly for Lydgate. Yet George Eliot never preaches directly. By the interweaving of concurrent stories, the depiction of many characters and above all the wide range of perspective she offers, the reader is



involved in the moral processes at work in the novel. Though Bulstrode or Casaubon are repulsive, George Eliot makes the reader react to them with compassion because he/ she understands their motivations as well as limitations. Similarly, neither Dorothea nor Lydgate become ideal characters. Along with their strengths, George Eliot also shows us their weakness, so that our admiration for the noble character is never unequivocal. It is this ability to represent such apparently trivial and even pathetic characters with such compassion that makes George Eliot one of the best Victorian novelists.

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## 4.8 Questions

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1. Consider, *Middlemarch* as a study in heroism.
2. “*Middlemarch* exposes human choice as limited and flawed and yet stresses the vital importance of making such choices nevertheless.” Discuss.
3. In what sense, if any, may *Middlemarch* be called the tragedy of provincial life?

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## 4.9 References

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## Unit 5 □ Heart of Darkness : Joseph Conrad

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Structure :

- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Major themes in Heart of Darkness
- 5.3 Basic aspects of the Novel
- 5.4 Sample Questions
- 5.5 Glossary
- 5.6 Selected Reading list

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### 5.1 Introduction

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**Heart of Darkness** was Joseph Conrad's third novel and was first published in seminal form in Blackwood's magazine in 1899. As in the case of his next novel, **Lord Jim** (1900). **Heart of Darkness** had started as a short story but finally ended as a novelette or short novel. Before writing this novel, Conrad had already published **Almayer's Folly** (1895), **An Outcast of the Islands** (1896), **The Nigger of Narcissus** (1897), **Tales of Unrest** (1898) and several essays and short stories of which 'An Outpost of Progress' (1898) has an immediate relevance to this novel **Heart of Darkness** was finally included by Blackwood in 1902 in a separate volume. **Youth : A Narrative**; and **Two Other Stories**—the third being 'The End of the ether'.

**Heart of Darkness** is autobiographical. It is based on Conrad's own experiences in the **Belgian Congo** in Africa during his employment there as a steamboat navigator between May and December 1890. In the Author's Note to the 1917 edition of the novel Conrad had written, '**Heart of Darkness** is experience pushed a little (and only a very little) beyond the actual facts of the case for the perfectly legitimate, I believe, purpose of bringing it home to the minds and bosoms of the readers. That sombre theme had to be given a sinister resonance a tonality of its own, a continued vibration that I hoped would hang in the air and dwell on the ear after the last note was struck.'" (Baines, 1960, p 272).

In 1890 Conrad took employment in a trading company called the Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce dm Haut-Congo (which can be roughly translated as the Anonymous Society for Trade in the Congo). This company was part of a multinational colonial enterprize aimed at exploiting and developing the resources of the Congo present day Zaire one of the largest nations of Central Africa and known as the Belgian Congo from 1908 till 1960 when it gained independence. In fact,

during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, northern and central Africa had become the site of several daring expeditions by Europeans. The most celebrated among these explorers was the Scot, Dr. David Livingstone who had gone there in 1856 and was later to be 'found' by the American journalist, Henny Morton Stanley in a much publicized event in 1871.

The Congo, however, had already become the scene of intense colonial rivalry between Portuguese, Dutch and French pioneers. In 1884, at a conference in Berlin, Otto von Bismarck, the first chancellor of the German Empire, conferred the Congo as the personal property of the Belgian King, Leopold II. In return the king had to guarantee that all nations would be permitted to trade freely there, that taxes and tariffs would not be imposed and that no nation would be allowed monopolies on particular items of trade.

In 1876, with many noble intentions and promises of philanthropic goodwill, the International Association for Exploration and Civilization of Africa was formed in Brussels with Leopold himself as president of the Association. At a conference held to mark this occasion, Leopold proclaimed that the main aim of the Association was to civilize Africa and initiate an age of progress there, "...to open to civilization the only part of our globe where Christianity has not penetrated and to pierce the darkness which envelops the entire population." (Ross, 1989, p. 5) In order to fulfil this commitment, Leopold assigned Henry Moton Stanley to supervise the formation of stations across central Africa. In 1885, Stanley collected his experiences into a massive two-volume eulogy to this enterprise titled, **The Congo and the Founding of its Free State : A Story of Work and Exploration**. Leopold thus assumed the title of sovereign of L'Etat Independent du Congo or the Congo Free State but soon withdrew from his commitments tyrannically turning his promises of opening the Congo to civilization into a cruel joke. In fact, it soon became clear that these slogans were actually a means of disguising ruthless exploitation and a brutal slavery of the Congolese.

Reports of atrocities started appearing in the European and American newspapers in the last years of the nineteenth century. But as the Congo was quite remote from Europe. These reports were relatively few and infrequent. Thus, when they did appear they were flatly denied or, at best, justified as instances of self defence against criminal uprisings of the natives. However in a report on the Congo submitted to the President of the United States in 1890, a Baptist missionary, George Washington Williams demanded that the truth respecting the Independent State of Congo, an absolute monarchy, an oppressive and cruel Government, an exclusive Belgium colony, now tottering to its fall" should be revealed to the American people. (Kimbrough,

1963, p. 97). In an open letter to Leopold, Williams concluded that “Against the deceit, fraud, robberies, arson, murder, slave raiding and general policy of cruelty of your Majesty’s Government to the natives, stands their record of unexampled patience long suffering and patient spirit, which put the boasted civilization and professed religion of your Majesty’s government to the flush.” (Kimbrough, 1963, p. 112). Together with Williams’s letter, there was the celebrated Report of Roger Casement a British Foreign Service Officer and the writings of Joseph Conrad, particularly his **Hart of Darkness** which had a significant role in creating European awareness and changing attitudes towards the Congo in the last decades of the nineteenth century. (Kimbrough, 1963, pp. 100, 123) Leopold, however, continued to control the Congo till his death in 1908. In his will he bequeathed the territory to Belgium in exchange for a government loan of 150 million francs.

Joseph Conrad’s journey to central Africa had, in fact, been part of boyhood dream. The later recounted this in his autobiographical work, **A Personal Record** (1912), “It was in 1868, when nine years old or thereabouts, that while looking at a map of Africa at the time and putting my finger on the blank space then representing the unsolved mystery of that continent, I said to myself write absolute assurance and amazing audacity which are no longer in my character now :

“When I grow up I shall go there,” (Conrad, 1912, p. 13).

At that time Conrad had dismissed it simply as a childhood boast. However, in a later essay, ‘Geography and Some Explorers’ he admitted his own disbelief when he found himself in the Congo :

“...nothing was further from my wildest hopes. Yet it is a fact that, about eighteen years afterwards, a wretched little stern-wheel steamboat I commande lay moored to the bank of an African river... The subdued thundering mutter of the Stanley falls hung in the heavy night air of the last navigable reach of the Upper Congo... Away in the middle of the stream, on a little island nestling all black in the foam of the broken water, a solitary little light glimmered feebly, and I said to myself with awe, ‘This is the very spot of my boyish boast’ ” (Kimbrough, p. 147, 186-87).

In 1889, Conrad had approached Albert Thys, the managing director of the Societe with the hope of getting a position as captain of the Societe’s steamer plying on the River Congo. However, Conrad had to wait till 1890 to be offered to command and that too owing to the fortuitous, though unfortunate death of the steamer captain named Freisleben. After signing the contract with Thys in Brussels, Conrad took a ship from the French port of Bordeaux arriving at his destination, Boma the main post of entry to the Congo on June 12, 1890. Conrad’s experiences and observations during his trip from Boma to Stanley Pool (now Malebo) mainly on foot is recorded

in his **Congo Diary** and the details of the voyage up the river Congo till Stanley falls (now Boyoma) is noted in the Up River Book.

While travelling from Stanley Falls to Kinshasa, Conrad met an agent of the company from whom he learnt that the steamer he was meant to command lay sunk on the bottom of the river. Thus having come to the Congo with the hope of commanding the *Florida*, Conrad found himself shipping upriver not as a captain but as a sailor of the wretched little stem wheel steamboat the *Roi des Belges*. Under the supervision of the manager of the company station at Kinshasa, Camille Delcommune whom he detested as “common ivory dealer with base instincts” he was to rescue a sick agent Anton Klein from Stanley Falls. The trip downriver with Klein’s corpse cured him of all desire to serve in the Congo; totally disillusioned and weakened by a terrible attack of dysentery he wrote to his aunt Marguerite Poradowska, “Everything is repellent to me...men and things, but above all men. (Musfin, 1989m p. 12) As Zdzislaw Najder notes, “The diary proper has been used as a source of biographical information and even more frequently, compared with ‘Heart of Darkness’ for purposes of psychological and factual interpretation of the story.” (Kimbrough, 1963, p. 156).

The Congo Diary appears to be one of the major sources of the novel. In fact, the obvious parallels between it and *Heart of Darkness* almost seem to suggest that the novel is a thinly disguised autobiography. And though Conrad would have dismissed this suggestion during the time of writing this novel, he was later to admit the importance of the autobiographical element in the work of a novelist : “I know that a novelist lives in his work. He stands there, the only reality in an invented world amongst imaginary things, happenings and people, writing about them, he is only writing about himself. Every novel contains an element of autobiography and this can hardly be denied, since the creator can only explain himself in his creation.” (Kimbrough, 1963, p. 234).

The parallels between Conrad’s Congo experience and that of Marlow, the narrator, can thus be summarized as follows : Marlow tells his audience about his childhood passion for maps and about his intention to go, someday, to the blank of heart of Africa. He describes, how many years later, he got an opportunity to realize his dreams and signed a contract for a Congo command in the office of a “great man... pale plumpness in a track coat” (Albert Jhys) helped by “an aunt a dear enthusiastic soul” who like Conrad’s Aunt Marguerite had prevailed upon the directors of the company to give him the job. Whereas Conrad got his command because of the death of the captain, Fiesleben, Marlow receives his appointment after the demise of the unfortunate captain Fiesleben.

Marlow’s description of his sea voyage along the African coast closely resembles

that in Conrad's Congo Diary. In fact, these similarities became more obvious in Marlow's overland journey from the port on the African coast to the 'Central station' which recount Conrad's experiences when travelling from Matadi to Kinshasa. The sick "while companion" who has to be "carried in a hammock slung under a pole" is a reference to the company agent Prosper Haron who was accompanying Conrad. The shocking references to the negro corpses which Conrad had seen along the way also surface in the novel, "Once a white man in an unbuttoned uniform, camping on the path with an armed escort of lank Zanzibaris, very hospitable and festive—not to say drunk was looking after the upkeeps of the road, he declared. Can't say I saw a road or any upkeep, unless the body of a middle aged negro with a bullet hole in the forehead upon which I absolutely stumbled three miles farther on may be considered as a permanent improvement. (Kimbrough, 1963, p. 23).

Marlow, like Conrad, learns that the steams he was to have commanded had such after an accident, to the bottom of the river. Like Conrad, he is assigned the task of retrieving a sick agent who dies soon after he is rescued. Some of the descriptions during the journey up stream have been drawn from Conrad's **Diary and Up-River Book**. Similarly Marlow also falls desperately ill and resigns from his assignment filled with a misanthropic disillusionment, "I found myself in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of the people hurrying through the streets... They trespassed upon my thoughts. They use intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I know (Kimbrough, 1963, p. 70). It is, in fact, this sense of bitter disillusion which pervades Conrad's Congo experience as a recall in his last essays, "A great melancholy descended on me (after he reached Stanley Falls). Yes, this was the very spot. But there was no shadowy friend to stand by my side in the night of the enormous wilderness, not great haunting memory, but only the unholy recollection of a prosaic, newspaper 'stunt' (This is a reference to Stanley's much publicized, discovery' of Livingstone) and the distasteful knowledge of the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human consciousness and geographical exploration" (Kimbrough, 1963, p.187)

Both **Heart of Darkness** and 'An Outpost of Progress, the short story which first grew out of Conrad's Congo experiences are mainly concerned with the distasteful knowledge of the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration. "An Outpost of Progress' was published in 1897 in the June-July issue of the **Cosmopolis**. A severe indictment of empire, 'An Outpost' ironically appeared in the jubilee year of Queen Victoria's reign; and the issue of the **Cosmopolis** which carried the story also contained an article eulogizing

the Queen and the British Empire. Describing the story in a letter to his publisher Conrad wrote.” It is a story of the Congo... All the bitterness of those days all my puzzled wonder as to the meaning of all I saw all my indignation at masquerading philanthropy have been with me again while I wrote... The story is simple-there is hardly any description. The most common incidents are related-the life in a lonely station on the Kassai. I have diverted myself of everything but pity-and some scorn-while putting down the insignificant events that bring on the catastrophe. (Baines, 1960, 218) Many of the phrases in Conrad’s comment on ‘An Outpost’ can be used to describe **Heart of Darkness**.

‘An Outpost’ is a story about two Europeans, Kayerts and Carlier, who came to an African trading station to make their fortune and also fulfil their duty towards civilizing the natives. They begin their work with but being incompetent and also lonely in this remote African swamp they soon become lazy and irresponsible. They thus become involved in slavery and murder allowing a black mercenary Makola to supervise the work in the station. Misunderstandings develop between the two and, finally they quarrel bitterly over a spoonful of sugar. As they chase each other around the station one of them fires from his revolver and Kayerts is horrified to find that he has killed Carlier, his friend. He thus, hang himself from the cross erected to mark the grave of the previous white agent of this station. Ironically, therefore an emissary of Christian civilization and European progress is reduced not only to bestial greed but also rendered pathetic and farcical. The Christian symbol of the cross like the term ‘heart’ in the later novel assumes an ironic significance in which the ideals of Christianity and European progress are travestied by the acquisitive, lust of imperialism. Moreover a comment about Kayerts and Caslier by the narrator has a profound bearing on the thematic meaning of Heart of Darkness.

“They were two perfectly insignificant and incapable individuals, whose existence is only rendered possible through the high organization of civilized crowds. Few men realize that their life, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and their audacities are only the expression of their beliefs in the safety of their surrounding. But the contact with pure, unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive man, brings sudden and profound trouble into the heart.” (Conrad 1947, p. 89)

In **Heart of Darkness** the protagonist, Kurtz’s degeneration from idealism to barbarity largely remains unexplained. Kurtz in fact, like many of Conrad’s other heroes remains an enigma. However, at one stage of his narration. Marlow seems to suggest the opinion expressed in ‘An Outpost’ as the reason behind Kurtz’s tragedy. Thus, one of the thematic preoccupations in Heart of Darkness involves this relationship of civilized man and primitive nature. Despite its autobiographical and factual emphasis,



the novel, therefore, is not only a journey which reveals the heart of the matter or the truth of European imperialism. This journey in turn becomes an exploration of the “sudden and profound trouble” that the heart of civilized man discovers when confronted with the primitive which is latent within himself.

**Heart of Darkness** ostensibly deals with Marlow, a level-headed seaman’s journey up the River Congo in a steamer of an European trading company. Marlow’s duty is to rescue an agent of this company, an eloquent idealist named Kurtz, mortally ill at his trading station at the upper reaches of the river. However, he discover that this Kurtz has submitted to rather than suppressed the natives savagery with its hints of cannibalism and seksual license while preparing to return with Kurtz, Marlow hears this man’s dying judgement of his own degeneracy which in turn becomes Conrad’s indictment imperialism. “I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride of ruthless power, of craven terror of an intense and hopeless despair... He cried in a whisper at some image at some vision he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath : ‘The horror! The horror!’” (Kimbrough, 1963, p. 72)

Marlow himself becomes severely ill soon after and is forced to resign and return to Europe, In fact, this illness becomes symptomatic of the bitter disillusionment which follows the Congo experience prompting him into “vesenting the sight of people.” He returns Kurtz’s official papers of the company and then visits the “Intended”, Kurtz’s fiancée with a packet of her letters to him. Though a witness to Kurtz’s physical and moral decline, Marlow unable to reveal to the... of Kurtz’s death cry he consoles her by announcing that Kurtz had died with her name on his lips. Ironically, therefore Marlow, who detests dishonesty, “laid the ghost of his gifts at last with a lie.” (p. 49)

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## 5.2 Major themes in Heart of Darkness

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As it is quite evident, **Heart of Darkness** is a rather complex novel which resists conventional and superficial readings. One such... interpretation, suggested in the previous unit, argues in favour of autobiographical description of the novel. Yet, even autobiography goes to explain only some aspects of the text; the details which record personal experience actually represent the novelists criticism imperialiosus. Thus, one important aspect of **Heart of Darkness** the fact that not only does the novel offer several different... but these tend to be linked and imbricated readings. It becomes increasingly clear that for Conrad the theme of imperialism constitute the meaning of the darkness central to primitive Africa and also implicit in the unknown recesses of the -human heart, The significance of the novel’s title therefore includes, as a whole or separately the many interpretations the text.



In its simplest sense, the **heart** in *Heart of Darkness* denotes... of Africa whose shape roughly resembles the human heart. The quarter of the nineteenth century, Africa largely remained an unexplored and unknown territory and was commonly referred to as the dark continent. Thus in the literal sense, the heart of darkness becomes a reference to the unknown and primitive... Africa. Geography, particularly map therefore play an important role in the novel as Marlow himself admits. Now when I was... chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America or Africa, or Australia and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth and when one that looked particularly in writing on a map... I would put my finger on it and say : When I grow up I will go there... But there was me yet—the biggest—the most blank, so to speak—that I had hankering after... It had ceased to be a blank space of delight mystery... It had become a place of darkness.” (pp 11-12) The irony implicit in Marlow’s observation lies in the fact that it was only... it was explored and mapped did Africa lost its pure (blank white mystery and turn into a place of darkness. It is in this ironical sense that the title of the novel is implicated the theme of imperialism which lay at the heart of the civilizing mission Europe.

Conrad’s treatment of the theme of imperialism has two contradictory features. While, on the one hand, he is directly critical of the exploitation and slavery in the Belgian Congo, on the other, he tends to justify imperialism by approving the British enterprise of empire. The more in fact, begins with a characteristic statement, “The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who has a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.” (p 10) However, studying the map in the office of the trading company he intends to join, Marlow qualifies this criticism by admitting that the vast amount of red” denoting the British colonies on the map, are “good to see at any time because one knows that some real work is done in there.” (p 12) In fact, Marlow had earlier acknowledged that even imperialism could be defended for “What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it, not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...” (p 10) It is, therefore, this dual attitude, this double vision which gives an ambiguous nature to the novelists criticism of imperialism contributing to the complexity of the novel.

What the novel actually shows is not a sacrifice to the idea but rather, its sacrilege. For one of the central ironies that Conrad emphasised the disparity between the noble and philanthropic promises of the colonizers and their actual practice, “They were conquerous and for that you want only brute force... They grabbed what they could

get for the sake of what was the begot. It was robbery with violence aggravated murder on a great scale and men going at it blind.” (p 10) “Appalled” at the brutalization of the natives used as chain gang on a railway project, Marlow later discovers them abandoned to diseases and death in the ‘Grove of Death’ : ‘They were dying slowly it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation lying confused in the greenish gloom. (p 20)

According to Manoni, the imperialist mentality is characterised by a massive misanthropic neurosis which tends to be dramatized in the colonies. In his book *Prospero and Caliban : The Psychology of Colonialism* Manoni points out that this mentality is shaped not by white man’s experience in the colonies is part of an assumption formed before his arrival there. (Manoni p) This pathological condition, is evident not only in the exploitation and brutalization of the native but also in the manner in which he is represented as a criminal or an ‘enemy’ : The most graphic instance of this attitude is evident, ironically in Kurtz’s report on the suppression of savage customs with its conclusive marginal note “Exterminate all the brutes.” (pp 50-51) As in the case of this report and its after thought Conrad repeatedly emphasizes this hiatus between professed aims and actual practice which marks imperialism, at least in the Belgian Congo. In fact, early in the novel, though Marlow dismisses the Romans as typical conquerors, the manuscript contained a statement (latter omitted which exonerated them of such falsehoods, “The best of them is they didn’t get up pretty fictions about it.” (Kimbrough, 10).

These fictions of empire is for Edward Said fundamental to the ‘Orientalist or colonial discourse. In his book **Orientalism**, Said, therefore shows that imperialism involves a constant production of the colonies; and these representations are used to generate a specific room of information and knowledge which is then used to control and exercise power over the colonies. “Conrad wants us to see how Kurtz’s great looking “adventure, Marlow’s journey up the river and the narrative itself all share a common theme : Europeans performing acts of imperial mastery and will in (or about) Africa.” (Said, 1993, 25) Thus, one of the myths used to justify this imperial losing adventure was turned the white-man’s burden. As Marlow’s aunt and most of Europe is given to believe, this involved a civilizing mission which was the responsibility of the superior white man who was, ‘something like an emissar of light, something like a lower sort of a postle. There had been a lot of such not let loose in print and talk just about that time, and the excellent woman, living right in the rush of all that humbug got carried off her feet.” (pp 15-16)

However, the distinguishing characteristic of Conrad’s criticism of empire involves

the paradox that the imperial project creates the condition of its own decadence and dissolution. Thus, the first example of development work which greets Marlow in the company station is the of a railway truck lying tumbled with its wheels in the air. A railway is being built and a cliff is being blasted with dynamite. Marlow, however, notices that “the cliff was not in the way of anything, but the objectless blasting was all the work going on. A few paces away is a vast artificial hole the purpose of which Marlow finds impossible to divine. And in a ravine a lot of important drawing pipes for the settlement had been tumbled... (in) a magnificent smash no.” (20) In the central station, Marlow is shocked to learn that the steamer he is supposed to command had sunk and the rivets required to repair it takes a long time to arrive. Here he finds the men strolling aimlessly about in the sunshine with absurd long staves in their hands” to protect themselves from any attack by the natives. Yet, their own time is spent” backbiting and intriguing against each other Marlow is forced to conclude that “It was as unreal as everything else—as the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern as their talk, as their governments as their show of work. In fact, it is this incredulous sense of absurdity that makes most of the signs of progress and performance that Marlow encounters as in the instance of French worship meaninglessly firming into a continent because of “one of their was while its crew was dying of fever “there a day”! (17)

In *Heart of Darkness* the imperial project, therefore, yields a series of inversions : the civilizing mission turns into forms of barbaric... progress, thus turns into regrets, the European order of things here becomes chaos, the rational irrational work is dissipated into entropic laziness, the ambassador of light thus ironically become perpetrators of darkness. The ironical reversals actually constitute Conrad’s criticism of imperialism for what they imply is the fact that the heart of darkness is actually not in Africa but inherent in Europe. Conrad seems to have suggested this early in the novel when he recognizes that even Britain have been one of the dark places of the earth.” (9) This opinion is confirmed when Marlow states that “All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz ...” (50) Thus, the river Thames flows into the Congo and like Marlow travels” back to the earliest beginning of the world”. (48) the novel has a portentous circularity returning the primitive darkness of Africa to London. Michel Foucault uses the concept of ‘counter-memory’ to explain Europe’s encounter with its primitive ‘other’. The other is represented in this novel in the absolute sense of racial difference between the white European and the African negro; it also suggests all that falls outside the European codes of civility and rationality European’s. counter memory, therefore not only involves its encounter with its primitive and savage past, but it also implies an anxiety about the primitive and the irrational being latent

though, repressed in the civilization order of Europe. Moreover, the attractiveness of this counter memory is equally evident in Kurtz's submission to the primitive and his refusal to be rescued from being in this condition. (57-58, 62-66) Thus, are possible explanation of Kustz's enigmatic dying words would be an acknowledgement of his common ancestry with the savage) his own self-identity with darkness.

For Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian novelist, it is this very admission of a kinship with the primitive other that proves Conrad's "racism" and his imperialist bias in the novel: "**Heart of Darkness** projects the image of Africa as the other world the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by a triumphant bestiality." (Kimbrough, 255) Early in the novel though Conrad has Marlow admit that the black man wanted no excuse of being then (17), he is however unwilling to allow them to leave their accustomed place. "Fine fellows—cannibals—in their places." (36) Significant however, for Achebe is the fact that Conrad also denies the nature a language giving them in place of speech a violent babble of uncomth sounds, short grunting phrases or, at least a dialect (Kimbrough, 1963, 262) This, for Achebe, is a step towards using Africa as merchy a setting and eliminating the African as a human being Africa, these becomes a metaphysical battle field where the European enters at his pexil fathe foccs of darkness may lay claim upon him. This, Achebe feels is a type of preposterous and perverse arrogance" and therefore he states: "The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has forthered and continues to forster in the world. An the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is No. it cannot." (Kimbrough, 1963, 257).

Recent studies of Heart of Darkness, therefore tend to focus on the ambiguity and evasive quality of Conrad's criticism of empire. Thus, despite Marlow's moral outrage at Kurtzo abomination, he finally affirms his loyalty to Kurtz recognizing his own identity with him. "This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man.... since I had peeped our the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of history that could not see the flame of the candle lent was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that best in the darkness. He had summed up he had judged. The horror!'... It was an affirmation, a moral victory. ... That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last and won beyond. (69-70) The fact that all Europe had gone into the making of Kurtz confirms Marlow's identities with Kurtz and denies him any exoneration. Thus, Avram Fleishman attempts to explain the evident ambiguity in Conrad's attitude towards imperialism by suggesting conflict between the novelists filiatire links with a Polish radical movement against

Russian imperialism and his later affiliations with a... British model of government represented, in many aspects by the Merchant Navy in which he sought and found employment moreover Conrad was also well aware that this government dispute its benevolence, had used its Merchant Navy as one of the chief purveyors and gaurdians of the nations imperialist enterprize. (Fleishman, 1967, 213-14, 223)

Since Conrad's novel is about Africa, it would only be... to conclude with the opinions of written of this continent. There in an interview with C. P. Saravan, the Kenyan novelist, Thiong'o endored Achebe's criticism of the novel... admitted that Conrad's attack of Belgian imperialism in the Congo was powerful and positive. However, he also pointed out that Conrad's ambivalence towards British imperialism... the novelist's position regarding this evil. Another Kenyan novelist critic and teacher, Deonard Kibera thus conclusively stated : "I study Heart of Darkness as an examination of the West itself and not as a comment on Africa. Many Amricans do turned off Conrad because they feel he used the third world so totally as a background against which he examined... and conduct that the people in Africa and Asia are not more than caricatures. I do not object to this and appreciate fact that in Conrad there is not that Joyce Cary... Greene pretension of understanding the third world." (Kimbrought, 1963. 285)

If Kurtz, in the main, represents to the imperialist theme in Heart of Darkness, Marlow represents the mind or consciousness which is responsible for dramatizing it. The novel is, therefore as... Marlow's strong as it is that Kurtz. Several critics have... identified the theme of Marlow's self-discovery where his journey to the Congo and then to the "I was station"... metaplor for thus psychological voyage and quest for self definition. The novel, thus becomes a journey within... a moral drama and therely making Marlow a... everyman or Christian of Bunyano Pilgrim's Progress. In sense the novel assumes an allegorical meaning where... mankind is caught in an eternal conflict between good and... Moreover, the psychological implications of the journey trope also implies the individual's descent into the unconscious and the consequent confrontation with irrational and nightmarish forces which have been pushed under and suppressed by the rules and conventions of civilized society. Though Congo had not heard of the Austrian doctor and psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud, Heart of Darkness seems to anticipate one of Freud's major arguments. For what the novel dramatizes is, according to Freud a return of the repressed." Thus as John Lessitore suggests that the novel should not be seen merely as Marlow's journey of self discovery but a much greater journey of civilization from its present (Western European) state of development back to its primitive origins" (Bloom, 1987, 91)

In fact the keyword darkness which is the recurrent motif in the novel is the meet

appropriate indication of this journey into the collective unconscious : The novel begins with this reference to a brooding darkness which hangs above London and then envelops the river Thames. The juxtaposition of civilization and primitivity suggested by the darkness of earlier Roman times in Britain prepares the ground for this theme to be developed in the novel. Moreover, the association of darkness with the river and later with the primeval forest in the Congo also suggest that Marlow's journey involves, like Ulysses and later Christ, a descent into the underworld; that the Congo river here becomes the River Styx of Greek mythology which separates the world of the living from that of the dead. This symbolism is further confirmed by the pervasive use of the colour black in the scene in the European city ironically described as a whited sepulchre (13)—where Marlow goes to receive his Congo appointment. He meets two women dressed in black, knitting black wool who become obvious references to the fates—to Clotho and Lachesis who in classical mythology spin and measure the thread of human life. Conrad, deliberately excludes Atropos, the third of the Fates sisters whose function is to cut the thread for that would suggest, Marlow's imminent death. (Marlow, however, undergoes a symbolic 'death' when he becomes severely ill at the end of the novel). Thus, Marlow's symbolic descent into Hades, the Greek world of the dead, is an experience which can be compared to that of the mariner in Coleridge's poem **Ancient Mariner** namely "death-in-life", a type of living death which becomes Conrad's assessment of the condition of modern man. Thus, a reading of *Heart of Darkness* as a journey of self discovery implicitly involves a consideration of the mythic archetypes and the elaborate use of symbols which structure this interpretation of the novel.

The irrational and nightmarish quality of Marlow's journey in the African Congo prepares the context for an exploration of the mind and the unconscious. Significantly, therefore in the medical examination during his recommitment Marlow is told by the doctor that he usually measures the crania of those who go to the Congo before they leave and after their return. He, however admits that this does not prove anything much for "the changes take place inside." (15) Marlow is then asked whether there is any history of madness in his family and finally admits that he is an "alienist" which in Conrad's time would be the term used to describe a psychiatrist. Thus the issues of the mind, the unconscious, madness and psychoanalysis is introduced in the very beginning of the novel. In fact, the theme of madness is suggested in the behaviour and subsequent death of the steamer captain whose place Marlow is portentously meant to occupy. (12)

Though *Heart of Darkness* has this nightmarish or dream—like as per the novel did not start with "abstract notions" but with "definite images" Conrad asserted in a



letter to his friend Cunninghame Graham. (Murfin, 1989, 127) This is evident in the scenes of absurdity and irrationality that sees on his journey to Africa and also in the company station. Thus there is the French frigate firing shells “incomprehensively” into a continent in an imaginary war in which nothing happened.” “There was a touch of insanity in the proceedings observes Marlow for the men that lonely ship were lying of fever at the rate of three a day. (17) A similar meaninglessness is evident in the railway work in progress at the company station. A horn tooted to the night and I saw the black people run. A heavy and dull detonation shook the ground a puff of smoke came out of the cliff and that was all. No change appeared on the face of the rock. They were building a railway. The cliff was not in the way of anything but the objectless blasting was all the work going on. (19) Marlow has, therefore to repeatedly encounter scenes where meaning is confounded such as the “vast artificial hole” whose “purpose I found it impossible to divine” and the “wanton smash up” “important drainage pipes” in a narrow ravine in the hillside. (20) Significantly enough Marlow descended the hill... towards the tree “which, in turn becomes an encounter with the gloomy circle of some Inferno”. The very terms that are used to describe this experience in the Grave of Death seems to suggest emphatically that darkness is not merely outside but also inside in the very centre of the human and the civilized.

The sense of absurdity continues as Marlow proceeds to the Central station where the first white man he meets is the Accountant, a figure ludicrously well groomed amidst the sordid muddle around him, “His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser's dummy, but in the great demoralisation of the land he kept up his appearance. That's backbone. (21) Corresponding with the miracle of this Accountant is the Russian dressed in motley like a clown or a harlequin who Marlow finds in the Inner Station. An admirer of Kurtz, this Russian had left firewood at his hut in the deep forest beside the river to help the steamer keep moving towards its destination; who had also made notes in Russian in a standard book on navigation (53-54).

However, what becomes increasingly clear in the Central Station is the immorality and depravity which accompanies the images of absurdity and chaos. Thus the manager turns out to be devil but only a flabby devil; the brickmaker without a single brick to his credit, is mephistopheles yet merely a papiermache mephistopheles”. In fact, for Marlow the whole concern “was as unreal as everything else—as the philanthropic pretence of their whole concern, as their talk, as their government as their show work. (27) Therefore, this parody of work had reduced the very reality of their existence and rendered them into forms of illusion. In order to resist this compromise with insanity and chaos, Marlow concentrates on the importance of everyday tasks and the business of repairing the steamer. Simultaneously however, Marlow becomes aware

of another version of the real namely that of the forest which symbolically represents man's links with his primitive past or the inscrutable forces of this primitive darkness repressed and dormant within himself : "Going up the river was like travelling back to the earliest beginning of the world, when vegetation sprouted on the earth and the big trees were kings... There were moments when one's past came back to one as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a space. It was the stillness of an implacable force over an inscrutable intention." (35)

As the steamer journeys up the river, Marlow becomes aware of the terrible fascination the forest and its darkness has for civilized man. First there is the recognition of the humanity of the natives even in their irrational behaviour on the banks of the river—what thrilled you was the thought of their humanity like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild passionate uproar." (37-38) Second, this very kinship with the primitive implies a freedom from all the civilized social norms and restrictions and therefore, the licence of release the repressed irrational self dormant under the National disguises. Kurtz personifies this second tendency for the native heads fired on the fence of his house suggest that he "locked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts." (57) Conrad thus suggests that the primitive impulses of the forest exist not only outside but inside the self. In fact, the outer "madhouse frenzy" is only a manifestation of the inner moral depravity. (37) Thus, when Marlow accepts Kurtz as his choice of nightmares (67), he is acknowledging not only his ancestry with the African native but also his own repressed self symbolised by Kurtz. Whether this is understood in terms of Freud's theory of 'id' or Jung's concept of the 'shadow' Kurtz clearly becomes Marlow's double', the Mr Hyde lurking under our rational, social masks threatening to tilt the balance and push the self towards a desire of the darkness.

Marlow tries to resist this atavistic fascination by concentrating on his work. This idealization of the work ethic thus enables Marlow to preserve his sanity, "You wonder I didn't go out ashore for a howland a dance? Well no-I didn't. Fine sentiments you say? Fine sentiments be hanged! I had no time. I had to mess about with white lead and strips of woolen blankets helping to put bandages on those leaky steam pipes (38) When Kurtz tries to crawl, back to savage rituals on shore, Marlow again tries to prevent him by appealing, ironically to a Christian moral sense, "You will be lost, 'I said—'utterly lost'. (65) It appears that Marlow still retains a hope of Kurtz's salvation within the conventional codes of Victorian ethics. Thus, in spite of the



ambiguous implications of Kurtz death cry (“The horror! The horror!.) Marlow finds in it the hint of his redemption, “He had summed up he had judged... After all this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candour, it had conviction... it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth—” (69) It is in this sense, that Heart of Darkness is concerned with moral issues and can be seen as a humanist allegory. For, according to J. I. M. Stewart, Kurtz’s last words are a statement of the widest generality. They define one tenable view of mans situation in an alien universe. Alternatively they define the only sense of himself that man can bring back from a wholly inward journey : that into the immense darkness the unmeaning anarchy of his own pasyche. (Bloom, 2000; 72)

Since after this knowldege there is little forgiveness, Marlow has a symptomatic physical and psychological breakdown. Like Lazarus in T. S. Eliot’s poem he seems to have returned from the dead bearing the burden of this overwhelming wisdom and contemptuous of the average citizen so full of stupid importance. “(70) Ouring Kurtz his loyalty for this self awarness, Marlow, inspite of his avowed honesty, therefore, ‘lays the ghost of Kurtz with a lie.’ (49, 75) sparing Kurtz’s fiancée the dark truth of his dying words Marlow reiterates his earlier opinion that, The inner truth is hiddenluckily, luckily. “(36) Inonically, therefore in the final analysis, Marlow represses the savage god and thereby rendered Kurtz the justice which was his dire.” (76) He, thus confirms the Freudian nation of the therapentic significance of literature whose cathartic value becomes necessary to maintain an equilibrium in both the individual and society.

In conclusion, therefore Heart of Darkness many be said to have four or five major thematic concerns namely, that of the criticism of imperialism which includes the autobiographical aspects of the novel. The novel also involves Marlow quest for self-discovery and this also constitutes a psychoanalytic reading of the novel where the titular darkness is seen to be both external and within man. This reading naturally has to consider the symbolism and the suggestive my thic compavisons used in the novel. Finally it becomes evident that all these interpretations surve to explain the novels title.

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### **5.3 Basic aspects of the Novel**

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One of the major aspects of HD involves its experiments in narrative, structure and the use of multiple narrators. This, in fact, constitutes the specifically modern aspects of the novel. This concern with narrative is emphasized at the very beginning of the novel when an anonymons narrator introduces Marlow and defines the nature

of his stories. "The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted) and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos, that sometimes one made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine (9).

Thus the unidentified narrator who introduces Marlow's story and recounts it can be termed the frame narrator" whose definition acts as a frame of Marlow's tale. Apart from this explicit function, the frame narrator has another important function involving his eulogy of the river Thames with its glorious history of the British navy. In a later essay called "Tradition" (1918) Conrad had admitted that "perhaps because I have not been born to the inheritance (the Merchant Navy) tradition... that I am so consciously aware of it." For some critics this seems to suggest an identity between Conrad and the frame narrator. Richard Ambrosini, however, points out that this association ignores the irony with which Marlow sceptically dismisses the conventional rhetoric of the frame narrator. Thus Marlow quibbles Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Franklin being reverentially addressed as "Knights" for in actuality, they were nothing more than pirates. The frame narrator's reliability is therefore, undermined thereby contributing to the complexity of the novel's narrative tone and its meaning.

Heart of Darkness, therefore has a dual narrative which Conrad first used in *Youth* serialized in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine in 1898. Conrad's usual method was to collect a group comprising of the Director of Companies, the Lawyer, the Accountant and the anonymous frame narrator around a table after a meal (*Youth*, Lord Jim) or on board a yacht (*Heart of Darkness*) and the frame narrator then announced that we were fated before the effort began to run, to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences." (11) Conrad's use of the dual narrators may have been influenced by Ivan Turgenev's story, *First Love*. This technique was also used by a nineteenth century French novelist, Count Joseph Arthour de Gobineau in *Le Pleiades*. In using dual narrator, Conrad gives the novel its lineage with the oldest of narrative traditions, namely oral narrative which associates the novel with myth and epic giving it an archetypal significance.

Moreover, Conrad's introduction of Marlow has a distinctive implication in *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow, in fact gives to the novel its sombre theme... a sinister resonance a tonality of its own." For, in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad's emphasis is not merely on the recounting of the plot of events but on the impressions that these events create and their meanings as these are dramatized through a sensitive consciousness. In this sense, the novel not only traces Marlow's experiences but also the effect of these

experience on his mind and personality. Moreover by dramatizing the events through Marlow's consciousness, Conrad is also presenting Marlow in dual roles : both as a participant and as a narrator or the letter-character. Thereby, the novel also explores the problems which the narrator encounters in relating understanding and communicating the nature and meaning of reality.

This preoccupation with the problems of the narrative is suggested in the very beginning of the novel when the frame narrator gives us a definition of the distinctive nature of Marlow's stories (see si). By distinguishing Marlow's stories from those of other sailors, the frame narrator is not only admitting the unconventional character of his stories but also their complexity owing to the ambiguous quality of the meaning of the tales. This is suggested by the imagery of the "Kerent haze halo and spectral illumination of moonshine in the description of Marlow's tales. The meaning here is not central nor inside the tale and therefore, not merely dependent on the events. By being on the outside, surrounding the events like an envelope, the emphasis here is obviously on the tale or its telling or narration which tries to bring out the implications of the event or the experiences. Thus this definition of Marlow's tales reiterates the novel's sombre theme and sinister resonance and it also points to its mysterious quality and the ambiguous nature of its meaning which Marlow's audience (and Conrad's reader) has to discover from the hazy and ghastly quality of the tale and also its telling.

Owing to Marlow's dual function both as narrator and participant, *Heart of Darkness* is characterized by frequent shifts in the narrative point of view. The concept of point of view in fiction can be defined simply as the position from which the story is being told or narrated. This position of the narrator has important implications for the meaning of a novel. For instance, in the traditional authorial third-person narrative method, the events are presented objectively and there is an impression of greater control and comprehension of the reality that is being presented in the novel. In the first person narrative method, however this element of objectivity is greatly reduced especially when the narrator is also a participant in the events of the novel. The narrator, therefore cannot present the thoughts of the other characters because he can relate only what he sees and experiences. Thus a total comprehensive representation can never be achieved owing to the narrator's limitations and gaps in knowledge. Naturally this created blurred or ambiguous areas in the novel and therefore the reader has to derive meaning through inference and careful reconstruction.

In *Heart of Darkness* as in Conrad's other novels these shifts in point-of-view thus create ellipses in the narrative. An ellipse involves an instance of incomplete information leading to a gap in or lapse meaning. Thus when Marlow reaches the

Central station he is checked to learn that the steamer he is supposed to command has sunk to the bottom of the river a few days before his arrival. When this boat is pulled up ashore. Marlow discovers that several boxes of rivets would be necessary for its repair. As there is none available at the Central Station, the Manager decides to get them from the Company's Station near the coast and set the time required for them to arrive at about two months. At that time Marlow misses the actual implications of this inordinate delay in the supply of the rivets. It is only later that he is able to piece together information from the agents at the Central Station and an overheard conversation between the Manager and his uncle to realize that this delay is part of a conspiracy to stall the rescue of the ailing Kurtz who stands a rival agent in the manager's ambitions for supremacy. Cedric Watts thus points out that in *Heart of Darkness* there is an overplot which is apparent involving Marlow's journey up the Congo river and the rescue of Kurtz, and a covert plot which literally plots the prevention of this rescue (Watts, 1982, 73).

These shifts in focus is also supplemented by shifts in narrative time in the novel. While Conrad uses a traditional linear narration of events in Part I of the novel, this chronological structure is sometime abandoned in Part II and III. Thus after being attacked by the natives near the Inner Station when Marlow assumes that Kurtz has died and regrets being denied the chance of hearing him talk, a discourse delivered much later by the ailing Kurtz, which Marlow hears much later in Part II) is instated in this section of the narrative (49-51, 65-66). This use of what can be termed an instance of foreshortening when something is prematurely or dramatically reduced in time or scale, creates here an ironical emphasis and a sense of shock and disbelief in the narrator.

Therefore, much more than his exceptional themes and characters, it is Conrad's experiments with narrative technique that defines him as a modern novelist. This is appropriately confirmed by Virginia Woolf in her notable essay, *Modern fiction* (1919) where she excludes Conrad and Hardy from her criticism of the Edwardian naturalist novelists. The most significant narrative strategy that defines *Heart of Darkness* as a modern novel is Conrad's use of impressionism. In his important book *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* I am well has given this aspect in the novelists work a comprehensive treatment. Watt, therefore mentions that the aesthetic term 'Impressionism was already in circulation when Conrad was writing his major novels; that the French Impressionist painters had also exhibited their work during this period; and therefore, the accepted meaning of the term as a technique involving the pictorial equivalent of the visual

sensation of an individual was probably within' Conrad's area of knowledge. (Kimbrough, 1963, 317)

In friction, Watt states this narrative method, therefore involves an attempt to find the verbal equivalent for the visual and subjective reactions of the protagonist or narrator. This according to Watt, is evident in the definition of Marlow's stories where the imagery of the 'mist' and the 'haze' which contributes to the meaning of the 'nut' or 'kernel' of the tale is basically an impressionist rendering of an event, subject or experience. This also corresponds exactly to Conrad's intentions of giving that sombre theme... a sinister resonance, a tonality of its own a continued vibration that I hoped would hang in the air and dwell on the ear after the last note had been struck." (Kimbrough, 1963). By the time' Conrad began writing *Heart of Darkness*, he had developed a narrative technique which was a verbal equivalent to that of an impressionist painter's method. This is evident in his descriptions particularly in the emphasis he places on the function of light, darkness and shadows in influencing perception and an understanding of reality of the several such instances; the most important seems to be the descriptions of the primeval forest and in impenetrable wall of mist on the river near the Inner Station. When the sun rose there was a white fog, very warm and clammy, and more blinding than the night. It did not shift or drive, it was just there standing all around you like something solid. At eight or nine perhaps, it lifted as a shutter lifts. We had a glimpse of the towering multitude of trees of the immense matted jungle, with the blazing little ball of the sun hanging it all perfectly still-and then the white shutter came down again smoothly as if sliding in greased grooves." (41)

The most distinctively impressionist aspect of Conrad's narrative involves his treatment of characters. As mentioned earlier, most of the characters (including these of the women) have a symbolic role and are therefore functional to some thematic or moral meaning in the novel. Though Watt admits that symbolism and impressionism are mutually exclusive methods, Conrad has made a symbiotic use of these techniques in *Heart of Darkness*. Thus while on the one hand, Kurtz symbolizes all Europe (50), his personality is developed in the novel from opinions and impressions of the other characters much before Marlow actually meets the man. The implication of these several impressions is not only to provide a variety of, sometimes contradictory, views regarding the protagonist, but also to withhold information and create gaps in the portrayal of the person. Thus, Kurtz's character which Marlow tries to piece together into the full substantiality of a man as he travels up the river ultimately remains an enigma like his puzzling death cry and Marlow's decision to bury. Kurtz's ghost with a like. This in fact, is a pervasive element in Conrad's fiction as Terry Eagleton points

ant, “At the centre of Conrad’s works is resonant silence : the unfathomable enigma of Kurtz, Jim and Nostroms; the dark, brooding passivity of James Wait in *The Nigger of ‘Narcissus’*; the stolid opacity of McIlhenny in *Japhoon*; the eternal crypticness of the ‘Russian soul’ in *Under Western Eyes*; the unseen bomb explosion and mystical silence of the idiot Stevie in *The Secret Agent*; Heyst’s non-existent treasure in *Victory*. The absences are determinate—they mark the gaps and limits of the Conradian ideology, represent the hollows’ scooped out by a collision or exclusion of meaning.” (Eagleton 138).

In *Heart of Darkness* these absences of meaning basic to Conrad’s impressionist narrative strategy. For, one of the central statements of the novel concerns the limitations of the human understanding of reality. Marlow’s tale involves an exploration of the difficulties in knowing another individual and the awareness that any understanding of another is strongly influenced by our own subjective characteristics. This uncertainty and doubt which is basic to Conrad’s fiction tends to emphasize that reality is essentially private and individual and any attempt to represent the real remains, therefore incomplete and ambivalent. “He was just a word for me. I did not see the man [Kurtz] in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt because no relation of a dream. Can I convey the dream sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling result that notion of being captured by the incredible which is the very essence of dreams...” (29-2) In his major novels, therefore, Conrad consistently experimented with narrative technique. In fact the modern novel is defined in terms of these narrative experiments and Conrad’s contribution to its development is substantial and significant. In *Heart of Darkness* his use of a character who is both narrator and participant gives the novel the authentic nature of autobiography and also the quality of fiction making it a fictional autobiography. The shifts in time and the narrative point of view suggest multiple perspectives of an event or experience. This also implies that meaning of events is relative and very according to individuals and their nature and preferences. Moreover, Conrad’s use of impressionism is relevant to the experiences and beliefs that are dramatized in the novel. It therefore becomes necessary to emphasize that Conrad’s experiments in narrative technique and not merely formal exercises but the means with which he expresses his themes, ideas and convictions about the world and human existence.



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## 5.4 Sample Questions

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1. Comment on the significance of the title of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.
2. Show how Conrad's experience in the Congo went to influence the theme of *Heart of Darkness*.
3. Examine Conrad's criticism of imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*.
4. How would you explain Conrad's ambiguous treatment of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*?
5. Would you consider *Heart of Darkness* to be the story of Kurtz or that of Marlow. Give reasons for your answer.
6. Discuss Marlow's role as a narrator in *Heart of Darkness*.
7. Analyse *Heart of Darkness* as a novel dealing with the theme of a spiritual journey.
8. Bring out Conrad's use of myth and archetype in *Heart of Darkness*.
9. Critically consider Conrad's experiment in narrative technique in *Heart of Darkness*.
10. Assess Conrad as a modern novelist with particular reference to the *Heart of Darkness*.

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## 5.5 Glossary

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**1. Existentialism** is a name given to a group of philosophical doctrines and ideas found in the writings of Karl Jaspers, Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Existentialists emphasize the importance of individual experience against general theories of human nature. Sartre insists that the individual is the centre of value and has accepted responsibility of his / her choices and actions. These ideas influenced the novels of Sartre and Camus though existentialism did not emerge as a 'school' of philosophy. However, many of these ideas have been used by critics to interpret literary works.

**2. Sigmund Freud** (1856-1939) is considered to be the creator of psychoanalysis, a science, which studies mental ailments and neurotic conditions. Freud's contributions to knowledge regarding the workings of the unconscious mind, the development of the sexual instinct in children and the interpretation of dreams has had a fundamental influence on twentieth-century medicine, anthropology, sociology and literature. Freud used his own theories to write on important literary characters as Oedipus and Hamlet in his book *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). Thus, psychoanalysis has had an important effect on literary criticism.

**3. Carl Gustav Jung** (1875-1961), a Swiss psychiatrist, began as Freud's disciple but later formed his own school of 'Analytical Psychology'. Jung's major contribution was in the study of schizophrenia, the 'collective unconscious' and 'archetype'. Like Freud, Jung was also interested in literature and wrote an essay on James Joyce's *Ulysses*. He, therefore, influenced literary criticism, particularly the use of myth and archetype to interpret literary texts best represented in the writing of the Canadian critic Northrop Frye.

**4. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche** (1844-1900) was a German philosopher and poet who challenged the classical tradition of European thought by opposing rationalist values in favour of man's passions and desires. His important works include *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-92) and *The Will to Power*. George Bernard Shaw used Nietzsche's notion of the superman in his play *Man and Superman* while D. H. Lawrence echoed his doctrine of power in his novel *Sons and Lovers* (1919).

**5. Post-structuralism** challenges the structuralist attempt to view language and literature as a semiotic (sign) system having its own 'grammar' revealing the meaning of a text. Post-structuralists, however, point out that a text may contradict itself and, therefore deny a systematic production of meaning (as in the case of *Heart of Darkness*). Post-structuralist theories developed mainly in the writing of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan.

**6. Colonial** or what is now also termed post-colonial theory was inspired by Edward Said's seminal study *Orientalism* (1978). Said, who had in turn been influenced by Michel Foucault's discourse theory attempted to show how the Orient (and Africa in his book *Culture and Imperialism*) was represented in the literature of the West, a representation which implicitly, affirmed imperialist attitudes. This gave rise to a study of the colonial discourse language of a particular subject or value system) in literary texts. Thus, the text was seen not only asserting imperialist ideas, but also contributing to this enterprise.

**7. Feminist** literary criticism developed from the feminist movement and is involved in revealing and attacking male-dominated values as reflected in language and literature. Together with this primary task, there is also the continuing project of rewriting male-dominated literary history by including and promoting the writing of neglected and unknown women writers.

**8. Psychoanalytic criticism** is mainly derived from the psychoanalytic theories of Freud though it now includes later developments based on the work of Carl Jung and Jacques Lacan. Literary works are thus seen as dramatizations of the author's neuroses; they may reveal repressed desires and fantasies and generally explore the unconscious workings of the individual mind.



9. **Cultural studies**, which developed from the work of critic and theorist Raymond Williams, attempted to challenge the emphasis on form and language in New Criticism and structuralism by placing the study of literature firmly within its social and historical context. Cultural criticism is, therefore sometimes termed New Historicism. Like other material and social productions, literature is seen and analysed as a product of a specific time and place, which, in fact, is one integral to the formation of meaning in a literary work.

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## 5.6 Selected Reading list

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1. Jocelyn Baines : Joseph Conrad : A Critical Biography, 1960
2. C. B. Cok : Joseph Conrad, The modern Imagination. 1974
3. David Daiches : The Novel and the Modern World, 1960
4. A. Guerard : Conrad the Novelist, 1958
5. B. Johnson : A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad, 1969
6. Joseph Conrad : A Collection of Criticism, 1975
7. F. R. Leavis : The Great Tradition, 1979
8. Marjorie Mudrick (ed) : Conrad, A Collection of Critical Essays, 1966
9. Ros C. Murnfis (ed) : Conrad's Heart of Darkness : A case study in Contemporary criticism, 1989.
10. N. Sherry (ed) : Conrad, The Critical Heritage, 1973.
11. Cedric Watts : Preface to Conrad, 1982
12. Benita Parry : Conrad and Imperialism, 1983

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3. Bloom, Harold (ed.) : Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, Modern Critical Interpretations, New York, Chelsea House, 1987 Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer, New York, Chelsea, 2000
4. Eagleton, Terry : Criticism and Ideology, A Study in Marxist Literary Theory, London, Verso, 1978
5. Forster, E. M. : A Passage to India, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1963.

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7. Guerard, A : Conrad the Novelist, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1958.
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9. Kimbrough, Robert (ed) : Joseph Conrad Heart of Darkness, Norton Critical Edition, New York and London, W.W. Norton 1963 (All references to the novel is based on this text).
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12. Said, Edward : Culture and Imperialism, London, Chalco and Windus, 1993.
13. Orientalism, Harmondsworth, Penguin
14. Walts, Cedric : A preface to Conrad, London, Longman, 1982.

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## Unit 6 □ A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man : James Joyce

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- 6.1 A Brief Sketch of Joyce's Life and Works
- 6.2 Joyce and Ireland
- 6.3 The Making of A Portrait of the Artist
- 6.4 A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man
- 6.5 The Stream of Consciousness Novel
- 6.6 Epiphany
- 6.7 Structure / Development of Stephen
- 6.8 Symbolism
  - 6.8.1 Language and Style
  - 6.8.2 Aesthetic Doctrine
- 6.9 Autobiography and Fiction
- 6.10 Recommended Reading

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### 6.1 A Brief Sketch of Joyce's Life and Works

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Joyce was born on 2nd February, 1882 in Rathgar, a suburb of Dublin. He was the oldest among the ten children of John Stanislaus Joyce. Like Stephen Dedalus, James Joyce's immediate predecessors on his father's side were from the city of Cork in the south of Ireland. When James Joyce was born his parents' circumstances were prosperous and when they later moved to Bray, a seaside town in south Dublin, in 1887, his father often indulged in his passion for sailing and inviting friends; the latter brilliantly captured in the Christmas dinner episode in chapter 1 of *A Portrait of the Artist*. But as the family fortunes declined, their properties were mortgaged off and like the Dedaluses in *A Portrait of the Artist*, the Joyce family was continually forced, to move from one place to another.

In 1888 Joyce was sent to an exclusive Jesuit boarding school, Clongowes Wood. Though the school was run on the lines of the English Public Schools, the Roman Catholic religion formed an important part of the curriculum and this Jesuit influence was to remain with Joyce for the rest of his life. But in 1891 Joyce's father lost his position as Collector of Rates in Dublin and he could no longer afford to keep Joyce in Clongowes. After a brief interlude with the Christian Brothers, Joyce joined the Jesuit-run Belvedere College as a 'free-boy' in 1893 and remained there till 1898.

Throughout his school years James Joyce was a victim of his family's declining fortunes and he seems to have suffered shame and degradation because of this.

At Belvedere Joyce's intellect flowered and he soon became popular for his writings. He became interested in all types of literature, especially Ibsen, and his review of Ibsen's play *When We Dead Awaken* published in the 'Fortnightly Review', one of the leading literary journals of the time. Ibsen thanked him for his favourable review of the play. In 1900, with the fee received from the 'Fortnightly Review', he and his father made a trip to London where they were dined by William Archer, the English translator of Ibsen. Back in Ireland Joyce was inspired to write his first play *A Brilliant Career* which he sent to Archer for his comments. Though Archer's comments were not very encouraging, he continued to write poetry and became more interested in prose writing.

In October 1901, Joyce wrote an essay entitled 'The Day of the Rabblement'—a protest against contemporary Irish theatre. This early piece is significant because here he, for the first time, speaks of his idea of the artist as one who must first assert his individual freedom, isolating himself from the multitude—a concept which he was to develop later in *A Portrait of the Artist*. The article was rejected by the editor of the college magazine. Joyce published it himself as a broad sheet thereby gaining wide publicity. As a direct result of this he met W. B. Yeats who helped to promote his literary career.

All this time Joyce was living with his family moving from place to place. He became acutely conscious not only of his shabby surroundings but also of the misery of his homeland. He started to feel that he should leave his country and try to find freedom and fortune on the continent. He had to escape twice. The first few months of his living in Paris ended in April, 1903 when he received a telegram, 'MOTHER DYING COME HOME, FATHER'. His mother died in August and for more than a year after her death Joyce remained in Ireland. That year he sketched out many of the short stories of *Dubliners*, the poems of *Chamber Music* and began to write *Stephen Hero*.

In June 1904, Joyce met Nora Barnacle, a young woman from Galway who worked as a chambermaid in a Dublin hotel. He persuaded Nora to run away with him to Europe and in October 1904 they left Dublin for Zurich, to return to Ireland only on brief visits. He made an exile of himself in Pola, in Trieste, in Rome, Zurich and Paris. Meanwhile a version of *Dubliners* was ready for publication in 1905 but was twice rejected, in London and in Dublin. The book came out in 1914. *Stephen Hero* went through various drafts and emerged in new form as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and was serialized in *The Egoist* in 1914-1915. His sketch of the tale

of a Wandering Jew in Dublin which he began in 1904 became in 1914 his project for *Ulysses*. It came out in 1922 in a limited edition from a Paris bookshop. It was banned in Britain, in the USA and in Ireland. Fragments of his **Work in Progress** were released from time to time during the Twenties and the Thirties. The completed work was published as *Finnegans Wake* in 1939. Two years later in Zurich on 13 January, 1941 Joyce died after an operation for a duodenal ulcer.

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## 6.2 Joyce and Ireland

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In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* James Joyce both accepts and rejects the importance of Irish life that formed him. In Chapter 5 of *A Portrait of the Artist* Stephen declares that the prerequisite to becoming an artist is freedom—freedom from ‘nationality, language, religion’, and by the end of the novel he refuses to serve ‘home’, ‘fatherland’ or Church. He abandons his study of the Irish language, mocks Gaelic sports and scorns the hypocrisy of the nationalists. At the same time he acknowledges the influence of Irish life on him.

“This race and this country and this life produced me, he said. I shall express myself as I am.”

By the end of the novel Stephen understands that as an artist his destiny is to express the ‘conscience’ of his race.

*A Portrait of the Artist* can be read as Stephen’s struggle to come to terms with the conflict between artistic freedom and commitment to contemporary revolutionary Ireland. Himself a socialist, Joyce did not take any active part in politics and gave up his Roman Catholic faith in early youth. In the novel, therefore, Stephen apparently avoids discussion of any of the political themes, though these themes are explored in the course of the novel for their pervasive powerful influence on Stephen’s life. For instance, the Christmas dinner episode in chapter 1 of the novel underlines how religion and politics are inextricably woven into Irish life. By transforming the political figure of Charles Stewart Parnell into a powerful symbolic figure in Stephen’s consciousness, Joyce brilliantly unites the novel’s religious and political themes with the theme of Irish history. Parnell is more than a physical or historical figure; he is Stephen Dedalus’s hero in the novel. Joyce exploits his heroic stature to emphasize the perils of loyalty in public life. In the Christmas dinner section of the novel, a fierce argument takes place between Dante and Mr. Casey regarding the divorce scandal of Katherine O’Shea that led to Parnell’s downfall. Dante’s uncompromising denunciation of Parnell is set against Mr. Dedalus and John Casey’s unwavering loyalty towards the hero. Joyce develops in full the theme of betrayal which was the

cause of Parnell's downfall, how he was deserted by a large majority of his colleagues and was forced to resign. Moreover, as Mr. Casey remembers, the Catholic clergy now turned against him :

“...the priests and the priests' pawns broke Parnell's heart and hounded him to his grave.”

In chapter 5 Stephen refers to the ‘Bantry Gang’, a group led by Timothy Healy, who were originally loyal supporters of Parnell, but later not only betrayed him but also rejoiced in his downfall.

Like Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist* Joyce turns his back on the contemporary Irish scene-cultural and religious. It is interesting to note that it was not a decadent cultural life on which Joyce turned his back. At about the turn of the century, Irish nationalist fervour was rediscovering traditional Celtic life and culture. Writers such as W. B. Yeats, J. M. Synge and Lady Gregory were studying the Irish language and folklore. Many old Irish texts were also being translated for a modern audience. A very strong national theatre thrived, represented by the building of the Abbey Theatre which was to become the Irish Literary Theatre. Yet Joyce found this movement to be insular and regressive. However, Joyce did not reject the Irish literary Tradition Completely. He absorbed whatever he found interesting and used these in his literary works. In *A Portrait of the Artist* Irish cultural interests are often scorned. Joyce claimed that his influence was more distinctly European and Modernist. He acknowledged the influence of a vast range of European writers—Dante, Flaubert, Balzac, Rabelais, Tolstoy and Turgenev. By escaping from Ireland he escaped from the spiritual paralysis of Dublin and was able to imbibe and assimilate a richer variety of cultural forces. Therefore, Joyce exemplifies the myth of the modern; rebellious, fractured journey into the ‘unknown arts’.

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### 6.3 The Making of A Portrait of the Artist

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“Dublin, 1904, Trieste 1914.”

These dates which Joyce placed at the end of the novel do not refer to the ten years of its composition but those ten years between the initial plan to write the account of the life of an artist up to the beginning of the serial publication of the novel in its final form in *The Egoist*. The origins of the novel go back even further—to Joyce's practice of writing and collecting of what he called ‘epiphanies’. The next step came in January 1904 when he submitted an essay, ‘*A Portrait, of the Artist*’ to *Dana*, an Irish literary magazine. The editor rejected it on grounds that it was incomprehensible. ‘I can't print what I can't understand’, said John Eglinton the

editor. However, Joyce's brother Stanislaus suspected that the essay had been rejected partly because of the sexual experiences described in it.

Within a month Joyce started working on *Stephen Hero* which he intended to be an autobiographical novel and into this novel he packed incidents from his own life. This novel was perhaps inspired by Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* which was published in 1903 and which also deals with the growth and development of a young artist and his revolt against social order. For the next three years Joyce laboured over *Stephen Hero*. and completed writing 24 of the 63 chapters he had planned for the novel. Then, in February 1905 he wrote to his brother :

'It would be easy for me to do short novels if I chose but what I want to wear away in this novel cannot be worn away except by constant dropping.'

By September 1907 Joyce abandoned *Stephen Hero* and had selected what was to be the final form for *A Portrait of the Artist*; five chapters containing incidents mostly drawn from *Stephen Hero* but so focussed that each incident would contribute towards his theme, the development of the young artist.

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## 6.4 A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

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*A Portrait of the Artist*, published in 1916, is essentially the story of Joyce's own break with the Catholic Church, with Ireland, and the discovery of his own vocation. It is a landmark in the Joyce canon because it is not only a prelude to the more complex techniques Joyce uses in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, it also significantly breaks away from the mould of *Stephen Hero* which is mostly rooted in the tradition of the nineteenth century novel. When it first appeared, the book met with a mixed response. Many reviewers recognized signs of genius but many considered it to be flawed by the intrusion of irrelevant sections like the sermons and the aesthetic doctrine. It took many years to arrive at a somewhat clearer understanding of the novel and we can now say that the initial difficulties were caused by the appearance of a new type of novel which broke away totally from the conventional novel.

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## 6.5 The Stream of Consciousness Novel

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To understand what makes *A Portrait of the Artist* so significant in the history of the English novel, we must consider what Joyce was attempting when he decided to rewrite *Stephen Hero*. The clue comes from the opening paragraph of the early sketch which was rejected by *Dana* :

"The features of infancy are not commonly reproduced in the adolescent portrait for, so capricious are we, that we cannot or will not conceive the



past than its iron memorial aspect. Yet the past assuredly implies a fluid succession of presents, the development of an entity of which our actual present is a phase only. Our world, again, recognises its acquaintance chiefly by the characters of beard and inches and is, for the most part, estranged from those of its members who seek through some art, by some process of the mind as yet untabulated, to liberate from the personalized lumps of matter that which is their individuating rhythm, the first or formal relation of their parts.”

While writing *Stephen Hero* it seems that Joyce had not found the technique he needed to capture ‘the individuating rhythm’ of that ‘fluid succession of presents’ which constitutes the past.

The technique Joyce uses in *A Portrait* is to show the nature of such ‘presents’ as it impinges upon the consciousness of Stephen Dedalus. It is important to note that Joyce reveals not merely what Stephen apprehends at a certain point of time but how he apprehends it. As the action of the novel moves from one ‘present’ to another, which is actually the progress of the potential artist to his full maturity, the style changes in the quality of Stephen’s apprehension of the world around him. And the style of all the sections taken together reflect the ‘individuating rhythm’ which is Joyce’ portrait of the artist.

William James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) gave currency to the term ‘stream-of-consciousness’ which he used to designate the flow and mixture of all past and present experience in the mind. As a literary technique it seeks to record the random flow of impressions passing through the mind of a character. For Joyce and his generation this technique helped them to break away from the authorial rhetoric of earlier novels. The modernist novel centred on the character itself. Inner thoughts and feelings now occupied the foreground.

Stream of consciousness novels seem to be fragmented, even as out thoughts, emotions and impressions, but there is always an underlying order. Psychological association, rather than syntax or logic, determines the order of elements in the ‘stream’. In *A Portrait of the Artist* Joyce uses a ‘dual consciousness’. Stephen’s and that of a mature narrator. Stephen’s consciousness enables Joyce to capture the intimacy of the first person narrator-recording, observing, experiencing. The consciousness of the mature narrator enables Joyce to retain control of form and to comment indirectly on the subject-matter. This mature consciousness runs parallel with Stephen’s and works to qualify Stephen’s point of view through irony and humour, Upto chapter 4 the irony of the mature narrator is sympathetic towards Stephen and treats his error as follies of youth. In the final chapter when Stephen’s pride, and his approach to what



he perceives as ‘nets’ become clear, the mature narrator’s mocking but sympathetic irony ceases.

It is this narrative method that makes *A Portrait* a shorter text than *Stephen Hero* but it leaves the reader to interpret the subject-matter and make necessary connections. The connected fragments represent Joyce’s ‘stream of consciousness’ technique, also called his ‘free indirect style’. The technique attempts to present Stephen’s mental life by imitating the working of the mind as it recalls ideas and events by a process of association. Stephen’s consciousness has a unifying function in the structure of the novel since the development of Stephen’s mind is both the subject-matter of the novel as also its structure. The ‘stream of consciousness’ here is principally used as a device by which the narrator organises his narrative, round the ‘epiphanies’ which make up the novel. The chief manifestation of this is the selection and ordering of ‘epiphanies’ which are united by their associations through the mind of Stephen.

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## 6.6 Epiphany

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The concept of ‘epiphany’ is crucially important to an understanding of Joyce’s work. The term ‘epiphany’ is usually used in a Christian context to refer to the festival commemorating the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles in the persons of the Magi. (The festival is celebrated on 6th January, the Twelfth Night) Joyce’s concept takes up this religious idea of a ‘manifestation’—a showing forth of the reality of a person or an event to the observer with the suggestion of spiritual insight.

“...manifestations or revelations...little errors and gestures—mere straws in the wind by which people betrayed the very things they were most careful to conceal. ‘Epiphanies’ were always brief sketches...”

(Stanislaus Joyce, *My Brother s Keeper*)

Joyce adopted the term to describe the ‘sudden revelation of the whatness of a thing’, the moment in which ‘the soul of the commonest object seems to us radiant.’ (These “sudden spiritual manifestations may be compared to the ‘sports of time’” described by Wordsworth in *The Prelude*). In *Dubliners*, *Chamber Music* and *Stephen Hero* Joyce employs essentially isolated epiphanies held together in varying degrees of unity. *A Portrait* is a further development in which Joyce incorporates a series of related epiphanies in the form of a coherent narrative. In *Ulysses*, however, an older, self mocking Stephen scorns his youthful reverence for epiphanies.

During his’ days at the university Joyce became interested in writing short prose pieces which he called ‘epiphanies’ : fragments of conversation or narrative by which the soul or essence of a person was manifested. In chapter 25 of *Stephen Hero* Joyce defines ‘epiphany’—

“By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself.”

Therefore, in Stephen’s definition and Joyce’s practice, the term has two meanings. First, it reveals the truth, the intrinsic essence of a person or of something which is observed—in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture.’ Secondly, it reveals a state of mind which is the heightened spiritual elation of the observer’s mind—‘a memorable phase of the mind itself.’ The first meaning emphasizes the ‘object’ and the fact that its reality can be revealed by an epiphany. In *Stephen Hero*, Stephen refers to ‘the clock of the Ballast office’ while in *A Portrait* he says that even a ‘basket’ is capable of an epiphany. The second meaning emphasizes the observer for whom it is a state of spiritual ecstasy. Because of its closeness to the unintelligible nature of religious experience which is difficult to rationalize Joyce uses phrases like ‘fading coal’, ‘luminous silent stasis’ or ‘enchantment of the heart’ to give a linguistic equivalent to such highly rarefied spiritual manifestations.

Such moments are an integral feature of the special rhythm which Joyce sets up throughout the novel. It is important to note in this context the fundamental relation between ‘epiphany’ and Joyce’s idea of time. In the final sections of the novel (the diary) Stephen draws our attention to this deeper implication of epiphany.

The past is consumed in the present and the present is living only because it brings forth the future.

Because each moment partakes of time present and past, and brings about the future *A Portrait of the Artist* is not tied to any strict chronological sequence. The psychological insights of the epiphany open up a new method of organizing the subject matter through the consciousness of Stephen.

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## 6.7 Structure / Development of Stephen

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In the words of Harry Levin, *A Portrait of the Artist*, a volume of about three hundred pages, is

“Symmetrically constructed around three undramatic climaxes, intimate crises of Stephen’s youth... Each epiphany—awakening of the body, literary vocation, farewell to Ireland—leaves him lonelier than the last.”

The first two chapters trace the awakening of Stephen’s religious doubts and sexual instincts leading to his carnal sin at the age of sixteen. The third and fourth chapters, which constitute the central portion of the novel, continue the cycle of sin

and repentance to the moment when, walking on the seashore he sees a wading girl, and realizes his vocation. The final chapter develops Stephen's theories of art and brings him to the verge of exile. It must be noted that as the book advances Stephen's observations on himself and his speculations become much more prominent than outside impressions.

It is clear from the very beginning that the purpose of the novel is to 'portray' the development of the artist's personality from the earliest moment of conscious awareness to the point of complete self-realization. The first chapter represents the child's development from infant awareness to the first assertion of his own identity in an act of rebellion against injustice. It opens with a rich store of associations of Stephen's fragmentary memories of childhood. The story of the moocow is linked in Stephen's imagination of the Byrnes' sweetshop; the memory of his father and mother, the sound of her Piano is linked to Dante and his fascination for Eileen. However, in the first chapter, Stephen's experience is characterised by (i) his striving to escape the reality of school life through imagination and (ii) by moments of realistic suffering.

These moments of suffering also provide the basis of the central crises in each of the major sections of the chapter : the intimidations by Dante, Stephen pushed into the square ditch by Wells, the Christmas dinner quarrel, and the pain and humiliation of the pandying. Though humiliated by the pandying Stephen struggles in deciding whether to see the rector or not; he is tempted to withdraw and escape but asserts himself. By the end of the chapter he is triumphant and alone, yet happy to be so.

The fragmentation in Joyce's narrative technique intensifies in the second chapter, reflecting the disruptions in Stephen's life. The pattern here is an alternation between the increasingly unsatisfactory reality of the world around Stephen and the dream world he constructs in trying to escape from that reality.

Stephen, back home for the last summer in Blockrock before the family moves to Dublin, has to spend much of his time with his senile Granduncle Charles. His freedom is strictly limited and we begin to see Stephen left more to his own devices. The dream world into which he escapes is provided by literature and he spends his evenings reading Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Stephen becomes restless, aware of his approaching adolescence, uncertain of his future, yet aware that he has been singled out for some special fate.

Reality intrudes on Stephen's dream world dragging him back to its shabbiness, and filling him with despondency. Further disappointments follow when he learns that because of his father's financial problems he is not to return to Clongowes. As he wanders restlessly along the street in search of a revelation of his destiny, his escape into sensuality at the end of the chapter is foreshadowed.

Stephen's family moves to poorer quarters in Dublin and Stephen, depressed by his surroundings, becomes even more isolated. At a party he meets Emma Clery for the first time and they walk to the tram where he wants to kiss her but fails. Next morning he writes a poem where he does kiss her. That Stephen turns the experience into a poem is significant. This is juxtaposed with his recollection of a similar attempt on the day after Christmas Dinner to write a poem on Parnell. Unable to write the poem he had written the names of his classmates who did not organize a rebellion against authority. The process of composing the poem becomes significant in the light of his later aesthetic doctrine. His poem omits the details of the scene and the two characters are generalized. It is mainly by a process of reflection on the incident by which he removes the particulars of the scene, abstracting the essential emotion of sorrow. Again, whereas in real life he had failed to kiss Emma, in the poem he is successful : art improves on nature, it compensates for the inadequacies of reality. For Stephen art becomes yet another of many forms of escape in the novel.

Stephen's long holiday ends when his father brings news that Father Conmee, former rector of Clongowes, has agreed to admit Stephen and his brother to Belvedere College in Dublin.

Stephen's revisit of Clongowes helps to reveal the social snobbery that he inherits from his father. In Ireland, upper-class Jesuit education was English rather than Irish in orientation. This factor serves further to isolate Stephen from his cultural roots.

Stephen, at Belvedere, takes the leading role in the Whitsuntide play. Knowing that Emma is in attendance he is bitterly disappointed when after the play, she does not wait. In a flashback Stephen remembers how he was whipped by some boys for refusing to admit that Tennyson was a better poet than Lord Byron because Byron was a heretic. Now, he becomes briefly angry at Heron's impertinent remarks about Emma but submits himself to their taunts.

It is clear that after the victory in chapter 1, Stephen avoids confrontations wherever possible. We learn that in situations of conflict he adopts the tactics of silence, escape and evasion. This gives him a sense of freedom and dignity.

"...he had heard about him the constant voices of his father and of his masters, urging him to be a gentleman above all things and urging him to be a good catholic above all things. These voice had now come to be hollow sounding in his ears."

The price that Stephen pays for this freedom is solitude and he becomes a lonely brooding figure withdrawing from conflict and contact as well. At a children's party, away from the company of other children, he begins to 'taste the joy of his loneliness.'

Stephen accompanies his father on a trip to Cork, where his father sells some

property. At Cork reality forces itself upon Stephen. As Mr. Dedalus revisits his old Haunts and meets old friends, Stephen realizes that he has nothing in common with his father, completing his sense of isolation.

At the university Stephen is horrified to see the world *foetus* carved into a desk. In the epiphany which follows we learn that Stephen is not horrified by the morality of the word 'foetus' but by the realization that he shares the same vulgarity of mind as the student who carved it. He is shocked to discover how ordinary his sexuality is. He is forced to see his own life from the point of view of others and has a harrowing fear about his own ordinariness. Stephen also feels humiliated when his father's friends tease him about girls and say that he will never be his father's equal with women. Stephen's loss of his relationship with his father is expressed by the image of a cold moon shining on the earth.

Stephen, in one last attempt to establish human communication, spends his scholarship money on gifts for his family. When he recognizes the futility of his attempt, he wanders into a brothel quarter and surrenders himself to a prostitute.

Sexuality is the most powerful theme in this chapter which manifests itself in the atmosphere of frustration and brooding unrest. Stephen's sexuality is first projected through his sentimental fantasy about Mercedes and then through his preoccupation with Eileen's smooth white hands and the 'kiss denied'. The climax, is reached in his carnal embrace of the prostitute at the end of the chapter. At the Brothel Stephen reaches another stasis or point of rest in his development. The prostitute seems to be the end of his searching, promising rest and release.

Father Arnall's sermons, with a section on either side, prologue and epilogue, form the structure of chapter 3. It resembles the structure of Dante's *The Divine Comedy* as Stephen travels like Virgil from Inferno (becoming aware of sin and guilt), through Purgatorio (fear of the death of his soul, despair and contrition), to a glimpse of Paradiso (expiation, Mass and Communion). Stephen's moral state shows that his intellect is still subsumed by the bodily appetite. At this stage there is no hint of remorse, and Stephen's familiarity with the ways of the brothel district implies that his visits have become commonplace. He idly contemplates the night's activities during the course of his maths lesson, to which he shows complete indifference. He is equally indifferent to the state of sin in which his soul languishes, and even to the hypocrisy implied in his being a prefect of the sodality of the Blessed Virgins Mary. Ironically, he considers that his being in such a state of sin actually brings him closer to Mary, the refuge of sinners. However, in spite of this indifference, his thoughts continue to dwell on sin and he comes to acknowledge his own guilt. Stephen now is exposed to other deadly sins, particularly, pride. He takes pride in

wrangling, arrogantly scorning his religion and disparaging the faithful at Mass. Pride plays a large part in both his original and later visits to the prostitutes. It is pride which prevents him from acknowledging the superiority of God and making a confession, but it is also pride which eventually makes him repent and then delight in his state of grace.

Stephen's conscience begins to prick him faintly with fear as the Rector announces the retreat. For instance when Stephen returns home after the first day of the retreat, he finds it difficult to stomach his dinner and the congealed—food images combine with references to appetite to stress both his current brutish preoccupation with the body as well as the stirrings of his guilt.

So he had sunk to the state of a beast that licks his chops after meat.

Father Arnall's sermons work again through Stephen's acute imagination, force him to interpret the burden of the sermons as directed personally at himself. The sermons appear to come less from the preacher than directly through Stephen's own mind. Joyce, here, achieves two chief effects. He allows the readers to hear the preacher's words and Stephen's response to them more or less simultaneously. It also helps to set up an intense claustrophobic atmosphere, sharpening Stephen's fixation on the words, words which are Stephen's gateway to reality. He adopts alienation and exile by practising more and more detachment. He becomes poignantly aware of the sins arising out of the senses, and this awareness is significant in the course of his development. For Stephen, the senses have been a source of curiosity and differentiation (smells, temperature, etc.) in chapter 1, and a source of pleasure and sin in chapter 2. Finally Father Arnall's sermons remind him that in hell 'Every sense of the flesh is tortured, and that his sinner's shame will be deepened by the stark realization that his guilt has been discovered by God. This camouflaging and concealment have long been Stephen's strategy, which is further combined with his duplicitous position as a sodality prefect. Stephen is now languishing in the guilt of cunning and self-deception. He interprets father Arnall's Sermon as a dire warning exclusively to himself Ironically, it is his own pride and egotism that can be accounted for this conclusion to a great extent.

Stephen again visualizes death at this point—as he had in chapter 1—only this time his body is less an object of heroic worship than one of revulsion. His imagination conjures up a comic tableau in which Emma is at his side, and they are standing before the benign motherly figure of Virgin Mary, forgiving the two of them. The three of them together, piously recognising the twin medieval aspects of woman, carnal and maternal, is naturally an idealized image of virtue contrasted with her earlier erotic fantasies. The contrast not only points out his wickedness, but also his



awareness of it and his timorous shame, which in turn shows the success of Father Arnall's sermons on his imagination. Not only is Stephen spiritually stunned by the sermons, but also physically convulsed. By the end of the third day he can barely walk from the chapel and he is convinced that his personal destruction is imminent she wobbles back to his room. His response to the sermon begins with his own vision of bestial horror and a bent of vomiting, followed by repentant self-abasement before the Holy Ghost. Gradually his fear is displaced by postures of meek piety and awestruck humility. He is forced to concede to the morality and the credo of the Church, partly because it is all-pervasive and exclusive—at home and at school—but even more, because it is dictated by his conscience. Every word of the sermon seems to be 'for him' simply because the Church has drummed the same words and the same morality into him since childhood. The sermons, therefore, are an externalization of Stephen's conscience at this stage, and of the morality imposed upon it. It is so much that he has been constructing a new moral code for himself, as just trying to break the received one, and in doing so, he is constantly being reminded of it. In due course, the long term effect of this conflict on Stephen will be to make him first analyse and then ultimately reject his religion and its code, but for the time being, his progress is arrested and reverted by it.

The final section of chapter 3 ends with Stephen seeking refuge at home His imagination now populates his bedroom with silent furies and grotesque beats, projections of his guilt and an insight into his private hell. He undergoes Father Arnall's hell in microcosm. But it is neither guilt nor even remorse at his sin which lies at the heart of his change. The cause is not even moral. It is primarily fear—he is cowed by a vision of hell, by the threat of his soul's eternal torture. Eventually he is cowed into seeking salvation in religion though it takes an immense effort of courage to visit the chapel in order to make his confession. Ironically, he makes his way to the chapel along the same labyrinth of dirty ill-lit streets, and under the same kind by darkness in which his 'fall' had occurred. He is directed to a chapel by an old woman, and there his confessor is an old priest, both of them symbolizing the old ways to which Stephen now retreats. Darkness pervades both the Church and the streets on his way back home. At the end of chapter 3 his ecstasy of grace bursts out in rapturous imagery of light and whiteness.

Chapter 4 marks a crucial watershed in Stephen's development, in his relationships with the tandem themes of family and religion and also with what he comes to recognize as his artistic destiny. It opens with images of constraint and discipline and closes with those of freedom, while among its chief concerns are order, power and the Dedalus myth. We can examine it by considering its three principal thrusts;

Stephen's rejection of the priesthood, his attitude towards his family, the epiphany of the ecstasy.

The chapter begins with a list of Stephen's daily devotions. Monklike, he imposes upon himself a strict religious regime, dedicating the days of the week to different devotional areas. He is scrupulous as well as meticulous, allowing no relief and no compromise in his discipline and prayers. Though he recognizes the risks of spiritual exaltation, yet he sets out to mortify each of the senses. Apparently Stephen's devotion may suggest to us that he does have the capacity for selflessness which comes about by denying his own identity, for instance, he pictures himself praying in the Catacombs and sees himself fading out of existence. But all they really show is Stephen's anxiety about himself. They enable him to cope with his ego and they are also a way of locating himself in the world by temporarily ceasing to be himself. At the same time, he does recognize the possibility of love and understands the love of God but, as he admits to Grawly in chapter 5, he is unable to love other people or God and feels remorse that he cannot approach them more closely. This failure of love is one reason for the failure of his religious devotion, as he himself acknowledges :

To merge his life in the common tide to other lives was harder for him than any fasting or prayer...

Another reason for the failure is the extreme zeal itself, whose aims are too absolute to achieve. His inability to punish the senses to his own satisfaction also contributes further to the failure, and yet another factor is Stephen's own suspicion that his prayers are ineffectual either in achieving relief for the souls in purgatory or in quenching his deep pangs of guilt. A more important reason for failure, uniting all these points, lies in the tremendous feeling of power with which Stephen's renewed state of grace endows him : the possibility of yielding to temptation reveals to him the profound power to undo all his efforts. Stephen's interview with the director recalls previous encounters with figures of authority. Stephen is now undoubtedly more objective and more discreet in his attitude towards authority. As he awaits the director he is much less in awe of the occasion, and his exchanges with the director are cautions, polite, indulgent, and above all, non-committal. When the director suggests the possibility of a vocation in priesthood, the idea appeals at once to Stephen's pride, especially with thoughts of power and eminence. First, the idea coheres with Stephen's own partiality for roleplay—he had occasionally pictured himself as a Jesuit priest, silent, anonymous, devout but aloof, selflessly administering the ritualistic functions and offices of the Church. Secondly, he contemplates the priesthood in terms of its power : the privileged status of the Jesuits with their secret knowledge and secret powers. In spite of these inducements, Stephen eventually rejects the offer



of priesthood. It cannot simply be that he has lost his faith. There are several reasons for refusal. One is in the harsh realistic prospect of the coldness and rigour of the Jesuit order which threatens to swallow his pride and individuality. Another reason is the commitment involved, that he would have to remain priest for ever. In either case, there would be no freedom to choose. The question of the priesthood has broadened in Stephen's thoughts to include the question of his very commitment to religion itself.

Though still unaware of any artistic 'destiny', Stephen shrinks from the choking order and discipline of the Church in preference to his own view of life as a third surface of disorder. He embraces the concept of sin and the fall both as inevitable and as proof of his essential humanity. In the disorder of life he discovers a gratifying expression of ordinary humanity, which he acknowledges in the recognition that he is bound to fall. It is a crucial moment in his development, the recognition of human fallibility and the inevitability of sin, and it is the key to the possible future redemption of his artistic spirit. Ironically, the idea of disorder consoles his confused mind as he learns that, whereas in the Church the failure of his possible ideal means death of the soul, in art it is the life's blood, the stuff of everyday living out of which he can make order. Stephen's caution and discreetness with the director and his ability to see through the lure of his proposal portray him as a mature single-minded individual on the threshold of adulthood. He imposes his individuality through the ability to make autonomous decisions with increasing foresight. Stephen leaves his father setting off for the sea, buoyant with pride, convinced of the wisdom of his decision to reject priesthood, excited at the prospect of university. Contrasted with the darkness of the previous chapters, there is a sudden light of elation, paralleling the freedom in Stephen's heart as he strips away the past.

Alone again, Stephen's gaze is caught by the figure of the girl also standing alone in one of the rivulets of the Siffey's estuary, and he is captured by the beauty of this figure—its poise and its softness. Her beauty is girlish, mortal and sensuous. As they gaze long at each other, Stephen is overwhelmed by the sacramental timelessness of the moment, then unable to contain his exuberance, he turns away and races across the sands. She is transfigured by his soul into both the angel of annunciation of his vocation as artist and, at the same time, the embodiment of that beauty which he would strive to capture in art—she is the word made flesh. As he begins to wade into the sea, Stephen recognizes his destiny, in the figure of the girl beckoning to his soul. She is the essence of beauty, the end of art as Stephen defines it in the next chapter. As the epiphany subsides, Stephen is certain of his way forward. His solitude is represented not in terms of loneliness, but in terms of freedom, assertiveness and joy. Stephen is now stronger, wiser, more mature, his vision clearer. A phase of Stephen's

life has become complete, since after this chapter Stephen is already fixed and the emphasis moves away from his development.

The narrative returns to a domestic setting in chapter 5 and ironically to Stephen being washed by his mother at the kitchen sinks, even as she continues to disapprove of the university. Together with succeeding scenes it shows how much Stephen's ordinary life is ruled now by disorder. In spite of this chaos there are still demonstrations of Stephen's attempts to impose order on the intellectual life—for instance, the strict discipline of the aesthetics theory and the villanelle that he composes. Stephen is now engaged in a theory of art and here is also a hint of solitude into which his intellectual life is drawing him. His preoccupation with the intellect makes him a lonely figure, introspective, shunning the company of friends, except in one-to-one situations, where he tends to dominate the listener.

Throughout *A Portrait of the Artist* we see Stephen in a series of major direct confrontations with priests, archetypal figures of authority, which gradually reveal, to us the level of Stephen's development. In chapter 1 he complains to Father Commee and is later betrayed; in chapter 3 he is harrowed by Father Arnall into confessing to another, anonymous priest; but then in chapter 4, he faces up to the director of Belvedere on very nearly equal terms. Finally, in chapter 5, his chat with the Dean reveals himself deferred to as an authority figure. The Dean approaches him for some thoughts on the 'aesthetic question'. Ironically, in *Stephen Hero* when Stephen had prepared his paper to present to the college society, it was the Church, in the form of the college president, which banned him from speaking on the grounds that his ideas contradicted those of the Church. However, in *A Portrait of the Artist* it is the Church, now in the figure of the Dean, which actively encourage Stephen to complete the figure. This episode serves other purposes too, The Dean's loveless eyes are a sharp reminder of the chill order of priesthood which Stephen rejected. In addition, their discussion of semantics and morals operates as a prelude to Stephen's aesthetic theory later in this chapter.

When Stephen formally expounds his theory of Lynch, we see that his ideas are already at a mature stage and cogently articulated. The climax of Stephen's intellectual development in the novel, the artistic theory, is an attempt to form an objective definition of artistic beauty, by placing the criteria for artistic beauty in the object or work perceived, rather than as the Romantics did, by placing them in the observer. In other words, whether or not a work of art is beautiful depends not on the mood, tastes, feelings, or backgrounds of the observer, but on whether the work embodies certain prescribed qualities. Just as the aesthetic theory is the climax of Stephen's

intellectual development, the villanelle which follows it, is the climax of his artistic development. The villanelle is an indication that Stephen takes himself seriously, that his perception of his destiny has some impulse and direction. However, he must mature if he is to succeed and in the hiatus the artistic impulse urges forward for expression. Having abandoned Roman Catholicism, he defines his life's mission as :

...a priest of eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life.

His mission is to express the 'uncreated conscience of my race', to expose the moral paralysis of the lives of his countrymen. In order to become a true artist, Stephen is convinced he must become free of any irrelevant extraneous demands on his attention and on his ideal of art for its own sake. To secure the freedom of pure art he must, ironically, adopt a rigorous self-discipline, 'ironically' because having rejected the rigour of the Jesuits he now seeks a rigour in the order of the artist. Identifying the chief obstacles to his freedom as 'my home, my fatherland or my church', he sets out to overcome their influence using the tactics of 'silence, exile, and cunning.' Stephen's ultimate aim is really to withdraw. Throughout the novel he appears to be involved in a continual process of stripping away, not only of 'nets' but also of people until, near the end of the novel, he is seen talking with Cranly for the last time. Then the diaries take over the narrative as he is left to 'talk' with himself. His search for intellectual honesty and independence is paramount for him and there is no place for friends in it.

In his last conversation with Stephen, Cranly brings out Stephen's attitude to religion and family. Cranly asks if Stephen will compromise his principle of honesty in order to satisfy his mother's religious aspirations. Stephen admits that it would cost him little to make her happy, but adds that he could not compromise his honesty to himself by making a duty he did not sincerely believe in. He is as dogmatic in his rejection of his faith as the Jesuits are in their adherence. When it comes down to a question of duty to his mother, Stephen denies her. Cranly assumes the voice of humanity against Stephen's single-minded preoccupations with freedom and self, a voice which is ultimately rejected through dogmatism and pride. Yet without Cranly's idea of humanity and love in particular, Stephen's artistic development would not advance beyond the effort of the villanelle. At the end Stephen proclaims that he will go out to find experience, to 'embrace life'. By doing this he appears more and more to be isolating himself from the life which ought to be the material of his art and which he promises to embrace. The hell which threatens Stephen is that of loveless solitude. While he turns his back both on Cranly and on his frustrated desire for Emma, and prepares to leave Ireland, solitude looms as the largest challenge to his

sanity. The fragmentoriness of the diaries at the end parallels the nihilistic threats against his reason posed by loneliness.

Reality acutely returns to Stephen with the clamour of birds on a late March evening. Stephen waits alone on the steps of the National Library, happy but uncertain. Convinced that the birds are significant, he is troubled that he cannot read their portent : ‘...augury of good or evil?... symbol of departure or of loveliness?’ Despite anxieties, Stephen finally steps forward to encounter the unknown with defiance : ‘Welcome, O life!’ His prayer in the last diary entry looks out beyond the novel to the future as well as back through those threads of the Dedalus myth woven throughout the novel, which have sustained Stephen’s ambition. Stephen’s development shows not only the uncertainty of his future and the solitude that lies ahead, but also hints at the penalty of overreaching ambition.

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## 6.8 Symbolism

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Symbolism as a literary term refers to suggestive associations in a work of art, giving rise to certain implied meanings. The later nineteenth century writers started using subjective or private symbols that could convey personal and intense emotional experiences and reactions. The essence of a work, therefore, lies in a fuller understanding of its symbolic network and its interpretation. In Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist* symbols are essentially concrete, which by association gain a spiritual significance. Joyce conceives the narrative on two levels—naturalistic and symbolic. The symbolic layer emerges naturally from within the naturalistic framework. The symbolic method is determined by the culture shared by Stephen and the reader and also by the peculiar associations in Stephen’s mind by his earlier personal experiences. The symbolic mode shows the working of Stephen’s mind while the myth places Stephen in a larger universal context.

The most obvious kind of culturally determined symbolism is the use of historical and mythological analogies. When Nasty Roche asks Stephen, ‘what is your name?’ he answers, ‘Stephen Dedalus’. (chapter 1). This name is the source of the mythic analogy which operates throughout the novel. There is a suggestive comparison with St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr who was stoned to death outside Jerusalem in 34 AD, and also with Dedalus, the great pagan artificer. The mode of associating Stephen with these two figures forms a complex pattern of symbolic method working as a sub-text in the novel. Stephen is also likened to Prometheus and this analogy is brought out in the opening section of the novel :

Pull out his eyes  
Apologise,  
Apologise,  
Pull out his eyes

Like Dedalus Prometheus was a rebel and a non-conformist and Stephen, in his association with Dedalus and Prometheus, becomes the archetypal symbol of the rebel. He strives, like the mythical heroes, towards psychological fulfilment and not personal gain. The apology-poem, therefore, poses for Stephen a choice between two alternatives : conformity or destruction.

The same poem is also the source of the first of a series of bird symbols used in the course of the novel. 'Pull out his eyes / Apologise' brings out to the surface the symbol of the eagles. They refer to the eagles of Rome, who were the emissaries of God, the punisher. The eagles evoke a sense of growing guilt and so Stephen is found hiding under the table, awaiting the eagles. The implication of a brutal blinding by the eagles suggests the vengeance of some sort of furies, like those that pursued Orestes in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* for disobedience to authority. The eagles objectify the notion of vengeance which the child's developing consciousness associates with his society.

Birds as symbols of authority continue in chapter 2 when, during the Whitsuntide play Stephen remembers being whipped by some boys for refusing to admit that Tennyson was a better poet than Lord Byron because Byron was a heretic. The symbol of the bird acquires suggestive associations in the name of Vincent Heron. Heron here symbolises civil authority. The fact that because the whipping is read only on the level of boyish cruelty, the symbolic sense is reinforced : that adult society, too, differs little in its inability to distinguish truth from falsehood. The fact that Stephen is beaten for refusing to conform to a non-literary judgement adds another strand to the persecution motif that runs throughout the novel.

Chapter 4 introduces us to a very different bird symbol : the symbol of the seabird. The vision of the girl standing in midstream brings to Stephen's mind the image of a seabird.

"She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird. Her long slender bare legs were delicate as a crane's... Her bosom was as a bird's soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some dark plumaged dove."

Like the seabirds that circle between the sea and the sky, Stephen's soul soars in 'an ecstasy of flight', a metaphor of sexual fulfilment and artistic creation. The

seabirds are a symbol of freedom. The vision of the girl in the water unites all of the previous associations of Stephen's life, transmuting them in an experience that is analogous to ecstasy of the mystic who sees the divine.

In the final sections of the novel we see Stephen standing on the steps of the library,

watching the circling swallows :

“He watched their flight; bird after bird : a dark flash, a swerve, a flash again, a dark aside, a curve, a flutter of wings... They were flying high and low but ever round and round in straight and curving lines and ever flying from left to right, circling about a temple of air.”

Joyce connects this image with lines from Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* and Poem No. XXXV of *Chamber Music*. Stephen recalls the lines in which the dying Countess compares herself to a swallow taking a last look at its nest before it flies away to 'wander the loud waters.' He thus interprets the swallows as 'symbols of departure or of loneliness'. At the same time swallows wheeling in the sky give rise to a sense of ambiguity, something that Stephen does not know. The suggestion is that there is no unalloyed exaltation, that for Stephen there is a fear of leaving the familiar world.

Throughout the novel the secret life of Stephen's mind is chiefly experienced through the symbol of the rose. The green rose in chapter 1 is the symbol of Stephen's Childlike wish, an impossible fantasy. The green rose is replaced by the red rose of passion in chapter 2. Stephen tries to find a fulfilling emotional relationship with Eileen and Mercedes and this is symbolised by the red rose. But in the same chapter the roses in the garden in front of Mercedes' house are significantly devoid of colour.

“Outside Blackrock on the road that led to the mountains, stood a small whitewashed house in the garden of which grew many rosebushes...”

The absence of colour symbolises the undefined boyish desires of Stephen. But at the same time the conflicting colours of the red and white roses in Stephen's arithmetic class show the conflict between the sensual and the spiritual that will develop with his developing sexuality. The white rose in chapter 3 does not satisfy him either. Religion does not satisfy him because his relationship with the Church was born out of the adolescent fear of carnal sin. It is in chapter 4 that Stephen has a vision of the cosmic rose.

“A world, a glimmer, or a flower?”

Glimmering and trembling, trembling and unfolding, a breaking light, an opening flower, it spreads in endless succession to itself, breaking in full crimson and



unfolding and fading to palest rose...”

This vision of the cosmic rose recalls Dante’s vision of the rose in *Paradiso*. Here it becomes symbolical of Stephen’s state of spiritual bliss that comes with realization of the vocation for which he was born.

The Dantesque Rose (symbol of illumination) is combined with the Romance of the Rose (symbol of art) in chapter 5 to symbolise the poetic consciousness of Stephen. These two images of the rose fuse into an image of the Radiant rose, which denotes Stephen’s creativity. In moments of inspiration Stephen’s mind now seems to deepen into ‘rose and ardent light’. He does not have to compose, ideas now come to him fully articulated. Divine illumination comes to Stephen through poetry, and not through religion.

Towards the end of the novel the symbol of the rose takes on a different dimension. As Stephen and Cranly walk towards the township of Pembroke, they hear the song ‘Rosie O’ Grady’. The name symbolically means a very ordinary woman of Ireland, not a Madonna or a Beatrice. To Cranly love is real. Stephen wishes to see the ideal first but Cranly thinks that if one has the inclination to spurn, he will be forever searching. Stephen has found the Rose of Art but as the artist who is alienated, he will never find Rosie.

Joyce’s use of colours in *A Portrait* is ambiguous. Colours are a source of conventional symbolism where ‘green’ stands for ‘creativity’ and ‘fertility’, the colour ‘white’ stands for ‘purity’, ‘red’ for ‘passion’, ‘yellow’ for ‘decadence’ and ‘corruption’, and ‘grey’ for ‘nullity’. When Joyce speaks of the ‘tower of ivory’ and Emma’s ‘white dress’ in the novel, the colour white symbolises purity which, however, changes its implication when associated with the food at Clongowes or cold damp things. Similar ambiguity attends Joyce’s use of the colour grey. A misty greyness invests Dublin with beauty. More generally the colour grey conveys a sense of lifelessness. The prefect of studies has a ‘white-grey’ face and ‘white-grey’ hair to match his ‘no-coloured’ eyes. Greyness associated with rain is continually present in the last chapter as the manifestation of a force in Ireland which “seemed to war with the course of Stephen’s thought”. Thus in the scene of incestuous intercourse which Stephen imagines, the background features a grey lake, grey rainy light and a woman dressed in grey.

Green is an equally ambiguous colour. It is the colour of the bogwater in the swimming pool at Clongowes, and also of the scum that mantles the filthy farmyard pool. At the same time it is the colour of the weeds infesting the derelict fields in which Stephen sees circling demons. Again, on the white legs of the wading girl in

chapter 4, “an emerald trail of seaweed had fashioned itself as a sing upon her flesh”. Green is also associated with the colour yellow, the colour of the gas lit haunts of prostitutes and of horse piss and rotten straw. In fact, what governs the implications of colours in the novel is the context in which they occur, and in particular Stephen’s state of mind. Logically, therefore, the significance of the symbolism shifts in tune with Stephen’s, development. Beyond the conventional, Joyce’s symbols change and take on a variety of new meanings and connotations to suit the naturalistic framework of the text.

### 6.8.1 Language & Style

Modernist artists at the beginning of the 20th century were to a large degree moved to an unprecedented freedom and confidence in stylistic experiment by what they saw as radically new ideas concerning time, consciousness, the nature of knowledge, which were to be found in the works of Nietzsche, Bergson, Freud, Einstein, Croce, Weber and others. And these ideas contested in a dramatic manner the beliefs of the older generation. This revolt against old beliefs which focussed on a ‘transvaluation of all values’ was influenced by Nietzsche. Joyce thought of himself as a Nietzschean and was all for paganism, licentiousness, pitilessness, etc. Nietzsche helped him to sustain his opposition to those totalizing religious and philosophical frameworks characteristic of the 19th century bourgeoisie. Thus Joyce favoured the relativist opposition to the beliefs of the past, its characteristics being pragmatism, pluralism and a sceptical irony. At the same time, however, he saw things as they were, thus extricating himself from the prevailing faith of his contemporaries. He was essentially a solitary experimentalist. By the time he was writing *Ulysses* he had set himself the task of writing a book from different points of view and in as many styles, all apparently unknown or undiscovered by my fellow tradesmen” (*Letters I*, 167) and this stylistic diversity enshrines in him an essential relativist attitude towards the ‘truthful’ depiction of reality. He thus used modernist techniques to adopt a series of rhetorical masks which make us doubt the authority of any particular style in his writing. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* a modern metamorphosis of previous styles, by weaving the mental worlds and the verbal characteristics of Pater, Newman and others into Stephen’s consciousness. As David Lodge writes,

Joyce varied his style to imitate various phases of his hero’s narrative,... declared his secession from the fully renderly mode of narrative, and began his career as a fully-fledged modernist writer.

It is through his style that modernism is implied.

Joyce enters the experimental mainstream of modernism by a distinctive reinvention



of the symbolist experience, as revealed in the epiphanic moments of *A Portrait of the Artist* and its aesthetic theory. So far as his language is concerned, the reader is expected to rationalize his use of language by reference to the great change in assumptions concerning our mental life which was proclaimed by the modernists. This is the essentially post-Freudian assumption that there is an intelligible and revelatory rationale for the association of apparently disjunct ideas. Joyce's withdrawal of the omniscient narrator who frames the reader's judgement, in favour of a particular focussed consciousness, is another characteristic of his modernist style. This exploration of consciousness forced all modernists, including Joyce, into a 'crisis of language'.

In *A Portrait of the Artist* subject-matter and the manner in which Joyce writes are fused. The subject and the style are not separable; in fact subject is the style. And in a sense, Stephen Dedalus is the language of the novel. Joyce modulates his style throughout the novel, using a different style in each section to underline each state in the development of the main character. Anthony Burgess describes the montage of the stylistic innovations employed in the opening pages of the novel as follows :

Prose and subject-matter have become one and inseparable; it is the first big technical breakthrough of twentieth century prose writing and, inevitably it looks as if anybody could have thought of it. The roots of *Ulysses*' are here-to every phase of the soul its own special language; *Finnegan's Wake* must seem, not a wilful aberration from sense, but a logical conclusion from that premise.

Stephen's father in *A Portrait of the Artist* is a natural story-teller and he too feels the need to tell a story in a style appropriate to it. For example, the moocow story or Mr. Dedalus talking of the Wicklow hotel keeper or imitating the nasal tone of Father Conmee-all involve different styles to make the reader see and hear Stephen Dedalus through the narrator's voice.

The opening chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist* suggests simplicity of childhood and this is brought out by use of baby-talk, monosyllables, short, direct sentences, repetition and use of the conjunction 'and'. Stephen's apprehension of the world is limited to sense-impressions and his moral judgments are elementary, for example, people are either *nice*, or *decent* or *mean*. The use of the word *but* is always a pointer to a conflict. Through the use of school-boy slang, like, 'rump', 'stink', 'sent', 'feek', 'wax', Joyce reveals Stephen's naivete and his isolation from the groups who use these words. At the Christmas dinner Joyce adopts a dramatic and impersonal style, shifting from a sympathetic discourse towards an impersonal language. This is contrasted with subjective prose of the previous section, which however, returns towards the end of the chapter. Before the rector enters the room, the drifting nature of Stephen's speculations is emphasized by loose syntax as we have direct sentences

strung lazily together by a succession of conjunctions. The rector's style changes again to the abrupt, brick dramatic mode.

Whereas in chapter 1, Stephen's came into contact with words through the reality of his life at home and school, in chapter 2, the reverse happens. Stephen begins to apprehend reality imaginatively through words and reading :

Words which he did not understand he said over and over to himself till he had learnt them by heart; and through them he had glimpses of the real world about him.

Against this escape into the labyrinth of language, the narrator contrasts vivid descriptions of cheerless reality. The fantasy quality of the language that reveals Stephen's flight of spirit in language collides violently with reality. His imaginative meeting with Mercedes, presented in a parody of sentimental romantic fiction is in contrast to his escape into the streets of Dublin, that involves an objective, explicit style. With the Heron and Tallon episode there is a restraint in the narrator's prose which points to the emotional energy of the first confrontation which rivals and mirrors Stephen's growing distaste for such rivalries and his growing aloofness towards others. The brothel involves a glossy, seductive prose style, a parody of the earlier romantic literature, as Stephen *swoons* into the arms of the prostitute, whose embrace ironically fulfils Stephen's long-suffering romantic ideal. Joyce's use of pulsating vocabulary with suspended sentences and maze-like subordinate clauses points to the frustration that Stephen undergoes. Stephen's adolescence, his first awakening of sexuality and his growing isolation from family—all involve a fragmentariness of styles. These styles rub and collide as the inner worlds of Stephen rub and collide. Joyce's technique sets up a rhythm between the vague inner world of Stephen and the coarse, insistent external reality.

In chapter 3, the Church rhetoric used reveals Joyce's anti-clericalism. The chapter abounds in the repetition of certain key phrases, ideas, diction and imagery, characteristic of the Church. Stephen's inner prose comes to imitate Father Arnall's use of alliteration, assonance and grotesque metaphors. Overwhelmed by guilt, Stephen's feverish imagination concocts images which are filthy and grotesque.

The first section of chapter 4 is a parody of the solemnity of the sermons. Joyce, here, approximates the style of the comic novelist in its ironic tone and detachment. The second section is a discussion of a vocation in the Jesuit order. Joyce presents this in the exquisite style of Newman. The entire section has the poise and dignity of a mature style, without ornamentation or ostentation. In a letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver Joyce writes :

...nobody has ever written English prose that can be compared with that of (Newmen).

The style suitably reflects the cool rational temperament of the Jesuit priesthood. The style swings to the other extreme in the final section of this chapter. From the elegant and restrained prose of Newman, the style becomes exultant, emancipated. The prose becomes rapturous, wild and subjective that marks the triumph of the voice of inner reality. The diction reveals the narrator's concern with emotional states. Joyce employs vivid images, highly charged metaphors and words that try to express direct verbal equivalents of Stephen's ecstasy. To capture the non-rational emotional states Joyce concentrates both on present participles of verbs of activity (like, calling, running, dangling, gazing, drifting) and loose-structure of sentences by breathlessly joining phrase and clause together.

The opening of chapter 5 is marked by heavy, monosyllabic prose. Linguistically, this chapter is characterised by precision and distinguishes between the market-place and the literary use of language.

### **6.8.2 Aesthetic Doctrine**

Hardy's concept of fate or Lawrence's concept of psychological truth and theory of time is different from Joyce's articulation of his aesthetic theory in his novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In case of Hardy or Lawrence, their theories are presented in terms of action, whereas in Joyce, the theory begins when all actions are stopped. Joyce's theory of art is presented through Stephen, in his dialogue with Lynch. The theory appeared fragmentarily in two earlier forms: in Joyce's notes and in *Stephen Hero*. The aesthetic theory is both a key to an understanding of the novel as well as significant in the development of Stephen's character. The length of time and space devoted to the theory shows that it has an important dramatic purpose. It is Stephen's discovery of his individuation, that he is going to be a modernist artist and throws light on what he is going to do in terms of his art.

Whereas in *Stephen Hero* the narrator makes the point that aesthetics is an Unpopular discipline, in *A Portrait of the Artist* this is made dramatically interesting through Lynch, who is bored and punctuates Stephen's lecture by chipping in with sarcastic yet significant remarks. After Stephen finishes expounding his theory, Lynch comments, 'That has the true scholastic stink,' Stephen's theory is rigorous and his arguments are sound. His theory can be divided into two aspects: the definition of beauty, based on the ideas of Aristotle and Aquinas, and the role of the artist in relation to his art, inspired by the ideas of Goethe, Flaubert, Shelley, Ibsen.

A comparison of Joyce's theory with the Thomist sources from which it derives, will reveal that Joyce follows the form of certain principles, but by denying the premises upon which they are based, distorts the meaning. Aquinas does allude to

questions of art and beauty, but only in passing, but Joyce takes Aquinas' definitions of beauty out of their context and interprets them literally. The two statements of Aquinas from which Joyce draws his principles are : (a) Pulcra sunt quae visa placent, Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, 9.5, art 4, (we call that beautiful which pleases the sight) and (b) Bonum est in quod tendit appetitus (the good is that which all things desire). Joyce deduces from Aquinas three main principles : (a) art is stasis, brought about by the formal rhythms of beauty (b) art or beauty, divorced from good or evil, is akin to truth and (c) the three qualities of beauty which correspond to the three stages of apprehension are unity, harmony and radiance.

Stephen begins by defining aesthetic pity and aesthetic terror. Aesthetic pity is something that arrests the mind, causes it to stop and contemplate on what is grave and constant in human suffering. It is an intellectual attitude as opposed to the emotion of human pity. It is an abstract, metaphysical perception of an understanding inherent in the human condition. Aesthetic pity, therefore, connects the observer with the sufferer. Aesthetic terror, in a similar way, arrests what is universal in the human condition and connects the observer with the cause of suffering. Based upon these two aesthetic responses to a work of art, Stephen categorises art as kinetic and static. Whereas static art is an aesthetic emotion that makes contemplation of the mind possible, kinetic art is pornographic or didactic, working merely our responses of desire or loathing :

...to keep away good and evil which excite desire and loathing... means certainly a stasis and not a kinesis.

Stephen, therefore, identifies static art as true art which brings the mind to a rest, raising it above the states of desire and loathing to a state which is satisfied by ideal beauty :

... beauty is beheld by the imagination which is appeased by the most satisfying relations of the sensible.

Closely related to the definition of beauty is the concept of truth. The question of the relation of beauty to moral good or evil leads to the problem of morality in art, a problem at the heart of Joyce's aesthetic creation. Truth to Stephen is

...beheld by the intellect which is appeased by the most satisfying relations of the intelligible.

Thus Stephen arrives at a position where he can claim for true art an immunity from judgements made on moral grounds. The only basis for the judgement of a work of art is purely aesthetic. His aesthetic theory is an objective definition of artistic beauty and truth, and his purpose is to establish beauty in the objectivity of art rather than in the subjectivity of the artist.

Stephen, himself, calls his theory ‘applied aquinas’. He uses Thomistic terms to characterize the three qualities of beauty: *Integritas* (unity), *Consonantia* (harmony) and *Clasitus* (radiance). He takes the example of a basket and goes on to explain to Lynch the proper meaning of these three qualities. *Integritas* or unity is that which separates a thing from all other things and makes it, as Aristotle would say, ‘complete in itself’. It refers to the recognition of an object as a single complete entity, in its wholeness :

In order to see that basket, said Stephen, your mind first of all separates the basket from the rest of the visible universe which is not the basket... you apprehend it as *one* thing. You see it as one whole. That is *integritas*.

*Consonantia* or harmony is the perfect relation of parts to one another and to the whole :

... you apprehend it as balanced part against part within its limits; you feel the rhythm of its structure... Having first felt that it is *one* thing you feel now that it is a thing.

*Clasitus* or radiance, however, is identified by Stephen as contrary to Aquinas—with the scholastic term ‘quidditas’, meaning ‘the whatness of a thing’. It is a quality, Stephen says, that makes a thing to be what it is and no other thing. It is a supreme quality giving an object its uniqueness and revealing its essence. But against Aquinas who claims these three as qualities contained together in a thing of beauty, Stephen makes them successive stages in the mind’s apprehension of beauty. The first stage is ‘synthesis’ or recognition of unity that leads to the second stage of ‘analysis’ or perception of harmony, finally leading to ‘comprehension’ of radiance, at which point the mind has reached a stasis or spiritual state that can be described in Shelley’s phrase as ‘an enchantment if the heart.’ Hence to Stephen, radiance of beauty in the mind’s comprehension of the truth of being.

Stephen’s use of the basket as an example is important as it shows how crude things of daily life are transmuted by the vision of the artist into a kind of ‘organization’, thus creating beauty, and makes it an object fit for contemplation. Appreciation of such an object is an expansion of our aesthetic faculties. Aesthetic satisfaction comes from a stilling of real life motives and actions. There is a moment of rich vacuum and it is filled with perfection. Both involvement and detachment are necessary for this appreciation. Involvement is necessary for responding to an object and detachment helps one to contemplate on larger issues, thus connecting the object to the universal.

Stephen then goes on to divide literature into three distinct forms: lyrical, epical,

dramatic. They are successive stages from the simplest to the most complex. The lyrical stage is an utterance of a momentary emotion, a cry of the heart, and therefore, personal. Stephen defines the lyrical form as

...the form wherein the artist presents his image in immediate relation to himself.

The epical stage prolongs the lyrical, drawing personal emotion into impersonal narrative :

The simplest epical form is seen emerging out of lyrical literature when the artist prolongs and broods upon himself as the centre of an epical event and this form progresses till the centre of emotional gravity is equidistant from the artist himself and from others.

On the dramatic stage the personal emotion has been transferred to characters who assume an independent existence. In this stage the

... personality of the artist.. impersonalises itself. The aesthetic image in the dramatic form is life purified in and reprojected from the human imagination.

Stephen then goes further to draw a parallel between the artist and God :

The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, passing his fingernails.

The complete objectivity of the artist is thus achieved. The artist's function is also seen to be similar to the priest. The artist is priest, his activity spiritual, he touches the soul and reveals a larger vision and this is done through a transubstantiation of ordinary things. Objects are released from the material and gross and are seen through aesthetic contemplation.

Joyce's aesthetic theory is not merely a literary theory, but an inclusion of all values. He does borrow from Aquinas his concept of beauty, but modifies it accordingly. Stephen, himself, confesses :

...Aquinas will carry me all along the line. When we come to the phenomena of artistic conception, artistic gestation and artistic reproduction. I require a new terminology and a new personal experience.

For Aquinas, beauty is an attribute of God. Through the contemplation of beautiful objects, man can reach his end, that is, God. Here lies the chief difference between Aquinas' concept of beauty and the use to which Stephen puts it. Aquinas needed a spiritual satisfaction of beauty. Stephen makes beauty an end in itself A work of art does not direct to anything else. A poem must not mean, but 'be' In its range of experience and capacity to respond, art becomes and end in itself However, while



Stephen's definitions are generally lucid, sometimes his theory appears cold, impersonal and vague. While his theory begins with the disciplined rational empiricism of Aristotle and Aquinas, it fizzles out at a point of 'supreme quality' into a transcendent laze.

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## 6.9 Autobiography and Fiction

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In many of the twentieth century realistic novels we see the novelist focussing his observations upon himself, In *A portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* Joyce transmutes autobiography into objective fiction and organizes his account of a potential novelist from infancy to the moment he realizes that art implies exile in such a way as to emphasize at every point the connection between the artist's objective vision and his consequent and inevitable alienation.

Joyce's method of blending autobiography with fiction may be treated on three levels: Factual, where Joyce draws upon family and social background; spiritual where Joyce characterises Stephen; and intellectual, which culminates in Joyce's epiphany and his aesthetic theory. Both Joyce and Stephen share similar family backgrounds, both belonging to Irish middle-class families with faith in Roman Catholicism. Both come from a considerably large family, with a bankrupt father and a sickly mother, and both also go to the same school and college. In both we find a rejection of the Irish ideals of Roman Catholicism and they both end up being writers. Joyce had a placid childhood but distress entered his life in 1891 when he was nine years old and his father removed him from the expensive boarding school of Clongowes Wood. In the following year the family moved from the fashionable neighbourhood of Bray, where they lived comfortably, to Dublin, where they started living in squalor. The family atmosphere was gradually crowded by anxieties and increasing poverty. The moody temper of his father always dominated his suffering mother, whose devotion demanded only self-sacrifice. Despite this misery, Joyce's temperament was one of vitality and equanimity. Unlike him, Stephen, his fictional representative, is priggish and inflexible. This inflexibility actually belonged to Joyce's younger brother, Stanislaus, who had a black and white moral view. Similarly, Joyce never regarded his father as an object of fun and contempt, which Stephen does, and this is where he once again endows Stephen with his brother's traits.

The most marked characteristic of Stephen is his isolation. On this aspect, Stephen and Joyce are startling contrasts. As a boy and as a young man Stephen had many companions and shared an intimacy with his family. He used to share his literary enthusiasms with his parents. He often asked for his father's approval on the plays he had written. Stanislaus too, was an eager participant in all such occasions. Such

intimate associations are completely absent in Stephen's family. Even his brothers and sisters are mere voices at the tea-table or garden. Joyce's purpose of making Stephen an alienated soul does not allow him to endow Stephen with the deep family bond that he himself shared with his family. Stephen, therefore, remains lonely and companionless throughout the novel. Stephen's unrelieved isolation leads to his rejection of Emma Clery. This rejection is contrasted with Joyce's acceptance of Nora Barnacle as his wife, despite his egotistical principles. Nora worked as a maid in a hotel in Dublin and got married to Joyce in 1931.

The aesthetic theories enunciated in *A Portrait of the Artist* are modified versions of Joyce's theories. The Epiphany explained in *Stephen Hero* is completely omitted in *A Portrait of The Artist*. Similarly, Joyce's devotion to Ibsen, which features largely in *Stephen Hero* as the 'most enduring influence in his life' is mentioned only once in *A Portrait of the Artist*. The aesthetic theories in *A Portrait of the Artist* show their detachment, whereas in *Stephen Hero* they serve to exemplify a revolutionary spirit. According to Stanislaus, while writing *Stephen Hero* his brother's aim was to develop,

... grim realizations that dethrone tyrannical secrets in the heart and awaken in it a sense of liberation.

Such authoritative pronouncements in *Stephen Hero* change to explanatory comment in *A Portrait of The Artist*. While in exile Joyce maintained a journal, *Paris Notebook*. The critical and objective observations which form his aesthetic theory in *A Portrait of the Artist* seem to be lifted from these notebooks. Joyce's aesthetic theory in *A Portrait of the Artist* enunciates how modern individuation lies not in choosing an unusual profession, but in choosing an alternate set of values. Once he makes this choice, man has made his value Judgment. In *The Fall* a successful barrister turns into a tramp, but Camus does not present this as a failure. The choice of the subject-matters, and Joyce's narrative technique reveal a value judgment. Stephen does not emphathize very easily with others. In being uncompromising, he is being an idealist. Joyce portrays Stephen as an individualist who is essentially against all continuities; as one who will not pay the debts of his forefathers. Such an active operation of the intellect and an insistence on the subjective choice of values, make *A Portrait of the Artist* an intellectual autobiography.

'O Stephen will apologize', his mother assures the neighbours at the opening of the novel. We must beware of reading *A Portrait of the Artist* as Joyce's own apology. Just as Gabriel Couroy in 'The Dead' is not James Joyce, but a character governed by an aspect of Joyce's Character, namely his complacency, similarly Stephen is not identical with his creator, except for one aspect of his character, that is, egoism. It



is, therefore, not *the* portrait, but *a* portrait, one of the several possible renderings of the original material. This egoism is never explicitly mentioned, but is ironically presented in an extended and developed application of the narrative method that Joyce takes up in the course of writing *A Portrait of the Artist*.

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## 6.10 Recommended Reading

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1. Ellmann, Richard : *Life of James Joyce*.
2. Levin, Harry : *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction*.
3. Kenner, Hugh : *Dublin's Joyce*.
4. Walton Litz, A. : *The Art of James Joyce*.
5. The Pelican Guide to English Literature, Vol. 7—The Modern Age.

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## **Unit 7 □ Wüthering heights**

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### **Structure**

#### **7.0 Introduction**

#### **7.1 Emily Brontë : The Formative years/objective**

##### **7.1.1 The Brontës : Their Background**

##### **7.1.2 Emily Brontë**

##### **7.1.3 The Juvenilia**

##### **7.2.1 Background to Wüthering Heights**

##### **7.2.2 Social and Economic Conditions in the early Nineteenth century**

##### **7.2.3 The Industrial Revolution and Social Transformation**

##### **7.2.4. Publication and Early Reviews of Wüthering Heights**

##### **7.3.1. Narrative : Problems and Technique / Objective**

##### **7.3.2. The Narrative : Problems of the Narrator**

##### **7.3.3. The Narrative Scheme of the Novel**

##### **7.4.1 Heathcliff : hero or villain? / objective**

##### **7.4.2 Hero or villain?**

##### **7.4.3 Heathcliff : The Byronic Leniage**

##### **7.4.4 The influence of the Gothic**

##### **7.4.5 Suffering and religious**

##### **7.5.1 Catherine : Objective**

##### **7.5.2 Catherine**

##### **7.5.3 Wüthering Heights and the problem of Harrioge**

##### **7.5.4 The second Generation**

#### **7.6 A Brief survey of the critical History of Wüthering Heights**

#### **7.7 Questions**

#### **7.8 Bibliography**

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### **7.0 Introduction**

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**Wüthering Heights** is Emily Brontë's only novel. Over the years it has entranced readers with its story of the passionate love of its protagonists Catherine and Heathcliff.

Heathcliff is dark and mysterious in origin; his actions are unexpected and inexplicable. Catherine is the beautiful, 'wild and wilful' heroine, torn apart by the conflict between her love for Heathcliff and her marriage to Edgar Linton. Her suffering is caused by the inability to reconcile the pull of her heart and the social bonds of marriage.

Long considered one of the finest novels in English, **Wuthering Heights** defies ready categorisation. The characters and events are strange and unfamiliar and do not correspond to common, everyday logic. The realms of reality and unreality, the normal and the abnormal, the human world and the non-human are hazily demarcated. We feel as if we have entered a twilight zone where normal certitudes do not prevail. At one level, with its story of youthful passions and its tragic outcome, it exudes an almost fairy-tale quality. At another level, it is a grim tale of power and passion, love and hate, enmity and vengeance, property and inheritance. The compelling story that the novel unfolds, its ends and means have been endlessly discussed and disputed. Is Heathcliff a villain or a hero? How do we understand the loving relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff? What are the different values associated with the two houses Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange? How reliable are the narrators Nellie Dean and Lockwood?

How does Emily Brontë explore the themes of oppression and victimisation, power and helplessness? Is peace truly won at the end of the novel?

The immense popularity of the novel has evoked various critical responses. The wide variety of interpretations has helped us to explore various levels of meaning. This complex novel challenges a definitive interpretation. The best way of reading it may be to keep ourselves open to the various readings the novel has to offer. A close reading may open up new insights into the novel.

I have divided our study of the novel into the following units. Remember it is essential to read the novel closely to follow the guidelines.

#### 7.0 Introduction

#### 7.1 Emily Brontë : The formative years

#### 7.2 Background to **Wuthering Heights**

#### 7.3 Narrative Technique

#### 7.4 Heathcliff : Hero or Villain?

#### 7.5 Catherine

#### 7.6 A brief survey of the critical History of **Wuthering Heights**

#### 7.7 Questions

#### 7.8 Bibliography

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## 7.1 Emily Brontë : the formative years

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### 7.1 Objective

In this unit we will look at the formative years of Emily Brontë. You may wonder why a detailed biographical discussion is necessary. The Brontës did not lead a conventional social life and the circumstances of their childhood, the early loss of their mother, made the children dependant on their own resources. Of the Brontë children, Emily was the most reclusive and very little information about her personal affairs is available. An overview of the formative years she shared with her siblings will perhaps enable us to understand the enigmatic personality of which we know little beyond the one published novel.

#### 7.1.1 The Brontës : Their Background

Emily, the fifth child of Reverend Patrick Brontë was born in Thornton on December 20, 1818.

As the son of a poor Irish peasant, Patrick Brontë's origins were humble and rustic. For a time he worked as an agricultural labourer, then was apprenticed a blacksmith and finally became a school teacher under a university educated clergyman, Reverend Thomas Tigbe. The rigours of an industrializing country and declining opportunities for rural and agricultural work caused many Irishmen to migrate to England in search of work in mills and factories in cities like Mauchester and Liverpool. Patrick Bronte migrated to England, but instead of seeking labour in mills, he went to St. John's College, Cambridge to get a degree and become an ordained minister of the Anglican church—an extraordinary destiny for the son of an Irish peasant.

#### Growing up in Haworth

In 1820 Patrick Brontë was appointed lifetime curate of Haworth and the family moved to Haworth parsonage on the Yorkshire moors. Early accounts perpetuated the idea of Haworth as a remote and isolated moorland village—as Mrs. Gaskell in **“The Life of Charlotte Brontë”** put it—“wild, oppressive, bleak, lonely, isolated”. But in fact Haworth in 1820 was a flourishing industrial village, and one of the most rapidly developing areas of Industrial England was on its doorstep. Haworth contained several weaving mills, besides industries associated with spinning, wool-combing and quarrying. In the wider township, farming was a common livelihood with annual livestock fairs. It had a small number of middle class families consisting of professionals such as clergymen , surgeons and quarry owners. A modest social and cultural life in which the Brontës participated centred round their father's profession.

Patrick Brontë spent a considerable part of his limited income to educate his children in the liberal arts. He believed passionately that a good education could transform lives as it had his own. Moreover, as he had no income other than his clerical salary, he was anxious that his children should be capable of earning their own living. Books were available to the children from their father's small library, from their neighbours, private collections and from other libraries in town, notably the Keighley Mechanics' Library. They read voraciously whatever they could lay their hands on, including Aesop, Bunyan, Scott, Byron, Shakespeare, Ossian, Arabian Nights, Blackwoods Magazine, newspapers such as the Leeds Intelligence, The Leeds Mercury, John Bull, Mr. Brontë subscribed to both Tory and Whig newspapers which the children read avidly and discussed contemporary political, social and religious issues among themselves and with their father.

During their early years, the Brontës were educated by their father. Formal instruction was supplemented by afternoon walks on the moors. These offered an opportunity for practical lessons in the natural sciences. Evening sessions were devoted to recitation and talk—oral lessons in history, biography, travel. Such methods of instruction, far removed from the dull parrot-learning and recitation of grammar and lists of geographical and historical facts which were the staple diet of early nineteenth century education, stimulated the Brontës' imaginative faculties but did not prepare them for the rigours of school life. Patrick Brontë's influence on his children was crucial to their development as individuals and novelists. He made no attempt to censor their reading and though their instruction was not formal, it was eclectic, widespread and invigorating to the imagination. To his children he transmitted his interest in the natural world and books on ornithology, gardening and zoology were among those in his personal library. To them he also handed his love for Romantic literature. Patrick Brontë himself had published several tales and poems which preached a moral lesson and were intended for the edification of his parishioners.

In **The Life of Charlotte Brontë** Mrs. Gaskell portrays the Brontë children as victims of an abnormal childhood and upbringing, exiled from civilization, society and friendship, ruled over by an eccentric, tyrannical and egocentric parent. She could not have been more wrong. Mr. Brontë was a generous and liberal man, actively engaged in social and political activities beyond his duties as a cleric. His apparent eccentricity was rooted in practical reasons. His unorthodox methods of education was inspirational to these clever, imaginative children. Haworth parsonage was a vibrant home, a place of powerful intellectual activity. Each of the Brontë sisters was unhappy away from home and anxious to return there.

### 7.1.2 Emily Brontë

Emily Brontë's life was in some ways the ordinary life of a nineteenth century female. As a child, only four years old, she was sent to join her sisters at the Clergymen's Daughters school, Cowan Bridge (the 'Lowood School' of Charlotte Brontë's **Jane Eyre**). Her two elder sisters Maria and Elizabeth returned home to die in early 1825 and when the school suffered a typhoid epidemic later in the year, Emily and Charlotte were withdrawn. In 1835, she went to school again at Miss Wooler's School at Roe Mead, to obtain the rudiments of an education, but returned home after three months as she fell ill. At home she learnt such domestic skills as sewing, cooking and bathing. From all accounts she enjoyed these domestic chores and was more adept at these skills than her sister Charlotte. She was skilled at playing the piano. She tried a brief stint as a governess. Emily Brontë was not enamoured of school education and never good at book work. Both as pupil and as teacher, she found school work immensely restrictive after the liberty she enjoyed at home. Growing up on the moors was different from growing up in London where most of Brontë's readers lived. As Charlotte Brontë explained, city bred gentlemen and ladies hardly knew what to make of the rough strong utterance and harshly manifested passions of the "unlettered moorland hinds and rugged moorland squires". The moors were "grand", Gaskell noted "from the idea of solitude and loneliness which they suggested". But they could also seem "oppressive" from the feeling which they give of being pent up by some illimitable barriers. Emily Brontë obviously responded to the grandeur of the moors. They inspire her poems and one loved with intimacy by her heroine Catherine.

### 7.1.3. The Juvenilia

Patrick Brontë fostered in his children an intellectual passion and love of literature. Mr. Brontë was a poet himself as well as a great story teller. His children seem to have picked up his intellectual tastes quite precociously, developing their own games, storytelling, playacting and adventure writing. The most famous of these storytelling activities began when Mr. Brontë brought home a box of toy soldiers for his son. This released the extraordinary imaginative energy of the Brontë children. Each child chose a soldier, determined his name and character. These characters became actors in a series of games which became steadily more complex. Emily called her soldier "Gravey" because he looked grave, and later changed it to Parry after the Arctic explorer captain Edward Parry. Though she was at their time only eight years old, she began to invent adventures that involved her soldier. These adventures were written down and made into tiny manuscript-books. This imaginary world filled with fair

haired queens, dark heroes, politics, war, private love affairs was sustained for nearly twenty years between 1824 to 1845. The children split into pairs. Charlotte and Branwell produced “Glasstown Chronicles” which later became “Tales of Angria” and Emily and Anne produced their own independent saga of Gondal. The surviving Brontë Juvenilia have been examined and discussed by Faunce E Ratchford in her book “The Brontë’s Web of Childhood” (the title comes from Charlotte Brontë’s poetic account of these literary activities “we wove a web in childhood”).

The epic cycles which the Brontës depicted were culled from their narrow experiences and wide reading. The Gondal stories have survived only in fragments. The poems of Anne and Emily from this cycle allow us to deduct something about Gondal. Unlike the king who commanded the fancy of his elder siblings, Emily’s Gondal was a feminist royalist realm with a dominating fair-haired woman of absorbing beauty and charm who brings all men to her feet. These Romances were enacted in countries with recognisable geography in West Africa and the Northern Pacific. In 1844 Charlotte discovered some of Emily’s poems that encouraged her to send them for publication. The volume of verses by the three sisters came out in 1846 under the pseudonyms of Ellis Currei and Acton Bell.

Emily’s personality is difficult to formulate. All the Brontë daughters shied from social contact, though, after the death of her sisters and their attainment of celebrity, Charlotte Brontë had perforce to fraternize with the London literati. From the few facts available, Emily Brontë seems to have been a woman of remarkable reserve and self-sufficiency. Her intellectual capacity cannot be questioned but she was also content with a retired domestic life. Ellen Nussey, Charlotte Brontë’s friend, describes her as “intensely lovable, yet commanding respect, even awe”. As a writer she was at home in the private world of fantasy as well as the familiar world of everyday activities.

The Brontës grew up in the second phase of the Industrial Revolution, during the development of full-scale capitalisation and of continuous and intense class conflict. The connections between Emily Brontë’s life and the historical world in which she wrote are important and necessary to challenge the conventional view of Emily Brontë as an isolated and eccentric genius. Their lives were unique in that they were a combination of the orthodox and the uncommon.

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### **7.2.1. Background to Wüthering Heights**

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#### **7.2. Time chart**

The following scheme charts the developments of the age and places against it the parallel events in the life of the Brontë family and the incidents of the novel

between 1757 and the death of Emily Brontë in 1848. This will help you to place the action of **Wüthering Heights** within the time-frame of the larger social and historical context.

Dates	Historical Events	Events in the Novel	Chronology of the Brontë's family
1757	Burke's <b>philosophical enquiry into the origins of the sublime and the Beautiful</b>	Hindley Earnshaw is born	
1769		Edgar Linton is born	
1764		Heathcliffe is born.	
1765 Summer		Catherine Earnshaw is born. Isabella is born	
1767	James Harvey invents the spinning jenny—marks the beginning of revolution in the production of raw materials in textile industry centred at Liverpool and Manchester.		
1771		Heathcliff comes to Wüthering Heights as a child of seven. Hidley is fourteen.	
1775		Death of Mrs. Earnshaw.	born Patrick Bronte in
1777		Death of Mr. Earnshaw	Ireland, county Desri
1778		Birth of Hareton.	
1780		Death of Mr. Linton	
1784 Jan.		Heathcliff marries Isabella.	
20 March		Catherine binton born	
„		Catherine (mother) dies.	



Dates	Historical Events	Events in the Novel	Chronology of the Brontë's family
Sept. „ 1789	Blake-Songs of Innocences and Experience. The French Revolution; rise of Napoleon	Linton Heathcliff born. Hindley dies.	
1797 June	Wordsworth and Coleridge publish <b>Lyrical Ballads</b> .1801 edition published with the famous preface which became the manifesto of Romantic poetry	Death of Isabella	
1798			
1801		Cathy marries Linton Heathcliff. Death of Edgar Linton.	
1802 March		Death of Heathcliff.	Patrick Brontë enters St James college, Cambridge
1803		Cathy marries Harton.	
1805	Battle of Trafalgar	End of Wüthering Heights	Patrick Brontë becomes clergyman of the church of England
1814	Jane Austen <b>Mansfield Park</b>		Maria Brontë (eldest daughter) born.
1815			born-Elizabeth Brontë
1816			born-Charlotte Brontë
1817			born Patrick Branwell Brontë

Dates	Historical Events	Events in the Novel	Chronology of the Brontë's family
1818 30 July			Emily Brontë born at Jharuton
1818	Mary shelly <b>Frankenstein</b>		
1818-20	Keat's <b>Odes.</b>		
1819-24	Byron's <b>Don Juan</b>		
1820	<b>Shelley's Prometheus unbound</b>		Family moves to Haworth death of Maria + Elizabeth Branwell gets toy soldiers
1829	Invention of steam engine by Stevenson		
1832	First Reform Bill		
1835			Emily Bronte returns home from RoeHead as pupil
1837	Victoria becomes Queen		
1838	Beginning of Chartist movement		
1842			Emily and Charlotte go to study at Pensionnat Heger to improve their qualification as school teachers
1845	Anti Corn Law Agitations Corn Laws repealed		Emily Brontë begins <b>Wüthering Heights</b>
1846			Poems by Currer. Ellis and Acton Bell <b>The Professor</b> and Agnes Grey completed by mid-year Charlotte begins <b>Jane Eyre</b>

Dates	Historical Events	Events in the Novel	Chronology of the Brontë's family
1847			<b>Wüthering Heights</b> and <b>Agnes Grey</b> accepted but no publisher for <b>The Professor</b> <b>Jane Eyre</b> published 19 October <b>Wuthering Heights</b> <b>Agnes Grey</b> published December
1848 21 Sept 19 Dec	Publication at Karl Marx's <b>Communist Manifesto</b>		Death of Branwell Brontë aged 31 Death of Emily Brontë aged 30.

### 7.2.2. Social and Economic Condition in the Early Nineteenth Century

The seventy-five years between the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth, was a time of social and economic change in England. This was the time when both England's industry and its empire were being established. As empire expanded, English imperialism acquired global power, but closer at home was the distressful picture of a country in the thirties of rapid industrialisation, where the onslaught of the factory system of manufacture was putting an end to the older feudal and agrarian way of life.

Industrialisation brought its concomitant ills of poverty, disease and death in slums and industrial towns. For a large section of the displaced rural population which had shifted to cities in search of work, this meant inhuman living conditions and life in dingy slums. Unhealthy living conditions were made worse by primitive sanitary arrangements. Rudimentary health care led to squalor and disease. Poor wages combined with dismal working conditions gave rise to simmering discontent among the working classes. Men, women and children were compelled to work in hazardous situations for a pittance while factory owners and captains of industry enjoyed the comforts and wealth arising out of industry.

You might like to read in this connection 'Dickens' novel **Hard Times** which is a satire on the system of industry and factory owners. Mrs. Gaskell in **North and South** and **Mary Barton** also gives moving pictures of the problems associated with the initial stages of industrialisation. Centres of urban growth fostered disease like

cholera, typhoid and tuberculosis and led to many deaths, mostly among the poor. Infant and childhood mortality was a way of life. In **Wüthering Heights** Frances, Isabella, Edgan, Catherine and Linton Heathcliff all die of unidentified diseases. The two elder Brontë daughters Maria and Elizabeth died when they had barely crossed the threshold of childhood of unspecified fever caught while they were living away from home at the school for Clergymen's Daughters. Emily Brontë herself died of tuberculosis when only thirty years old, as did her sister Anne.

Food riots were a common occurrence during this period. More specific working class protests led to the Luddite Riots between 1780 and 1820. Arising out of trade fluctuations, these riots further accentuated the misery of the working classes. Gradually, collective awareness of these issues initiated a more connected movement by disgruntled workers and conscious protesters. These agitations ultimately paved the way to the **First Reform Bill of 1832** and the **Poor Law of 1834** and ultimately the beginning of trade unionism. The **Chartist movement** between 1838 and 1848 marks the period when England came close to a revolution. In 1848, the publication of **The communist Manifesto** by Karl Marx provided a vindication of working class movements by furnishing acceptable theoretical basis for their struggle.

It is interesting to recall Patrick Brontë, relevance to these times. Like many Irishman he had left his impoverishead peasant life and immigrated to England. He elevated himself educationally through a Cambridge degree and socially by joining the clergy. As a clergyman, too, Patrick Brontë was keenly aware of his social and political environment and was actively involved in the issues of his locality. Through articles in papers and personal effort and involvement he tried to improve the insanitary conditions which prevailed in Maworth, though his own parsonage was better than the town. He encouraged his children to familiarise themselves with the current issues of the day through the many newspapers they read. They would debate and discuss these with their father as moderator.

### **7.2.3. The Industrial Revolution and Social Transformation**

One of the major fallouts of the process of Industrialisation was the changed character of society and the creation of new social classes with conflicting economic interests. Industrialism brought with it fundamental social changes and transformed the lives of men beyond recognition. For a large section of people it altered their way of living from an old agrarian and feudal pattern to one dictated by the terms of the new industrial world of factories and machine production. While the lives of all ranks of society felt the change, all were not transformed in the same way. Those who were least transformed were also those who benefited most in material terms. This further

led to a moral contentment so that they were often unable to perceive the problems affecting a large section of the populace or to do anything effective about it. To this category belonged the British aristocracy and the gentry who were very little affected by industrialisation except for the better. Rising rents, expansion of cities, mining, building of railways all added to their coffers. Even in bad agricultural years they were unlikely to feel the pinch. The Church, the English universities, and professionals such as lawyers, civil servants, too continued to live secure lives cushioned from the explosive changes surrounding them. Novelists like Charles Dickens attacked these institutions often savagely but to little apparent effect. For the merchant class, often involved in overseas trade and the rising new business class, the industrial revolution brought no major changes. On the contrary they formed part of the powerful and prosperous world wide framework of trading which was the basis of British power. The great mass of men rising from modest beginnings to business affluence and the labouring poor below them, were moving into what came to be recognised as the “middle class” a class largely successful and satisfied.

The suffering majority comprised the labouring poor whose traditional world and means of livelihood the Industrial Revolution destroyed. The poor cash wages they received for work was unsupplemented by pre-industrial peasant holding to or craft workshops. Coupled with this was the monotony, routine and hazards of industrial work and the traditional industrial ethics of extreme struggle and ruthless competition for material prosperity.

Do the problems arising out of industrialisation have any bearing on our study of **Wüthering Heights**? At first glance the worlds of Wüthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange and their inhabitants seen cocooned by the moors far removed from the larger world. If you have read the novel, you will remember that the story of the Earnshaw household begins with Mr. Earnshaw going to Liverpool on business. Liverpool and Manchester were the hub of industrial activity at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Mr. Earnshaw brings home gifts for the children and presents his wife with Heathcliff “the gift of God”, from the streets of Liverpool. Later in the story, Heathcliff, wounded by Catherine’s remarks disappears from Wüthering Heights. He returns one evening, an indefinite time later, altered in appearance and announcing himself as a person from Gimmerton, surrounded by an aura of well being. From this point Heathcliff is a prosperous man. Nelly tells Lockwood—“He has, nobody knows, what money and every years it increases”. True, we do not know the source of this wealth. Nelly’s suggestion of his having been in the army, hardly seems a plausible source of his money. The possibility of trade or business could have furnished quick money in a short period.

For the Victorian reader, the story of Heathcliff could well be within imaginable transformation during the social upheavals of the 1830s and 1840s. They knew about Unemployed textile workers who burned power looms to protest against loss of work; they watched working class Chartists agitate for the vote in massive urban demonstrations; they saw hundreds of hungry Irish refugees pouring into English ports to escape a potato famine that starved thousands to death. Heathcliff, a foundling from the port of Liverpool, represented to Victorians a common enough social problem; that he should rise to wealth and status by dint of his own efforts was also a familiar feature of the day.

A critical debate surrounds the question as to whether historical context should provide the basis of interpreting **Wüthering Height**. The question whether Emily Brontë's vision is social and historical or spiritualist and transcendent recurs frequently in critical studies. She was less explicitly historical in her writings than her sister Charlotte whose novels address such contemporary issues as women's education, church politics, labour movements and strikes. But **Wüthering Heights**, too is rooted in historical context. Brontë's heroine marries Linton for financial security and social status like any Victorian woman pressured into marrying well over marrying for love. Modern readers also need to know the eighteenth century marriage law that made it possible for Linton Heathcliff and then his father to take control of Catherine's real and personal property. In his Marxist analysis of the novel, Terry Eagleton shows how fiction is rooted in, without being reduced to, specific social conditions. He finds in the Brontës' work a "pre-industrial creative activity" and "the felt pressures of a drab spiritless society." Similarly, Nancy Armstrong reads **Wüthering Heights** as a product of and a producer of its culture. The regional features of **Wüthering Heights** an aspect of the novel and in the nineteenth century regionalism was being commodified. Other critics of course downplay or even deny the usefulness of historical analysis.

#### **7.2.4 Publication and Early Reviews of Wüthering Heights**

The Victorian age saw a prodigious output of printed materials. Among these, the novel enjoyed the greatest popularity with the ever-increasing reading public. An author's books usually found their way into the hands of the publisher by several methods. There were the three-decker compact volumes, the usual format for novels from about 1830. Novels were written to fit the three-volume format, so that some novels were as well structured as a three act play. As novels were quite high priced, few people actually bought them, usually accessing them through the numerous circulating libraries. Novels were also published in two volumes but a one-volume

publication was rare. Another method of publication was the serial magazine publication, but the form most popularized with the publication of Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* was the part-publication of fiction. Usually a monthly part was thirty-two pages and the work was completed in twenty monthly parts.

**Wüthering Heights**, Emily Brontë's only novel, was published in December 1847 along with her sister Anne's shorter work, **Agnes Grey**. Many stories surround the publication and early reception of **Wüthering Heights**, some true, some apocryphal. One true story explains how the three Brontë sisters each wrote a novel and sent their manuscripts to London publishers, hoping their work might appear together. Charlotte Brontë's novel, **The Professor**, was not accepted, and for a time **Agnes Grey** and **Wüthering Heights**, though accepted, lay unpublished with the publishers. In the meantime Charlotte Brontë wrote **Jane Eyre** and sent it for publication. It received instant attention and was published in October 1847, under the pseudonym Currer Bell. Almost overnight the momentous success of **Jane Eyre** caught public attention and hastened the publication and production of **Wüthering Heights** and **Agnes Grey** in December 1847 under the pseudonyms Ellis and Acton Bell. After the deaths of Emily and Anne Brontë, Charlotte brought out a new edition of **Wüthering Heights** and **Agnes Grey** in 1850. In a biographical notice of Ellis and Acton Bell attached to this edition, Charlotte Brontë accused literary critics of failing to do justice to Emily's novel. "The immature but very real powers revealed in **Wüthering Heights** were scarcely recognised," she wrote—"its import and nature were misunderstood, the identity of its author misrepresented". This, however, was not quite the fact.

Early reviewers of **Wüthering Heights** between 1847-48 were perhaps amazed and baffled by a literary work which did not fall comfortably into recognised categories. By this time, the novel as a literary genre was beginning to acquire a certain respectability. Some novels were of course only "entertainment", but in a "serious" novel the reader expected to be led to a moral understanding which they counted on to be beneficial. **Wüthering Heights** did not go unrecognised, but though its early readers and literary critics repeatedly acknowledged its originality, its genius and imaginative power, they also complained about its moral ambiguity.

A reviewer for **The Spectator**, a nineteenth century literary journal, praised Emily Brontë's execution as "good", her delineation of incidents as "forceful and truthful". **The Athanaeum** noted the novel's "power and cleverness (a phrase echoed by **The Examiner**) but stamped the story "disagreeable". Words like "powerful" "original" "strange" appear frequently in early reviews of the novel—as if critics recognised the novel as an exceptional and compelling book but could not quite



figure out how to interpret it. “We are spellbound” said the reviewer for the **Literary World** “we cannot choose but read”. The problems which seemed to confront the reviewers, they labelled as its “coarseness” and “confusion”. By modern day standards, the accusation of profane language in the dialogue seems surprising, but to many nineteenth century readers, specially puritanic Americans, the language seemed corrupting. Even plot and character came under this ‘moral taint’ in its obsession with evil and diabolic behaviour. Novels, they argued, should depict positive aspects of humanity. We can see how these led to further criticisms of the novels “confusion” and “wildness”. By “confusion” critics refer both to the difficulty of disentangling the incidents and setting them forth in chronological order. They meant also that the novel was “morally confused”, that it failed to give a clear message.

“There seems to be a great power in the book, but a purposeless power.”

“The Villainy does not lead to results sufficient to justify the elaborate pains taken in depicting it.”

Such critics were clearly troubled by their inability to discover the meaning of Emily Brontë’s text—specially a meaning that coincided with their sense of social morality or poetic justice. Already by 1850, they are beginning to formulate versions of the questions we ask even today—what is **Wüthering Heights** about? What does it mean? How should one interpret it?

Charlotte Brontë was among the first to propose some solutions to these questions. To complaints of the novels “coarseness” Charlotte pointed out that her sister was not a town dweller, but “a native, and nursling of the moors” and accurately reproduced “the rough, strong utterance, the harshly manifested passions... of the unlettered moorland hinds and rugged moorland squires among whom she grew up. She also suggested that as the inspired artist, Emily had worked “passively under dictates (she) neither delivered nor could debate.” Thus she suggested the Romantic idea of Emily Brontë as an inspired artist. This idea has influenced various kinds of later twentieth century criticism. In her 1850 preface, Charlotte Brontë pointed to more immediate sources of her sisters inspiration. These were “tragic and terrible” tales told by the local villagers. She pointed to “their ways, their language, their family histories”. From the search for these sources, we arrive at various historical, biographical and cultural approaches to the novel.

By the end of the nineteenth century **Wüthering Heights** was already being held as a work superior to that of her sister Charlotte, and open to a serious critical gaze. It was on the way to gaining recognition as one of the greatest English novels. Since then, inspite of the multiplicity of responses which explore the minutiae of its creation,



the influences working on it, the various aspects of its meanings, the biographical niceties of the author and her environment, the novel which critics have called “the sphinx of English literature” still retains something of the mystery and impenetrability which is part of its romantic appeal.

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### 7.3.1 Narrative : Problems and Technique

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#### 7.3.4 Objective

Narrative presupposes a narrator, a story the storyteller. We begin **Wüthering Heights** by asking who tells the story, then how it is told. The ways in which a story is told may be manifold. It may be a simple recounting of incidents like a tale. It may be told by a single person or by many. Novelists have experimented with ways in which to tell their story. The narrative of **Wüthering Heights** has drawn diverse responses and reactions because of its striking experimentation with narrative technique. In this unit we will look at the ways the author has used narrative technique to manipulate and enrich the overall effect of the novel.

The story is set in the desolate moorlands of Northern England, at the end of the eighteenth century. It covers a period of about forty years. The core of the novel is the doomed love of Catherine and Heathcliff—a story of love, hatred, ferocity set in an almost Gothic world. From the outset, the author creates a degree of critical distance from the action by using an uninvolved narrator. Lockwood is a newcomer from London who records the story in his diary. As you read the story, you will notice that Lockwood and Nelly’s narration of past events is interrupted several times by the daily life around them. Thus the actual time-span between the opening of the narrative and the final events covers about nine months. The actual incidents covered by the story is about forty-five years (see the time chart in UNIT 3.3). This creates a troubled and distorted sense of time. The date with which the novel begins helps to anchor the story in real time and fixes it in historical time. The chart in UNIT 3 gives an idea of events happening in the real world where the happenings of the fictional world are set. The scheme of the story given below will help you to follow easily the events in the complex narrative.

#### 7.3.2. The Narrative : Problem of the Narrator

The first chapter of **Wüthering Heights** begins thus “1801. I have just returned from a visit to my landlord—the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with. This is certainly a beautiful country.”

The speaker is Mr. Lockwood who introduces us to his “landlord” Heathcliff and

the strange world of *Wüthering Heights*. This initiates us to the way the novelist has chosen to tell the story. The chosen narrative method strongly influences our response to the imaginary world created by the novel. The essence of narrative art lies in the relationship between the teller and the tale. Broadly speaking, there are three ways in which a story may be told, firstly, it may be told by a central character, that is, a first person narrator. **David Copperfield** and **Jane Eyre** are novels of this type. The presentation is subjective, and this can add veracity and immediacy to the narrative, but it also sets a limit on the reader because he / she experiences only one character's story or point of view more intensely than that of any other. The story may also be told through an impersonal narrator or the authorial voice who speaks from outside the story, yet who knows all about what is happening or about to happen. The technique of the omniscient narrator is used, for example, by Henry Fielding in **Tom Jones** and by George Eliot in her novels. Narrative also involves an audience who can be a character within the story or someone outside it, the characters within the story are also involved in the way the narrative is structured. Sometimes the author also needs to be distinguished from the narrator of the story.

Before we think of the role of the narrators, the author steps into the scene. The novel was first published with the pseudonym of Ellis Bell, so we are confronted with this unknown entity who can be thought of as the principal narrator. Charlotte Brontë, in the preface to the 1850 edition of **Wüthering Heights** explains the reason for the use of the device of a pseudonym a ploy that is intrinsically fictitious. You will remember the nature of the reaction which **Wüthering Heights** had provoked among the reading public and literary critics. The Brontë sisters realised that the contents of their works were very different from the writings of contemporary women novelists and that readers might react adversely to these works. In the Biographical 'notice' of Ellis and Acton Bell, 1850 by Currer Bell, Charlotte Brontë writes :

“...Averse to publicity, we veiled our own names under those of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell; the ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because—without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called ‘feminine’—we had a vague impression that authoresses were liable to be looked on with prejudice.”

So, the pseudonyms were adopted to disguise their feminine identity as well as shield their eyes from public gaze.

One of the reasons why so much interest has been generated by **Wüthering Heights** is because the narrative technique is like that of a modern novel. The emphasis in the text is as much on the devices of story feeling as on the story itself. I hope

you have read the whole novel by now. If you observe the way the story is recounted you will notice that there is no first person narrator yet every word is spoken by a character in the story. The author's presence is deliberately withdrawn. This device combines the objectivity of impersonal narration with the felt experience of first person narration. The authoritativeness of the omniscient narrator is absent and the first person narrators are neither the hero or the heroine, so we do not form a special or intimate relationship with them.

The first word of the narrative is "I", but this perspective is that of Mr. Lockwood. What is our first impression of the Lockwood? When we listen to a story we wish to empathize with the storyteller. Is Lockwood a storyteller in whom the reader can repose his trust and establish a rapport? He comes from London. He is an outsider, unfamiliar to the life and mores of the Yorkshire locality where the story is located. The substance of the story is not his own experience. Neither does he give us a clear understanding of the central character, Heathcliff. In fact, he is puzzled and confused by him, but is impelled by curiosity about Wüthering Heights and its master. On the first evening his childish grimaces at the dogs unleash their fury and bring the pack to his throat. He is enchanted by young Catherine's beauty and makes fatuous remarks to her. He blunders his way in trying to fathom her relationship to the inmates of Wüthering Heights. He is nothing like an all knowing narrator, nor one in whom the reader can repose his trust and confidence. However, he carries the reader with him in the attempt to unravel the strands of the plot and place the events in sequential order to make sense of them. Though Lockwood's story is engrossing (the dream or nightmare and the uncovering of the diary notes heighten the reader's curiosity), the reader's response to Lockwood is, at first, somewhat tentative.

Lockwood's role as a narrator is not consistent throughout the novel. When he begins to narrate the story, he is something of an innocent who is exploring his way into an unknown territory. At the end of the narrative he visits Wüthering Heights once more after having spent six months in London. He is now thoroughly informed about the families and will not make silly gaffes about relationships or dead rabbits. During his first encounter, Wüthering Heights had seemed inexplicable and mysterious. At that time he was an actor, a character in the action like any other character. During Nelly Dean's narrative his role changes to that of a passive listener like one of us and this role is sustained through the greater part of the novel. At the end, when Lockwood once again meets Catherine, he is in the position of a privileged character, with knowledge about all that has happened since. In his conversation with Catherine and Heathcliff (Ch31) he makes this clear. So how does his function as narrator appear in the opening chapters and at the close? It appears that his role as narrator

shifts with the shift in narrative. Lockwood tells us about events in present time, starting with the year 1801 and ending with 1802. Within this time frame the events he reports could be terrifying and awful like his dream or the stuff of ordinary life like the story of Hareton and Catherine. Events of the past are narrated by Nelly Dean and are sometimes natural and ordinary or strange and baffling. At the end of the narrative Lockwood is now equipped with knowledge that clarifies our understanding of people and events. Thus Lockwood's role as narrator changes from what it was at the beginning. This technique of shifting narratorial role suggests that the relations between fiction and real life are unsettling and complex. While the natural inclination of the narrator Lockwood is to explain and account for everything in rational and naturalistic terms, there is also another tendency which rejects only the naturalistic explanation as inadequate.

The greater portion of the story is narrated by Nelly Dean. In contrast to Lockwood, she is an insider who has been present through nearly all the events that are narrated. She takes the reader close to the action of the story. She had been the servant, alternatively of the Earnshaws and the Lentons and has intimate knowledge of the central characters. Her story is meant primarily for Lockwood, who transmits it to the reader in Nelly Dean's own words, interposing sections and comments in his own voice. Nelly's narrative is always of the past. The effect is to distance events into the remote past while the corresponding effect of Lockwood's narrative is to draw the reader into a near and familiar present.

Lockwood, then, is the enclosing frame who begins and ends the story, while Nelly narrates the major line of the story. In contrast to Lockwood she is of the locality and in contact with its life and manners. As a woman we presume she is better able to gauge the emotional content of her narrative, which is vivid and detailed. Nelly's narrative prose is dramatic and colloquial and is able to convey a sense of immediacy. Through her continuous presence she plays several roles in the course of the action. Firstly she is both an actor in and a witness to what happens in the story. More importantly, she acts as confessor to both Heathcliff and Catherine. To her they lay bare their closest thoughts, doubts, misgivings. This lends depth to character by allowing the reader a glimpse into their innermost self. At such moments of soul-searching or laying bare their intimate thoughts, Nelly's presence is subdued almost to invisibility and she does not interpose herself as narrator between the reader and the action. Yet at other moments her presence and perspective are important.

One memorable scene is her "catechism" of Catherine. Nelly's function here is that of Catherine's conscience. Edgar's proposal leaves Catherine in a dilemma. Nelly listens to her protestations of love for Edgar and shows that what she feels for

Edgar in mere fancy in comparison to the emotion she nourishes for Heathcliff. Catherine herself indicates through dramatic gestures (Chapter 9, 119) that the obstacle to the marriage exists both in her head and her heart. Nelly acts as a sounding board for Catherine, though she later acts in a headstrong manner against Nelly's better judgement and advice.

How far do we accept Nelly's narrative at face value? By this time you will have understood that no narration can be totally dispassionate. Nelly and Lockwood are very different characters who offer, disparate perspectives on what they see and experience. Critics point out that each narrator is involved in an attempt to interpret, analyse and evaluate the strange, mysterious and unfamiliar events that occur in the course of the novel. As readers too, we are involved in this endeavour at interpretation. The narrator can offer insight into these occurrences, we may endorse these insights or disregard and discard them as erroneous. So as readers, too, we are also judging the narrators.

As an example of divergent responses to the same event seen from the perspective of two narrators, we can examine Nelly's attitude to Heathcliff in chapter sixteen and Isabella's account of the same occasion in chapter seventeen. Nelly recounts Heathcliff's response to Catherine's death. He has been watching motionless all night in the park from where the activities in Thrushcross Grange can be perceived. He looks almost like a lifeless statue as she approaches and does not need Nelly's communication to tell him that Catherine is dead. He brushes aside her offer of sympathy and would appear to be unmoved though "his whole being trembled with inward agony inspite of himself to his very finger ends." When he reacts, he is violent, vehemently passionate. He curses and prays that Catherine may not rest as long as he is living. Nelly reports how the strong hold on his passion's cannot be contained as he bursts into a paroxysm of grief "he dashed his head against the knotted trunk, and lifting up his eyes, howled, not like a man but like a savage beast, getting goaded to death with knives and spears." (Chapter 16, p. 204)

Nelly's sympathy for Heathcliff colours her narrative as she describes how he learnt against an old ash tree his hat off and his hair soaked with dew"; how "he held a silent combat with his inward agony."

"Poor wretch", I thought : "You have a heart and nerves the same as your brother men! Why should you be anxious to conceal them?..."(chapter 16, p. 203)

Let us now turn to chapter 17 where Isabella returns to the Grange and recounts her encounter with Heathcliff the evening after Catherine's death. Nelly's pity draws forth tears of sympathy from her eyes. Isabella's antagonism towards Heathcliff

allows her to perceive and narrate every look and gesture with dispassionate detachment, almost gloating over his consuming and overwhelming grief. It is from Isabella that we learn about Heathcliff's reaction to Catherine's last illness and death. We discover that ever since he learnt of Catherine's illness he has been a stranger to meals ("whether the angels have fed him, or his kin beneath I cannot tell; but he has not eaten a meal with us for nearly a week"). On the day she died he had been praying since dawn ("locking himself in and playing like a methodist" ...till he grew hoarse and his voice was strangled in his throat... he would be off again; always straight down to the Grange".) He returns to the Heights after her death and Isabella describes his state.

Her description is graphic but utterly devoid of even an iota of compassion.

"His forehead, that I once thought so, manly, and now think so diabolical, was shaded with a heavy cloud; his basilisk eyes were nearly quenched by sleeplessness and weeping, perhaps, for the lashes were wet then; his lips devoid of their ferocious sneer, and sealed in an expression of unspeakable sadness. Had he been another, I would have covered my face in the presence of such grief. In his, case, I was gratified. I couldn't miss this chance of sticking in a dart."

Throughout the novel, Emily Brontë juxtaposes contrasting perspectives. The primary function of the two principal narrators is to keep the story grounded in reality. As a narrator Nelly is both an asset and liability. On the one hand, we can see her as a yardstick of normalcy; on the other, her moral and conventional religious sentiments colour her point of view. As one who nursed the children in childhood she also harbours a sense of self-importance and authority. As an active participant she too is liable to errors of judgement or a biased outlook on persons and events. In chapter twelve, for instance, she speaks self-deprecatingly of her earlier complacency which had failed to foresee Catherine's genuine illness, presuming it to be merely simulated and fall-out of her rage, and concluded that Catherine would soon see good sense.

"I went about my household duties, convinced that the Grange had but one sensible soul within it and that lodged in my body" (Ch. 12 p. 158). She confesses over and over again, her bias against Catherine ("I own I did not like her and rather relished mortifying her vanity now and then").

We cannot therefore, readily agree with Charlotte Brontë that "Nelly is a specimen of true benevolence and homely fidelity". The reader will always have to sift through Nelly's narrative to perceive the ultimate reality. The technique of multiple narrators perhaps suggests that reality is too complex to be pinned down to only one perspective.



Critics have viewed the narrative technique of **Wüthering Heights** as a story within a story that is disentangled by undoing one layer after another. This has been called the Chinese Box design. On the outermost layer is the narrator Lockwood who enters from the bitter cold outside into the warmth of the health at “Wuthening Heights though he receives no warm welcome. Later he is forced to stay back and is sent to Catherine’s bedroom to stay the night. He finds her diary and as he reads this he unravels the past of Wüthering Heights and enters into the mind of Catherine. So Lockwood’s entry is both physical into the house and through Catherine’s diary, into the past of Wüthering Heights, He enters through physical spaces into the spaces of the mind. When he goes back to Thrushcross Grange, the suspense he encountered at the Heights is gradually filled in by Nelly’s recapitulation of the past. Nelly’s narrative is frequently interrupted by Lockwood as they interact with each other to judge and comment upon past events. Thus past and present are interwoven in a complex shift of time and space. This back and forth movement between the past and the present in which Nelly and Lockwood evaluate the events each has witnessed brings into play and allows the reader to savour certain ironies in the novel.

The many narrators from Ellis Bell to Lockwood, Nelly, Heathcliff, Catherine, all contribute to the complex narrative. But just as there are many speakers, there are many listeners too. Nelly, the confidante of both Heathcliff and Catherine transmits to the story much of what they have told her. Isabella’s letter tells Nelly about her ruinous marriage. Lockwood is Nelly’s chief audience and enclosing all these listeners is the consciousness of the reader.

Nelly is the leading eyewitness to the story of Catherine and Heathcliff. Through their queries, comments, confabulation they try to make sense of the story which is transcendental, complex, and beyond the understanding of common men. Many early critical readings of Wüthering Heights also work along this line in their attempt to impose a meaning to the central relationship in the novel. These critics also read the novel’s structure as a series of polarities or binaries. They regarded the novel as the creative expression of these polarities between nature and civilization, calm and storm, intuition and reason, heaven and hell, day and night, order and chaos and such like. Both the narrative structure and the form of the novel heightened this sense of polarity.

Further study of the structure and technique of the novel is suggested by deconstructionist analysis. Deconstructionist criticism contends that one cannot make a final judgement to determine the truth about anything. The structure of the narrative deflects the reader from arriving any truth about **Wüthering Heights**. Another criticism emanating from the same school of criticism is based on an analogy with picture

frames. A picture frame draws attention to what is within the frame but also suggests the existence of certain areas outside the frame. The viewer sees clearly what is within the frame but is conscious at the same time that something is being excluded. The outermost, frame in **Wuthering Heights** is located in the time scheme of the Nelly-Lockwood interaction in which Lockwood is entertained by Nelly with the story of Wuthering Heights. The innermost frame is the story of Catherine Heathcliff. The narrators are the framers. Because they shape what the frame encompasses and what it excludes, it is arguable that they cannot be totally objective. The deconstructionists suggest that since Nelly and Lockwood control and modify so much of the narrative, the reader is at liberty to question the degree of authenticity of the narrative. Heathcliff and Catherine do not or cannot narrate their tales (except in Catherine's diary) so we can never know their point of view of events. Their story in this Nelly and Lockwood's version of the story. It is suggested that by using them as framers, the story of Catherine and Heathcliff is brought within the confines of normal social and moral experience. They try to impose meaning and order in a relationship that lies essentially beyond normal parameters of societal experience.

### **7.3.3. The Narrative Scheme of the Novel**

#### **Chapter 1**

1801 Lockwood the new tenant of Thrushcross Grange begins his narrative. His host Mr. Heathcliff is very unwelcoming and ungracious. In second visit (ch 2) he meets Heathcliff's beautiful but unfriendly daughter-in-law Catherine Linton and her raffianish cousin Hareton. Lockwood makes several errors about the relationship between these persons. Though unwelcome he is compelled to stay at Wuthering Heights due to a snowstorm.

**Chapter 3 :** Lockwood spends the night in Catherine's bedchamber and discovers her diary. The reader through Lockwood reads Catherine's diary. Lockwood narrates his dreams and unwillingly witnesses Heathcliff's anguish.

**Chapter 4 :** Nelly Dean begins her tale to Lock wood who is laid up due to told on his homeward journey. She, full, tells him how Heathcliff came to the Heights.

**Chapter 5 :** Heathcliff and Catherine are drawn to each other as playmates and partners in mischief.

**Chapter 6 :** Death of old Mr. Earnshaw Hindley becomes the master of Wuthering Heights and banishes Heathcliff to the kitchen. Catherine and Heathcliff's first encounter with Thrushcross grange.

**Chapter 7 :** Catherine returns from the Grange.



**Chapter 8 :** Nelly continues with her story.

**Chapter 9 :** At the end of the chapter. Lockwood observes that Nelly glanced at the time-piece over the chimney and seeing it was very late, the story-telling is suspended for the time being.

**Chapter 10 :** Lockwood, not feeling well enough to read, asks Mrs Dean to 'finish her tale', Nelly continues, as Lockwood urged, from the point where the "hero had run off" and the heroine got married.

**Chapter 11 :** Isabella, Edgar's sister, is infatuated with Heathcliff. Catherine, Heathcliff and Edgae.

**Chapter 12 :** Quarrel violently and Catherine falls ill, Isabella elopes with Heathcliff.

**Chapter 13 :** Nelly reads out Catherines letter to Linton in which she recounts events after her marriage to Heathcliff.

**Chapter 14 :** Nelly resumes her narrative, ends with the visit of Dr Kenneth to see Lockwood.

**Chapter 15 :** Lockwood approves Nelly's style of narration and considers her a fine narrator. She resumes. The last meeting between Heathcliff and Catherine.

**Chapter 16 :** Nelly narrates the birth of the second Catherine and the death of her mother.

**Chapter 17 :** Isabella ruins away from Wüthering Heights, arrives at Thrushcross Grange and narrates her sufferings to Nelly.

**Chapter 18 :** Nelly continues as narrator and begins the story of the second generation.

**Chapter 25 :** Nelly brings us to the present as the events of the last chapter had happened only a year back. She had not expected to the telling the story of Wüthering Heights to a stranger. Lockwood wishes to know more about Catherine's daughter Cathy. Nelly narrates the events of the past year.

**Chapter 30 :** Nelly's story ends. These is a gap of six months which Lockwood decides to spend in London.

**Chapter 31 :** Lockwood recounts his visit to Wüthering Heights.

**Chapter 32 :** Begin with a date—1802. Lockwood visits Wüthering Heights again after about a year after learing the Grange. Meets Nelly who recounts the sequel to Heathchiff history. Nelly narrates the events of the interviewing period. Lockwood ends the narration with a visit to Heathcliffs grave.

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## 7.4.1 Heathcliff : Hero or Villain?

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### 7.4.1 OBJECTIVE

Heathcliff is really the central problem of **Wüthering Heights**. Our evaluation of him determines our sense of what the novel is about. Is he the hero of the novel? He never does anything good or noble in conformity to our orthodox ideas of the hero in a novel. His story is a long list of morally deplorable acts. He is seen as an incarnation of evil qualities and is a potentially subversive character. A common assessment of Heathcliff is that, like Macbeath, he is a villain-hero, a hero in the first part of the novel and a villain in the second. This ambiguity about his character makes him more attractive at a time when the Byronic hero and the Gothic romance were popular trends in fiction. In this section we will try to see why, inspite of the way the dice seems loaded against him, the reader is reluctant to condemn him outright. Despite all his ‘diabolical’ actions, our response to him tends towards sympathy.

### 7.4.2. Hero or Villain?

Who and what is Heathcliff? This question is asked by Nelly and Isabel. You will notice that we seldom get a direct presentation of Heathcliff. Like most of the characters in the narrative he is seen through the prism of Nelly’s vision. He is seen as a force acting on others, and we have to pay close attention to his effect on others if we wish to fathom the mystery of Heathcliff. What is this force that play’s havoc with the lives of two families?

The mystery around him is introduced at the outset of the novel with his entry into the Earnshaw household. He is brought home from Liverpool by Mr. Earnshaw who says he found the boy starving in the city streets. He presents the child to his wife as “a gift of God” adding “though it’s as dark as if it came from the devil.” From his arrival Heathcliff is associated with discord and distress. Darkness, physical and metaphorical, is associated with him. Hindley cries at his arrival, because, in sheltering him, his father has broken the violin Hindley had asked for, Catherine’s reaction is more violent—she kicks and spits at the intruder. Though he is named after Earnshaw’s dead son, he is not given the family name and therefore remains an outsider to the family and society. His name evokes suggestions of the heath—larren primitive, pagar and pre-christian. Nelly says of him “He bred bad feeling in the house.” Heathcliff, the ‘brat’ from Liverpool, has neither name nor position, nor status and introduces are an element into the Earnshaw household. Hindley sees him as a rival for his father’s affection and his own position as heir. Accordingly he hates him.

Nelly refers consistently to the child as “it: (sixteen times in one page-see page 78 chapter 4) denying Heathcliff a human status. He is treated with callous indifference and even outright cruelty. Nelly and Hindley tellingly express their hostility and repugnance in words like “plagued” ‘hated’ ‘hardened’ “wronged” “imp of Satan”. As an outsider who threatens the tight knit family structure of relations and potentially imperils the pattern of inheritance and possession, he is subjected to purposeful acts of cruelty and injustice. So at first Heathcliff is not the instigator, but the recipient of injustice. Terry Eagleton in **Myths of Power** says, however, that Heathcliff is not the cause of friction in the Earnshaw household as is generally supposed. The friction always existed at a subterranean level. Heathcliff is merely the catalyst that brings to the surface.

Even in these early days a bond has been established between Heathcliff and Catherine. “She was much too fond of Heathcliff”, Nelly tells Lockwood Heathcliff’s friendship offers her freedom and equality. With the death of Mr. Earnshaw, Hindley takes over as master of the house and Heathcliff becomes the object of his implacable resentment. Absorbed in his newly wedded wife, Hindley is entirely negligent towards his orphaned sister and both are allowed to run wild and promised fair to grow up as rude savages” Here is the birth of the central issue of the novel, the relation between Heathcliff and Catherine which begins in these wild wanderings to bloom into “a fertile imaginative liason.”

Heathcliff and Catherine’s introduction to Thrushcross Grange, following their adventures on the moor (chapter 6) is a watershed in the novel. To Catherine’s eyes opened to the splendor of a new world, Linton appears in every way superior to the sullen, morose, ignorant, unamusing Heathcliff. Edgar Linton possesses those graces of civilized life in which Heathcliff is totally lacking. He is charming, handsome, urbane, and Catherine is impelled to respond to qualities she had not encountered earlier in any man. The difference between Edgar Linton and himself is brought home to Heathcliff when he overhears Catherine confide to Nelly her acceptance of Edgar’s proposal of marriage. However, she recognises that Linton does not respond to and cannot relate to the innermost part of her nature where her identity with Heathcliff is unquestionable (“He’s more myself than I am”). She persuades herself that she loves Linton and their marriage, socially acceptable, would bring her domestic happiness, whereas her attachment to Heathcliff can only end in disaster and degradation. Tragically, Heathcliff does not wait to hear Catherine’s expression of love for him, having disappeared into the night to be heard of no more for two years.

During this absence. Heathcliff has reinvented himself from a sullen, oafish boy into a “tall, athletic, well-formed man [who] looked intelligent and retained no marks

of his former degradation.” (Chapter 10, 135) However, traces of the old Heathcliff are seen in “A half-civilized ferocity [which] lurked yet in the depressed brows and eyes full of black fire but it was subdued; and his manner was even dignified, quite divested of roughness though too stern for grace.” It appears that Heathcliff has acquired the trappings of culture, if not true gentility and installs himself in conventional society. His gentility is a calculated social role, its intention is first to re-establish his passion for Catherine and then to destroy the system which had rejected him. When Heathcliff meets Catherine again, their thwarted love expresses itself in mutual accusations and outbursts of self pity. Heathcliff torments both himself and Catherine. Instead of expressing love they lacerate each other and are incapable even before death of atonement or mutual forgiveness. Heathcliff breaks in like a tempest into the peaceful tenor of Catherine and Linton’s marriage rousing in Catherine a passionate love she had never known with Edgar and effectively breaks up the marriage. Catherine tells Heathcliff.

“Your bliss like his [Satan’s] is inflicting misery... I begin to be secure and tranquil; and you, restless to know us at peace, appear resolved on exciting a quarrel—quarrel with Edgar if you please, and deceive his sister, you’ll hit on exactly the most efficient method of avenging yourself on me.”

Catherine has no illusions about Heathcliff and opposes his encouragement of Isabella’s infatuation. Her attempt to make him see reason leads instead to a violent quarrel with Heathcliff. Linton enters at this juncture and insists that Catherine should have no further association with Heathcliff and debars his entry into the Linton threshold. This attempt to establish his authority at once joins Catherine and Heathcliff, forgetting their quarrel they taunt Edgar for his “weak nature”. Heathcliff says he is “a lamb who threatens like a bull” and Catherine jeers “he’s not a lamb, but a sucking leveret.” These unexpected abuses bring on an uncharacteristic burst of physical anger in which he strikes Heathcliff and leaves before the latter can recover from the powerful blow. This blow “burning in (his) gullet” promises vengeance in stock for the Lintons. Marriage with Isabella and her subsequent degradation is the form of his vengeance.

Heathcliff’s boorish behaviour towards Edgar Linton and even Catherine in this encounter is abhorrent and distasteful, but Emily Brontë evokes a different note in the last meeting with Catherine. Their coming together unleashes a whirlwind of emotions that begins with frenzied expressions of love, and modulates into mutual recriminations. He savagely upbraids her for her cruelty and denounces her marriage as a cruel act of self-betrayal.

“Why did you betray your own heart, Cathy? I have not one word of comfort. You deceive this, you have killed yourself. Yes, you may kiss me, and cry; and wring out my kisses and tears, they’ll blight you they’ll damn you. You loved me—then what right had you to leave me? What right—answer me—for the poor fancy you fell for Linton? Because misery and degradation, and death, and nothing that God or Satan could inflict could have parted us, you of your own will, did it. I have not broken your heart—you have broken it; and in breaking it, you have broken mine...”

(Wh chapter 15 p. 199)

After Catherine’s death there is no agency to restrain Heathcliff and his diabolical machinations are carefully laid out as he plans to avenge himself on the Earnshaws and the Lintons. He who had been the victim of Hindley’s oppression, now becomes the victimiser. First he leads Hindley to perdition by encouraging his drinking and gambling. Then he sets out to debase and pervert Hareton as once he himself had been degraded and brutalised by Hindley. His avowed intention is “to make one tree grow as crooked as another with the same wind to twist it.” He does not inflict physical torture on Hareton, but stunts his mind by denying him education and all graces of civilized life. But in spite of the dehumanization to which he subjects Hareton he has an underlying sympathy for him, seeing in Hareton his own sufferings under Hindley. Moreover, he is aware of the true gold of Hareton’s nature. Comparing him to his own son, Heathcliff says “one is gold put to the use of paving stones, the other is tin polished to ape a service of silver”. The persecutor and the persecuted are bound in a twisted bond. Heathcliff confesses to Nelly “Do you know that twenty times a day I covet Hareton with all his degradation? I’d have loved the lad had he been someone else’s.”

(Ch 21, page 257)

He also recognises Hareton’s unspoken affection (“he’s) damnably fond of me!”) His antipathy seems directed not towards Hareton himself as for his transgression of being his father’s son.

Following Isabella’s death, Heathcliff brings his son Linton to Wüthering Heights. Though he despises his sickly, effeminate son, he nourishes and nurtures him not out of filial duty or love but to further his own plans. Linton is weak but good natured to begin with. Heathcliff terrifies him and turns him into a terrified, repulsive and treacherous creature. Catherine and Linton now renew their acquaintance and fancy themselves in love. To fulfil his design, Heathcliff lures Catherine to Wüthering Heights, imprisons her and compels her to marry Linton who is on his deathbed and dies soon after the marriage. Edgar Linton, death, meanwhile has made Catherine heir to Thrnsheross Grange and its properties. Through her marriage with Linton and his subsequent death, these now pass into Heathcliff’s hands. In **The Structure of**

**Wüthering Heights** (1926) C. P. sanger scrutinised the complicated legal process by which Heathcliff secured the properties of both Catherine Linton and Hindley Earnshaw. This involving a complex understanding both of the law of the land (real property) and the law of money and goods (personal property), shows Emily Brontë's deep and accurate knowledge and research of the laws of property between 1771 and 1803, during which the action of the novel is laid.

The third and final section of **Wüthering Heights** carries the action forward after Linton's death to the end of the novel and the death of Heathcliff. This part of the novel shows how with the gradual decline of Heathcliff's frustration, his destructive passion also dies. His tyranny and oppression and almost half-hearted exertions lack the violence and passion of his former self. He torments Catherine, who stands up to him, showing something of her mother's spirit. Gradually, as he perceives the growing bond between Hareton and Catherine, a change comes over him. On one occasion, for example, he is on the point of attacking Catherine when he is hindered by something in her face—

“...be seemed ready to beat Catherine to pieces... when of a sudden his fingers relaxed he shifted his grasp from her head, to her arm and gazed intently in her face—Then he drew his hand over his eyes, stood a moment to collect himself apparently...” (chapter 32, p. 350). In another instance he stops short, as Catherine and Hareton look up together from their reading. He is arrested by their eyes which, says Nelly “are precisely similar—those of Catherine Earnshaw”. As his vengeful wrath wears out he pours forth an anguished confession to Nelly in which he voices the futility of his action.

“It is a poor conclusion, is it not... an absurd termination to my violent exertions? I get levers and mattocks to demolish the two houses, and train myself to be capable of working like Hercules, and when everything is in my power, I find the will to lift a slate off either roof has vanished! My old enemies have not beaten me—now would be the precise time to revenge myself on their representatives... But where is the use? I don't come for striking... I have lost the faculty of enjoying their destruction...” (p. 353).

Hareton affects him differently as he says “He seems a personification of my youth” and again, “Hareton's aspect was the ghost of my immortal love, of my wild endeavours to hold my rights, my degradation, my pride, my happiness and my anguish” (p 354). His startling likeness to Catherine “connected him fearfully to her”. The whole world now seems to be filled with Catherine's shadows.

“...for what is not connected with her to me? and what does not recall her? I cannot look down to this floor, but her features are shaped on the flags! In every



cloud, in every tree—filling the air at night and caught by glimpses in every object, by day I am surrounded with her image!... The entire world is a dreadful collection of memoranda that she did exist, and that I have lost her.”

It is Catherine’s shadow that haunts his final days and lures him to his death. His hearty physical constitution and temperate mode of living do not encourage a hope of sudden death, yet as the fire in him dies, he becomes more laconic in company, fonder of solitude. He roams the moors by night and day, lost in a state of unexplained rapture. A feverish ecstasy envelops him as he seems to feel her presence around him. He deprives himself of food, of rest, of sleep—not a deliberate withholding, but a forgetfulness of these essentials of life.

“I repent nothing,” he asserts. “I’m too happy and yet I’m not happy enough. My soul’s bliss kills my body but does not satisfy itself.” By such paradoxes does Heathcliff express something of the transfiguration which he undergoes in the closing phase of his life. He confesses no fear of death, yet has to “remind” (himself) to “breathe”. His whole being yearns towards some bliss dimly described, which has “devoured” his existence, and prays this long fight might soon be over. After a night of storm and rain Heathcliff is found in Catherine’s panelled bed by the window, his eyes are open, his face washed by the rain, a lifelike gaze of exultation on his face. The bathed is open, presumably in the hope that Catherine’s spirit would enter.

Heathcliff dies at the age of thirty-eight, eighteen years after Catherine’s death—eighteen years spent in trying to get his own back on a world which had deprived him of Catherine. Why does Heathcliff spend so much time in this elaborate endeavour to destroy Thrushcross Grange and Wüthering Heights and all its inhabitants? He destroys Isabella, Hindley, his own son Linton and for a while imperils the destiny of Hareton and the second Catherine in his career of ruthless annihilation. J. Hills Miller in “Emily Brontë : The disappearance of God” investigates Heathcliff’s relationship with Catherine and argues that his sadistic career is an attempt to possess Catherine and through this to re-enter society to which he is an outsider. Miller writes.

“Heathcliff’s sadism is more than an attempt to take revenge indirectly on Cathy. It is also [a] paradoxical attempt to regain his lost intimacy with her. If his childhood relationship with Catherine gave him possession of the whole world through her, perhaps now that Catherine is lost, he can get her back by appropriating the world. The sadistic implication of pain on other people.... is a way of breaking down barriers between oneself and the world.”

For Heathcliff, the revenge unloosed by him is the consequence of Catherine’s own tyrannical treatment of Heathcliff.

“I seek no revenge on you... The tyrant grinds down his slaves—and they don’t turn against him, they crush those beneath them. You are welcome to torture me to death for your amusement, only, allow me to amuse myself a little in the same style...”

(WH chapter 11, page 151).

Just as Catherine’s falsity to her own nature results in virulent outbursts and mental breakdowns and sets in process the tragic action, Heathcliff’s warped nature expresses itself in violence and sadism.

### **7.4.3 Heathcliff : The Byronic Lineage**

In the nineteenth century, the poetry of Byron had thrown up a type who dominated much of popular romance—the Byronic hero. He is usually dark and mysterious, almost never handsome in the traditional sense. He is dangerous as well as fascinating and often follows a path of violence and self-destruction. The hero who occupied centre-stage in Gothic fiction bears strong elements of resemblance to the Byronic hero who is generally a rebel and transgressor of moral codes. He is similar to the anti-hero of modern literature and often carries the author’s sympathy. The Byronic hero is the most easily recognisable romantic element in the novels of the Brontes. Bronte criticism ascribes the origins of both Rochester and Heathcliff to the influence of Byron.

We have seen that from the beginning Heathcliff is associated with darkness. He is dark in appearance and also suggests the metaphorical darkness of evil and the supernatural. Suggestions of a non-European origin—Asian or even African—have also been made to explain his dark-skinned gypsy-like appearance, as England’s imperialist adventures during this time had given occasion for the entry of such mixed races. Unlike the cold intellect and reason associated with the white races, Heathcliff’s temperament is more oriental—ardent, passionate and even frenzied. Some have drawn a parallel with another dark, powerful tragic hero—Othello.

Heathcliff’s transformation from a wild, uncouth boy who left Wüthering Heights into a man “tall, dressed in dark clothes, his sallow cheeks half-covered in black whiskers, the brow lowering, the eyes deep-set and singular” strongly suggests the Byronic pattern. He also appears well informed and intelligent. The changes do seem to follow a mutation into the type of the dark romantic hero, but the course of the novel shows this to be only a surface similarity. The Byronic hero is at odds with society which, he feels, is too insensitive to appreciate or understand him. This leads to his perpetual brooding, sombre melancholy and a wilfully worked out isolation. Heathcliff, on the other hand, has been excluded from societal associations. When he returns, he rather calculatively courts entry into society and gentility to gain access



into the world of Catherine Linton. The Byronic hero's masochistic sufferings and isolation originate from illusory wrongs perpetrated on him by society. Heathcliff's agonies arise out of the death and loss of Catherine and memories of his childhood deprivations. This acute sense of injuries propels him on a course of sadistic destruction.

If Heathcliff is not totally a Byronic figure, we cannot also place him within the parameters of the traditional hero of romance. His consuming and unnatural bonding with Catherine is far removed from the impetuous, emotional love of romantic heroes. A simple, naive girl like Isabella, unexposed to the predatory world of men like Heathcliff, is overwhelmed and infatuated by the transfigured Heathcliff and fancies in him a hero of romance, even as he coldly and calculatedly sets out to exploit her obsession.

An attempt to appraise Heathcliff makes it apparent that he escapes the bounds of the Byronic hero. Nor is it possible to contain him within the limits of the stereotypical romantic hero. We cannot define him by the standards of conventional society or morality, or categorize him in black or white as hero or villain, good or evil. For the greater part of the story, Heathcliff is associated with desperate and violent acts and described in terms of diabolic forces. The reader encounters various monstrous and harrowing actions by Heathcliff and yet he engages the reader's sympathy. We feel with him and for him when he is ill-treated and cast out, when he loses his love because she places social graces and securities above his sterling love, when he is in the throes of an agony only death can assuage. But beyond all this we perceive a dichotomy in the character of Heathcliff, which embraces a "metaphysical" aspect an critics have put it, which rises above material concerns in his obsessional love for Catherine. The other aspect exhibits a person who skilfully exploits and manipulates others to appropriate their wealth. In Heathcliff, it appears, Emily Brontë has created an unheroic hero, a character who is placed outside the established parameters of conventional society and the moral universe in which society exists. It would be deficient, therefore, to categorize him by the standards of orthodox judgement.

#### **7.4.4 The influence of the Gothic**

Early reviews of *Wüthering Heights* had branded the novel "a nightmarish tale of horror". As we enter the world of Emily Bronte, we immediately perceive the influence of the Gothic. The novel operates within two conventions—the realistic and the supernatural. For the most part Emily Bronte handles events and characters naturalistically and within the realms of possibility and realism. On the other hand there are incidents and states of mind which defy rational explanation and readers have been constantly aware of a supernatural layer to the story. Tales and novels of

passion and mystery were published in Blackwood's magazine which was familiar reading matter in the Brontë household. They also read the poems and novels of Scott, the poetry Shelley and Coleridge. The adulterous adventures of Byron's Child Harold, Manfred and Cain were also read with guilty pleasure, although they raised a moral problem. There is evidence that Coleridge's poems attracted Brontë strongly. She uses the name 'Geraldine' for her cruel Gandal princess and some Gothic aspects of Geraldine's looks are transmuted into Heathcliff's appearance, notably his "basilisk eyes."

The world of **Wüthering Heights** is riddled with superstition. The spirit of Catherine haunts the opening pages of **Wüthering Heights** and the name of the Earnshaw house evokes the forbidding rather than the comfortable and homely. "Wüthering" is explained as "a significant provincial adjective descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather." Its bleak situation is further borne out by the "few stunted firs blown back by the north wind", and the "quaint thorns" which "crave alms of the seen" dramatises its natural setting. Though set amidst the natural world, Wüthering Heights evokes an impregnable castle-like structure, as if demarcated and displaced from the normal world. Recurring Gothic paraphernalia such as ghostly figures, and crumbling grotesque carvings and bleak graveyards find their way into Wüthering Heights. Beyond these external Gothic trappings are deeper motifs of suppressed sexual longing and forbidden love.

The widespread belief in witchcraft permeates the language of the novel. Isabella's shrieks sound as if witches are running red-hot needles into her. Catherine frightens Joseph by dropping hints about her knowledge of the black arts and threatens to make an image of him in wax and clay. Joseph thinks the younger Catherine has bewitched Hareton. Nelly Dean's narration is filled with ghosts and goblins in which she seems to believe. To her Heathcliff is "a little dark thing harboured by a good man to his save", of more than human origin and she wonders whether he is a ghoul or a vampire. Belief in ghosts was common. After Heathcliff's death local people believed that Heathcliff walked and a young boy cried because he saw Heathcliff and a woman on the road ahead. Nelly leaves Wüthering Heights for Thrushcross Grange probably because she fears Heathcliff's ghostly visitations.

Bizarre dreams and portents contribute further to the Gothic ambience and provide a key to the moral theme. Two significant dreams occur at the beginning of the narrative when Lockwood is mystified by his unfamiliar surroundings and his uncongenial host. Both arise from the events of the evening and show the dreamer's nature. Locked into Wüthering Heights by a snowstorm, and feeling dizzy and sick, Lockwood is forced to spend the night in Catherine's bedroom and falls asleep in her

panelled bed by the window. His unquiet sleep is broken by the tapping branches of the fir tree in the storm, and leads to two dreams. In the first, a complex dream of sin, religious zeal and violence, he set out for home guided by Joseph and found himself at the chapel listening to an interminable sermon on four hundred and ninety sins rather than their forgiveness. Lockwood's violent nature exposes itself as he urges his fellow martyrs to drag down the preacher and crush him. In reply the preacher orders the gathered men to assault Lockwood. "Every man's hand was soon against his brother." The preacher's tapping on the pulpit soon woke Lockwood who found that the sound was caused by the rattling branch of a fire tree. The noise merges into his second dream. Lockwood thought he would stop the rattling sound and finding the window locked, knocked his hand through the glass. His hand grasps a small icy-cold hand which clings to his, begging to be let in. He asks "Who are you" and gets the answer "Catherine Linton". Terrified and desperate to keep her out, he indulges in a grisly act of cruelty—"rubbing her hand against the broken pane till the blood ran" From Lockwood's commentary it appears as if Catherine Linton as really trying to enter. It is only later that the reader realises this is only a dream, though vividly terrifying both to Lockwood and the reader who are as yet ignorant of Catherine's story. The unaccountability and unnaturalness of Lockwood's act of cruelty arouses the first thrill of horror, while the incongruity of the child who has been a "waif for twenty "years" brings home the import and full terror of the dream. The dreams reveal that despite the veneer of civilization, there exists deep down in man the desire for cruelty and revenge.

Heathcliff's spirit is storm-tossed after Cathy's death. He confesses to Nelly "I was wild after she died, and eternally from dawn to dawn praying her to return to me." In his intense desire to evoke her in the spirit he indulges in acts almost necrophiliac. He tells Nelly (Chapter 29) how he disinterred her body and looked on her unchanged face. He compelled the sexton to keep one side of her coffin loose, so that after death his body could be placed by her side. He dreams of the day when they should lie thus side by side. This might seem a grisly act appropriate to the tale of horror. Nor is it just Emily Brontë's concession to the Gothic, for a true emotion thrills through Heathcliff's words. His passion for Catherine does not accept any limitations not even those imposed by death and burial. His wish to lie by Catherine and to be buried with her expresses the desire to "Merge" with her. In physical terms such deeds translate into acts which break the norms of accepted social and moral behaviour. His assurance of Catherine's presence in the spirit is conveyed tellingly in infinitely evocative images.

(I) "... it seemed that I heard a sigh from someone above, close at the edge of the grave. I seemed to feel the warm breath of it displacing the sleet-laden wind. I

knew no living thing of flesh and blood was by—but as certainly as you perceive the approach to some substantial body in the dark ... I felt that Cathy was there, not under me, but on earth.” (Chapter 29, pp 320-321)

(II) “... the moment I closed my eyes she was either outside the window, or sliding back the paves—or entering the room or even resting her darling head on the same pillow as she did as a child.”

In such images Emily Brontë confers an airy magic to the Gothic, using it to express states of mind rather than to titillate the senses. She introduces Gothic elements but challenges the role of traditional Gothic. Classic Gothic writers like Monk Lewis try to convince the reader that what happens in his novels is real or like Anne Radcliff and later Wilkie Collins that what appears supernatural has a natural explanation. Emily Brontë never tries to persuade the reader to believe in the existence of her ghost. The reader seldom considers seriously whether Catherine’s ghost is real. Rather he attributes it to Heathcliff’s obsessive love for Catherine. Thus Emily Brontë uses symbols of the Gothic to enable us to plumb the depths of the mind, to turn it to questions of psychology and obsession.

The supernatural is also envisioned as a triumphant attainment of afterlife by the chief characters of the novel, in which they merge both into the world of nature and to each other. The supernatural tale of Catherine and Heathcliff’s love is constantly set side by side with orthodox Christianity as put forth by Nelly or by the more lurid morality of the Bible-spouting Joseph. Some critics are also of the opinion that the motifs and devices of the supernatural which Emily Brontë grafts into the novel properly belong to the tradition of folk tales and older forms of oral folk culture. The novel at this time was emerging as one of the newer genres of the literature of high culture. In implanting the old with the new she revitalises the literary form of the novel. In her use of the supernatural we perceive the influence of the Romantics—the Wordsworthian idea of imagination playing upon the familiar to provide insights into the human condition and Coleridge’s view of the supernatural as familiar.

#### **7.4.5 Suffering and Religious belief in Wüthering Heights**

In the novel Heathcliff is described in many ways by other characters, most of which are disparaging and associated with images of the beast and the fiend, the Christian myths of hell and its creatures. He is variously called “imp of satan”, “the evil beast” “gypsy beat.” His eyes are “a couple of black fiends ... like devil’s spies” “clouded windows of hell.” He is “a naughty swearing boy” “monster” “ungrateful brute” “an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone” “Judas” and such like. Most of these arise from his unacceptable origins and his lack of civilized mores. Some are also terms of Christian censure.

Some issues that surface in the novel deal with sin, heaven, hell, purgatory, redemption, death and after life. There are numerous references to devil, heaven and hell. Heathcliff is as dark “as if he came from the devil”. He is prepared to defy the devil in order to protect Catherine from the dogs unleashed on them at Thrushcross Grange. In her diary Catherine writes how Joseph was sure “owd Nick would fetch us as sure as we were living” Nelly expresses her puzzlement over and again as to whether Heathcliff is indeed human or a demon. Isabella, the newly married wife of Heathcliff wonders whether he is a man or a devil. Fire, burning, hell and its tortures accompany Heathcliff.

To understand Emily Brontë’s views on sin, purgatory, damnation and redemption, we have to glance at the religious influences on her life. Tom Winnifrith’s book **The Brontës and their Background : Romance and Reality** studies the influence of religion on the life of the Brontës. The book analyses the impact of Calvinism, Methodism and Evangelical ideas on them and how they consciously challenged these views. The Brontë household was deeply embedded in the Christian religion and as daughters of a clergyman, the Brontë sisters were undoubtedly exposed to a lot of religious ideas both through reading and through serious, debates and discussions. Victorian society of this time was fractured by economic disparity leading to great inequality between classes. For a large section of people this led to poverty, disease, death and other social evils such as rise in crime, prostitution, alcoholism accompanied this. Churchmen gave these socio-economic issues a religious colouring and religious debates tried to explain the cause of human suffering on earth. The common areas of theological debates ranged around suffering, damnation salvation, heaven and well.

In their own lives such questions seemed particularly relevant as the early and poignant death of their young mother had been followed by the loss of siblings in early childhood. But the event which most significantly affected them and is reflected directly and indirectly on their writing was the course of their brother Patrick Branwell Brontë’s disastrous life. Branwell had shown early intellectual and literary promise. He had been sent to London to follow an academic career and was later appointed tutor at Thorp Green. But this early promise was destroyed by his alcoholism, charges of licentious behaviour, but mostly by his inability to confront the limitations of his talents. The sisters, specially Emily, were deeply sympathetic to Branwell. As they witnessed their brother’s degradation and subsequent suffering, they were haunted by questions of his ‘sin’ and the ‘punishment’ he endured. Questions on Christian doctrines of sin, perdition and salvation must have troubled their minds and are echoed directly or indirectly in the writings of Charlotte and Emily Brontë in **Jane Eyre** and **Wüthering Heights**.

In an essay she wrote, Emily Brontë expresses the idea that a just and merciful God inflicts punishment on earth, but death leads to “an eternal realm of happiness and glory.” Souls do not suffer after death and earthly suffering assures attainment of happiness in heaven. The story of *Wuthering Heights* encompasses untold suffering and no character central to the action escapes a share of the pain. It would appear that before the arrival of Heathcliff into the Heights, life was peaceful and unruffled. He brings with him all the evils and sufferings of the outside world. Henceforth the world becomes darkened and touches all lives with the tortures that ensue. Heathcliff’s suffering on earth is his hell. In a conversation with Nelly just before his death, thoughts of heaven, hell, repentance, salvation are raised as Nelly asks him to repent and pray for the forgiveness of God. Heathcliff feels an approaching change in himself and recognizes this as the closure of his life. To Nelly he speaks of himself as “a man struggling in water, rest within arm’s length of the shore.” But strangely enough, he seems to espy some heavenly happiness. He rejects conventional Christian beliefs of heaven, hell, repentance leading to salvation. He has no need of repentance, he says, as he has already attained his salvation. Could he be expressing hopes for a reunion with Catherine after death? Or perhaps he means that suffering has purged him of all sin and evil. After his death the hatred and suffering seem to have spent itself, and peace descends on *Wuthering Heights* as we hear from Lockwood who visits Heathcliff’s grave.

Derek Traversi argues that one characteristic of Emily Brontë is the tendency to see human life and individual passions in the shadow of death. In *Wuthering Heights* we feel the presence of death and the protagonists react against it with all the force of their vitality. Even in death Heathcliff expresses passion and vigour as he says “My soul’s bliss kills my body.” It appears that Emily Brontë was moving away from conventional notions of heaven and hell towards a greater sympathy for the human condition.

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### **7.5.1 Catherine**

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#### **Objective :**

Heathcliff is an arresting and powerful figure, but the meaning and full dimension of his character centres round his relationship with Catherine. She, too, gains proportion and magnitude only from the perspective of her affiliation with Heathcliff. She dies halfway through the novel, but her haunting presence moulds the course of the entire book. Other than her image as a romantic heroine, Catherine, through her rebellion against the male-centric ideologies of her time, enables us to view the position of women in the Victorian age. The institution of marriage and its associated feeling of enclosure is also brought under scrutiny.



## 7.5.2 Catherine

The reader's first access to Catherine is through her diary which Lockwood reads when he is compelled to stay the night at Wüthering Heights. The diary shows us her early relationship with Heathcliff. Please read chapter 6 of the novel which describes how, after the death of Mr. Earnshaw, Hindley arrives at Wüthering Heights with a newly-wedded wife. He is now the master and his immediate action is to expel Heathcliff from the comforts of the house. The closeness which has developed between Catherine and Heathcliff makes it inevitable that they are persecuted together. They are thrown out from the "parlour", sit shivering in the garret while Hindley and his wife enjoy the blazing fire. Under Joseph's rigorous supervision, they are compelled to listen to his sermons by the hour. Catherine's narrative ends with their determination to rebel against Hindley's tyranny and their plan for a ramble across the moors in the rain.

Arnold Kettle believes that this common rebellion forges the bond which later transforms into love. Dorothy Van Ghent considers the rebellion to be instinctive and unconscious. Terry Eagleton in **Myths of Power** sees history as the basis of the novel's conflict. The open resistance to Hindley is an attempt at breaking down parental authority which was the hallmark of Victorian society. The action of the novel shows us Catherine in various forms of rebellion. The early childhood years are worked by rebellion against parental authority, then against societal norms and a woman's role in the marital scheme.

The core of the novel lies in the Catherine-Heathcliff relationship. Early critics who disparaged other aspects of the novel recognised in the central relationship a level of sublimity above a mere boy-girl romance. It is an all-consuming ardent passion, but unfulfilled and unresolved. It begins as a childhood bonding like siblings who share common loves, even a common bed and are the target of shared reprimands from Joseph and Hindley. The first separation arises from a caper across the moors and their subsequent introduction to Thrushcross Grange. Catherine's entry into Thrushcross Grange is a defining moment. She stays there for five weeks to allow her foot to heal and emerges magically transformed.

"... instead of a wild, hatless little savage jumping into the house to squeeze us all breathless, there lighted... a very dignified person with brown ringlets falling from the cover of a feathered beaver, and a cloth habit which she was obliged to hold up with both hands that she might sail in." (93)

Hindley, pleasantly surprised, exclaims : "Why Cathy you are frite a hearty! ... you look like a lady now..."

Critics suggest that her stay at the Grange changes Catherine from a child to an

adult. Dorothy Van Ghent maintains that this is Catherine's attempts to become human,; that is, civilized, social, and adult. Heathcliff wishes her to remain childlike and retain their 'non-human' 'natural' relationship. Hindley's wife attempts to woo her with clothes and flattery to retain these ladylike manners. Indeed, in clothes, manners and attitude she now appears to be a lady more suited to the fine life at the Grange than the farmhouse style of living at the Heights. Hindley had earlier tried to separate Catherine and Heathcliff because of Heathcliff's lower status. Her stay at the Grange has exposed her to a life where class, status and privilege have placed the masters over those who work for them. Nelly expected "a wild savage" who would "squeeze us all breathless" but Catherine's welcome is dignified, reserved as befitting a lady. However, this veneer of ladyhood vanishes. When she effusively greets Heathcliff, "bestowing seven or eight kisses within the minute", though she pulls back to remark on his sulky looks and dirty appearance. Hindley, having woken up to his sister's beauty and her attraction for young Linton, makes an effort to separate her from the "young ruffian" Heathcliff. Catherine's "double character" as Nelly calls it, surfaces as she puts on her best face with the Lintons but has little inclination to practice politeness at home.

The problem in her relationship with Heathcliff arises because Catherine thinks she can have everything that the other life can offer her—fine clothes, flattery, the status of lady, and still retain her older relationship with Heathcliff. But Heathcliff cannot accept this. She accepts Edgar Linton not because she loves him with the intensity of her love for Heathcliff, but because he is handsome, pleasant to be with, young and cheerful, but most of all because "he'll be rich and I shall be the greatest woman of the neighbourhood and I shall be proud of having such a husband" (W H Page 118). Nelly knows how wrong Catherine is to marry Edgar and also how the separation will affect Heathcliff, but is unable to gauge the nature of Catherine's attachment to Heathcliff. In chapter Nine Catherine describes and distinguishes between her love for both men—

"My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods. Time will change it, I'm well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath—a source of little visible delight, but necessary..."

She ends with the momentous identification, annihilating all distinction, "I am Heathcliff."

Though Nelly chastises Catherine for her deliberate and mistaken choice of a marriage partner, it is apparent that the love which Catherine describes as "the eternal rocks beneath" is beyond her comprehension or she recognises that such love is essentially destructive. While it symbolizes the highest degree of devotion and



commitment, critics have regarded it to be dangerous to a relationship as it denies the other an independent individuality. Such love can exist only outside a social context. Catherine rejects Heathcliff as a suitor ultimately because he is socially inferior to Linton and the train of disaster follows. Catherine's tragedy, then, stems from her brief separation from Wüthering Heights and the acquisition of social graces and nations of a better life from Thrushcross Grange.

Does Catherine really desire these new-found graces? Emily Brontë seems to blur over what is desirable and what Catherine actually desires. The new life of the lady of the Grange seems immensely desirable till Heathcliff's return three years later, having acquired the looks and manners of a gentlemen, though wild and half-savage at heart. Catherine now feels once more the pull of her childhood and the gilded lady's life is now a prison for her. The changing social structures of Victorian England encouraged upward mobility of the middle classes which had acquired economic status from new industry and imperial ventures. Emily Brontë challenges and exposes those values which create a false notion of gentility and class distinction.

Victorian society was dominantly patriarchal and imposed upon women male centric ideas of a woman's role within society, which was defined as essentially domestic—that of a daughter, wife, mother, a role pre-determined by men. It involved the knowledge necessary to run the household and please the master of the house. Their education did not encourage independent thinking, Rather, their upbringing aimed at enabling them to acquire the manners and etiquette of high society. As a lover she was expected to be shy, demure, if possible beautiful—a recipient of the man's love, not one who instigated it actively. When Catherine says "I am Heathcliff" she is taking the initiative in a relationship—an action that was seen as a male preserve.

Changing social relations demanded a fresh look at established attitudes and mores. The growth of industry and expansion of empire shifted wealth from the landowners into the hands of the new leaders of society, the "captains of industry." Women's role in society was also changing. In mills and garment producing factories women and even children were part of the work force. The world of books and education was now open to women of the middle class and with it the literacy circle. For middle class women who must earn their livelihood the preferred occupation was that of a governess or a teacher. The Brontë sisters all worked briefly as teachers and governesses during their lifetime.

In **Wüthering Heights** Emily Brontë draws our attention to the controlling power exercised by the patriarch of both Wüthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. Catherine's rebellion against this takes the form of her refusal to submit to domestication and her repeated outbursts of wild acts and behaviour. As a young

child this is bypassed but adulthood and matrimony impose certain parameters. Within the limits of bourgeois society she must become a lady and marry Edgar. From the vantage point of her married status she wishes to help Heathcliff attain establishment and prosperity. This is a realistic attitude to love in a society where marriage is after women's best preservative from want and a stepping stone to social status and well-being. The peaceful tenor of her life with Edgar, however, is shattered with the re-entry of Heathcliff. She tries to bring the two men together but this leads only to escalating tensions and nerve-racking passions. Catherine's hysteric outbursts are a direct result of this conflict between Heathcliff and Edgar and causes Catherine to retreat into invalidism. Catherine's tragedy is her inability to abide by the codes set by this patriarchal society and only through death can she break its fetters.

We may now look briefly at some of the approaches critics have adopted to debate the nature of the love between Heathcliff and Catherine. How would we define the nature of the love Catherine and Heathcliff express for each other? What sort of relationship would such a love imply?

(a) Let us first look at their relationship from the perspective of the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century. Emily Brontë uses certain familiar romantic devices in **Wuthering Heights** such as the use of landscape, the connection between nature and emotional moods, the use of dreams and the supernatural, the use of Gothic devices, the influence of the Byronic hero. Again, the romantic quality in the novel can also be regarded in the light of the popular concept of romance as a story of passionate love as that between Catherine and Heathcliff. Such love transcends the limitations of real life and could also be regarded as a form of escapism.

(b) The historical approach regards the Romantic movement not merely as a literary but also as a social movement. The emphasis on feeling was part of the process of social change, a reaction against the attempt to dehumanize or destroy natural feeling in the early eighteenth century.

(c) Some critics have argued that the love of Catherine and Heathcliff is neither Romantic nor historical, but religious— a religion of the soul and a spiritual experience which transcends time and material existence. Catherine and Heathcliff are consecrated to each other and can never be separated or set apart.

(d) Critics like Dorothy Van Ghent adopt a Freudian approach which rejects the above arguments on the grounds that the relationship is not human at all. They are not adult human characters who respond to the social responsibilities and complexities of adult life but are lost into childhood consciousness or "anonymous natural energy."

(e) Finally, feminist criticism concentrates on Catherine rather than Heathcliff. She is seen as a figure who typifies the oppression of Victorian women. Heathcliff is partly a creation of Catherine's imagination and partly of Emily Brontë's.

Of these arguments you may select those which appear to you to be the most acceptable and use them to analyse the text. To me it seems that the arguments which relate the novel to the Romantic movement and the historical development of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century would be a good place to start your analysis. Not also the position which suggests that the novel's conflicts should be seen in the light of the real problems and conflicts of Victorian society.

Note only **Wüthering Heights** but also in the novels of Charlotte Brontë we notice an emphasis on individual passions. In **Jane Eyre** Jane's life can be seen as nearly defeated by the forces of society. Only the demand for an intense and passionate love can challenge and defeat these forces which seek to frustrate her life. In the novels of the 1840s the powerful individualism of Romanticism is being threatened by the conflict with social forces. It seems that it is no longer possible to bring about a resolution between individual fulfillment and social aspiration as harmony. In Charlotte Brontë's novel of love and industrial struggle, **Shirley (1849)**, the demand for love by Caroline and Robert Moore, is in direct conflict with industrial struggle (Robert's struggle for individual aspiration). Shirley is not set in a timeless romantic age but in concrete historical conditions, with which it is inseparably connected. The most Romantic aspect of Catherine's love is the assertion of her identity with Heathcliff. While this seems no more than an assertion of absolute devotion and commitment it is also dangerous because it denies Hethcliff's individuality. If there can never be any separation between them, she can never marry Edgar without violating the bond between herself and Heathcliff. In fact she also negates Edgar's individuality when she believes that Edgar will accept Heathcliff as a partner in her affections. The tragic events of this triangular relationship emerge from Heathcliff and Edgar's refusal to accept Catherine's view of their situation.

Catherine is a departure from the traditionally perceived character of the heroine in Victorian fiction. We have seen how the changing society altered the lives of women. Education and the necessity for earning a livelihood were two major tranforming factors. The opportunity for education opened to women through social and literary activitics as well as through labour outside the home refashioned their world. Victorian male-centric ideology however, regarded the women's world as essentially confined to the domestic sphere. Catherine does not fit into this scheme, though, after her mrrriage with Edgar Linton, she tries to accept domesticity and play the role of a lady as so many other Victorian women had perforce to do in order to accommodate themselves into the bourgeois society. In this scheme of things, giving birth to children and death in child birth were commonly accepted. Catherine too dies

in child birth as if in protest against or refusal to the conservative acceptance of the codes imposed on women by society.

### 7.5.3 **Wüthering Heights and the problem of Marriage**

The familiar convention of the Victorian novel decrees that the resolution should centre round the marriage of the hero and the heroine. For women writers the question of marriage was often the dominant, if not the primary issue. The novels of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot followed this direction. Marriage brings together many issues that form the basis of society such as the question of money, class, culture, social power and gender equations. **Wüthering Heights** differs from most Victorian novels in that the story does not revolve primarily around the theme of marriage. But it does pose disturbing questions even if we do not regard it as the central issue.

In **Wüthering Heights** the expected marriages do not take place. Catherine marries Edgar Linton, not Heathcliff. Heathcliff marries Isabella whom he does not love, but who is infatuated with him. Marriages of the principal characters are not the consummation of mutual love as is the expectation in Victorian fiction. More often they are based on other motives—as revenge in the case of Heathcliff and selfish self-indulgence in Linton Heathcliff. Though not always articulated, Victorian marriages were frequently based as property alliances. The two marriages of Isabella and Heathcliff and Linton and Catherine are manipulated by Heathcliff as part of his strategy to acquire the entire wealth and property of the Earnshaws and the Lintons.

Most of the marriages in the novel do not end in a lived-happily-ever-after situation. The separations are sometimes brought about by death and are also due to mental incompatibility.

Frances, Hindley's wife dies leaving the motherless child Hareton. Catherine dies at childbirth and her daughter, too, is left motherless, Linton Heathcliff's death leaves Catherine a beautiful young widow. Isabella too, had died with her son Linton left motherless. It is only in the second generation of lovers that Emily Brontë depicts love fulfilled in matrimony.

The second Catherine's marriage to Hareton is based on mutual love and looks forward to future fulfillment. Though attracted by Catherine's luminous beauty, Hareton is at the beginning ignorant, ill-mannered and loutish and the couple appear to be irreconcilable opposites. The common plight they share is that both are at the mercy of Heathcliff. This forges a binding link between them. Catherine can only free herself of Heathcliff if she marries again. Hareton, however, must first transform himself, rise from the depths to which he has fallen, educate, polish and reform himself before Catherine can accept him.

Marriage was one of the key concerns of the Victorian age. It was recognised as an important part of society, but for women, marriage could be far from an ideal situation. It could be a prison for many women who would often endure physical and emotional abuse because they were powerless to walk out of such marriages. Catherine marries of her own accord, it is true, but soon her marriage to Edgar which began as a springtime of love becomes a strangling noose when Heathcliff returns. Isabella is too infatuated to see the truth of Heathcliff's character, and when his true nature is revealed after marriage she is compelled for a time to endure an abusive marriage.

Marriage was also important in the Victorian age because the idea of the family was undergoing a significant change largely due to industrialisation. From the elaborate family structures of earlier times, industrialisation brought about the emergence of the nuclear family. The pivotal unit of this consisted of parents and children living under one roof, held together by strong emotional ties. Unlike older familial structures, it was relatively detached from other blood relations and the community. Sociologists argue that the nuclear family is rooted in romantic love which establishes and stabilizes the relationship of a couple, and the child shapes the third angle of a family triangle. Critics see in **Wüthering Heights** a repetitive recurrence of the triangular leitmotif both at Wüthering Heights and Trushcross Gange.

The girl child in both generations is seen as the triangled element which will stabilize the structure. In the first generation Cathetine is the negotiating and interceding element between domesticity represented by father/brother/husband and wildness (Heathcliff). Later she tries to draw a balance between Edgar and Heathcliff. The effort makes Catherine the focal point of great tension and conflict that bring on her illness. She is reduced to an invalid and destroyed by the stress of having to mediate between conflicting elements.

#### **7.5.4 The Second Generation**

At the outset of the story we are prepared for the second generation of the Earnshaws and Lintons. Lockwood, meeting Hareton and the second Catherine, assumes they are husband and wife and that Hareton is Heathcliff's son. Thus the two generations are brought together for Lockwood. The story of Catherine and Hareton, with its elements of social difference and parental abuse, is in many ways similar to the first generation, though their story ends differently. The younger couple manage to overcome the obstacles to their relationship and achieve a successful and harmonious union.

How does the reader react to the extension of the story into the Hareton-Catherine sequel? Let us look at three critical views on this subject.

(a) *Wüthering Heights* is highly schematic and the demonstration of the corrective

case-history of the second part is not just a matter of winding up the story and restoring the land to the legitimate heirs ... having recognised Hareton's merits and her own needs, she (Catherine) freely chooses him as her husband to become Catherine Earnshaw like her mother ... (but) Cathy's mother had abandoned the degraded Heathcliff but her daughter generously takes the lad he had formed on that very pattern for revenge, thus righting the wrong.

(Q. D. Leairs – A Fresh Approach to *Wuthering Heights*)

(b) We are left at the end with the fearful uncertainty of the fates of Catherine and Heathcliff, and of the sense of the costs to themselves and to others ... of a love like their. Set against this is the certainty of the love which has sprung up between the second Catherine and Hareton and of the good it has already brought them. The last few chapters have a dual movement. As Heathcliff approaches death, Catherine and Hareton approach each other ... Catherine teaches Hareton and thus brings out the suppressed good in him ... In the first pair, love was seen as a superhuman passion, as an affinity existing outside every social or moral category; in the second, the direction of the lovers' feelings is defined in the human and socially weighted term 'esteem' ... ultimately then, the novel affirms the domesticated virtues of man as a kind and social creature; it develops towards the Brontë version of the good life ... which envisages and alleviation of suffering and loveliness through love that is kindness, affection, stronger teaching weaker in a domesticated context.

Inga-Stiva Ewbank : **Their proper sphere-Brontës as Female Novelists**

(c) ... the second generation story is coming to its conclusion, and this 'coincidence' draws attention to the nature and degree of Emily Brontë's resolution of her conflict. At the last, within the space of a single page we turn from the phantoms of Heathcliff and the elder Catherine ... to contemplate those other 'ramblers' on the moors, Hareton and the younger Catherine ...

The closing passage of the book might suggest to an unwary reader that the final victory is to them. It is possible to mistake this last comment of Lockwood's indicating 'calm' after 'storm' for a statement of Calm's ultimate triumph. But such a reading overlooks the departure of Hareton and the younger Catherine to the valley, and their abandonment of the old house to the spirits of the still restless Heathcliff and the elder Catherine.

Miriam Allot : **The Rejection of Heathcliff**

The first two critics believe that the novel affirms and approves of the love of the second generation which resolves the problems of the earlier relationship. Thus the story draws to a close showing love defeating adverse circumstances and manifesting the restorative powers of nature and love. For the third critic, the ending does not



suggest a comforting and unambiguous happiness for the second generation. For this critic the passion and intensity of Heathcliff which has dominated the first half of the story, cannot be wiped out and replaced by the almost manlike sweetness of the Catherine-Hareton romance. This critic argues that one should distinguish between the emotional content of the concluding chapter and the narrative technique by which it has been achieved. The 'calm' at the end is imposed by the rather sentimental narrator Lockwood and not the narrative voice of Emily Brontë the novelist. The dominant view is that the introduction of the story of the second generation leads to a serious diminishing of interest. The intensity of the tragic love story of Catherine and Heathcliff is lost, the focus is deflected from the great tragic figures to the more ordinary human figures of Hareton and Catherine.

David Cecil first expressed the idea that Emily Brontë uses the two generations to illustrate and contrast the principles of 'storm' and 'calm'. Miriam Allot, in **The Rejection of Heathcliff** accepts David Cecil's opposition of storm and calm but asserts that it is modified in such a way as to do away with its violent and troubling elements. But it is these very elements which lend power and passion to the story of the first generation. In comparison with the violent relationships of Catherine-Heathcliff-Edgar, the Catherine-Hareton-Linton triangulation seems but a mild shadow of the first. Then again the better enmity which existed between Hindley and Heathcliff is tempered in Heathcliff and Hareton. Even while wreaking vengeance on Hareton, Heathcliff cannot but nurture a soft feeling for him, while Hareton is not an embittered victim and lacks the venomous antagonism of Heathcliff, entertaining a gentle loving towards him. Thus Brontë substitutes the wildness and energy of the first generation story by elements which are more familiar and compassionate.

This balance is achieved, according to Allot, by a new combination of the Earnshaws and Lintons. Catherine Linton and Hareton Earnshaw combine to form the new Earnshaws and create a balance between the energy of the Earnshaws and the calm of the Lintons. Moreover, by leaving Wuthering Heights for Thrushcross Grange, they are repudiating the violent energies of the Heights and Heathcliff but achieving a new dynamism modified by the values of the Lintons.

The difference between the two generations is also signalled by a change in imagery. In the first half of the book images are sombre and dark while the story of the second generation is pervaded by fresh, vivid, life-giving images. Catherine's panelled bed at Wuthering Heights occurs through the story both as a physical object and as a motif. Lockwood spends his first fateful night in it, in childhood Catherine and Heathcliff slept here together, in her delirium Catherine dreams of being at home in her own bed, and finally Heathcliff, in death, finds his final bliss in the same bed.

Nature imagery also changes markedly in the second half of the book. In the Catherine-Heathcliff story, imagery is “of earth in her dark guise” the sombre imagery of lightning and moonbeam, frost and fire, eternal rocks and foliage of the woods. “Earth in her fair guise” replaces it in the second half, with images of calm. The younger Catherine preferred landscape is of larks, thrushes, linnets, cuckoos “pouring music on all side” suggest summer happiness and vitality. The elder Catherine speaks of lapwings, moorcocks, wild ducks—all belonging to northern moorlands and associated with winter, death and a vanished childhood. Their distinct preferences are also pointers to the contrasting characters of the two Catherines.

Heathcliff is also a figure to contend with in the story of Catherine and Hareton. What happens to Heathcliff in the second part of the story? Many critics feel that after the death of Catherine there is a kind of diminution in the character of Heathcliff, an emasculation, as it were. When Catherine dies, Heathcliff’s retributive passion, works itself out of his system. Though he rants and raves as of old, his vituperations have lost their cold anger, and sound “like the rantings of stage villain”. His acts of gross injustice towards the second generation persist, as he tricks Catherine into marrying Linton, prevents her from joining her dying father, compels her to nurse Linton unaided when he is mortally ill, reduces Hareton to the position of an unpaid servant, further, once Linton is dead, he accomplishes his aim of acquiring Catherine’s property and continues to treat her with undiminished severity. Yet the reader’s response is not down right rejection of Heathcliff. Rather he continues to harbour a shealing sympathy for him, especially when the narrative focusses once more on Heathcliff’s new genuine suffering.

The extension of the story to the second generation, then brings the story to a harmonious close. The story of Catherine and Hareton, a parallel to the Catherine-Heathcliff love of tragic conflict, affirms the establishment of sympathetic cooperation, friendship and love. The wrongs committed by Heathcliff on their are righted as they regain their rightful possessions. The unnatural and passionate love of the first generation is substituted by happy, domestic love. Thus old ghosts are laid to rest and calm descends after storm. This can be one kind of interpretation where the novel settles and reconciles conflicting elements into a traditional ‘happy ending’. A second interpretation raises other interesting questions. It suggests that the ‘happy ending’ arrived at is through the mediation of Ellen and Lockwood’s narrative, and essentially due to their interpretation of events. Other distracting voices speak of ghosts which will not be laid, but wonder the moors and the Heights, compelling the dwellers to move to the more hospitable Grange. Whichever conclusion one prefers, the novel provides sufficient support.



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## 7.6. A Survey of the Critical History of *Wüthering Heights*

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The one hundred and fifty years since the publication of the novel has seen a flood of critical material on *Wüthering Heights*. Chronologically we may divide this period of critical history into three phases. First, criticism from its publication to the early years of the twentieth century can be called the early phase. In the second phase critics viewed the novel primarily as a work of art without looking for moral interpretations or social messages as they did in the first phase. The last phase is taken up by modern critics who, with their sophisticated approach and new critical tools have given fresh insight into the text. These are critics who apply Marxist, structuralist, Deconstructionist or Feminist theories to analyse the text of *Wüthering Heights*.

We have looked generally at the early critical approach in the section on **Publication and Reception of *Wüthering Heights*** (UNIT/3.4). Most nineteenth century criticism was interested in searching for Biographical, historical or literary sources of the novel. These early Biographer–critics unearthed much of what we know about Emily Brontë’s life and imaginative world. This form of criticism discussed the influence of Byron, of the Gothic tales and of Emily Brontë’s Gandal poems on the novel. They also searched for meanings of the text, specially its moral and social significance. These early enquiries, however, opened out many issues that modern critics have taken up.

By the first half of the twentieth century, critics began to turn away from moral questions towards artistic achievement. Close attention to Brontë’s artistry begins with C. P. Savgeis “**The structure of *Wüthering Heights***” (1926) and Lord David Cecil’s **Early Victorian Novelists** (1935) Some early critics had laid on the novel the charge of ‘confusion’ ‘and in coherence’. Savger and David Cecil sought to refute these charges. C. P. Savger’s path-finding work showed Emily Brontë’s impressive legal knowledge of laws of property and inheritance. He indicated through detailed charts, how carefully Brontë had worked out the chronology of the novel. David Cecil’s was a broader attempt to illuminate “the aesthetic aspects of Victorian novels which can still delight readers.” He showed how the setting of *Wüthering Heights* Versus Thrushcross Grange embodies the cosmic principles of storm and calm. The conflict in the novel was not between right and wrong but between ‘like’ and ‘unlike’. Characters find fulfillment when they unite with partners for whom they have a natural affinity. Catherine and Heathcliff are both children of the storm, but Catherine, in marrying Edgar, spells her own tragedy because here lives do not unite with the second generation the novel ends perfectly because Hareton and Catherine combine

the best traits of both worlds. Their marriage ends with the prospect of peace and happiness. Sanger and Cecil pointed out that critical arguments should be based on the formal elements of the novel rather than the critic's preconceived notions.

The New Criticism dominant from the 1940s through the 1960s, analysed, like the two critics mentioned above, the formal elements of the novel. They argue, for instance, about the appropriateness of Nelly Deans as a narrator while others show that Nelly's common sense is a liability as well as an asset. Besides analyzing narrative techniques, New Criticism focussed on patterns of imagery and recurrent symbolism in the novel. **Fiction and the Matrix of Analogy** by Mark Schorer (1949) was a seminal New Criticism analysis. He noted two dominant image patterns—(1) animal imagery which Brontë used to satirize or vilify her characters and (2) imagery of wind, water, fire which Brontë associates with elemental human emotions. Dorothy Van Ghent's perceptive study also focussed on the structural patterns and recurring motifs in *Wuthering Heights*. In **The English Novel, Form and Function** (1953), Van Ghent spotlighted motifs of "the window" and "two children figures." The windows embody the two kinds of reality—human and non-human or "the other", and also the space in terms of "inside" and "outside". Pairs of characters attempt to break through the windows that separate them, hoping to write the two binds of reality. Close textual criticism by formalist critics revealed the text as capable of multiple interpretations beyond merely a haunting and tragic love story.

Earlier criticism is mostly interpretative criticism. Modern criticism recognises the possibility of a multiplicity of interpretations. They acknowledge the 'plurality' of literature—that is, the possibility of many meanings within a single literary text. Texts, thus, can look rather different when seen from different angles, even though the text itself is held to possess a fixed intrinsic meaning.

Theoretical studies in various fields like philosophy, anthropology, culture have also impacted on modern literary criticism, generating a new kind of criticism of the novel. One school of critics influenced by what is known as structuralism which studies literature in terms of language and cultural behaviour. It states that all meanings are socially constructed. For structuralist critics the text did not have just the literal meaning, because meaning was also related to culture. Structuralism influenced the reading of a text by involving the reader in many levels of weaving and endued literary criticism by encouraging multiple possibilities of interpretation. Critics like Frank Kermode argue that without the potentiality for many meanings the novel would not be able to survive beyond its immediate historical and cultural context.

Marxist critics like Arnold Kettle and Raymond Williams viewed the novel from the perspective of Emily Brontë's life and times. They argue that the text of *Wuthering*

Heights manifests the changing social political and economic context of nineteenth century England. Issues of oppression and degradation of the working classes were looked into by early Marxist critics. They looked upon Heathcliff as a symbol of the unjust social order which repressed and degraded him. Kettle argued that the values embodied by Thrushcross Grange specify those of the tyranny of Victorian society. Brontë's artistry, in Kettle's view, consists of making the Reader sympathise with Heathcliff, a representative of the working classes. Raymond Williams demonstrates that Brontë's novel registers the troubled years around 1847, though these transformative historical events do not find a direct response in the novel. Their impact spills over into the personal and emotional conflict that the novel depicts. Terry Eagleton's book **Myths of Power, A Marxist study of the Brontë's** does not try to show direct socio-economic correspondence between the novel and the times, but believe that the critic should try to locate the relationship that holds between the imaginative fiction of the Brontë and the society of the time.

Deconstruction, a post-structuralism, which challenges the structural approach is reputed to be the most complex of contemporary critical approaches to literature. The term refers to a way of reading texts practiced by critics who have been influenced by the writings of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. He argues that though the structuralist analyses language and culture objectively and scientifically and examines how meanings are produced, there is always the chance of making some sort of subjective value judgement. If we do so, the purpose of opening the text to a plurality of meaning is defeated. The deconstructionist does not accept a central or core meaning in a text. They try, ultimately, to demonstrate that a text may mean contradictory things. It opens up the text for critics who wish to show how cultural values and dominant preferences and value systems may be hidden in the text.

The works of the Brontë's sister have engendered a great interest among another school of thought—feminist criticism, Feminist critics have a variety of goals. Some are interested in rediscovering the works of women writers overlooked by a dominant masculine culture. Others have reexamined books by male authors from a woman's point of view to understand how they reflect and shape hidden attitudes. Still others are interested in the ways and methods by which patriarchal society has been able to dominate and marginalise the woman's voice. Other feminist critics have taught female writers not as parts of a male dominated tradition but as expressing a new and original female experience of life.

Elaine Showalter articulated this idea in **A Literature of Their Own**. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in **A Modest Woman in the Attic**, propose that **Wuthering Heights** should be linked with writers like Milton and Blake both of whom portrayed

visions of Hell as a focus of enormous energy and power. Blake reversed the conventional portrayal and defined Hell as **Energy and Eternal Delight**. Gillis and Gubar argue that initially Catherine occupies a state of liberty similar to Blakean Hell. Her power is manifested through Heathcliff who is her strength against an autocratic father and later a Drutisic brother. With the visit to Thrushcross Grange, their togetherness is broken. This is for Catherine a 'fall' from innocence into experience, from childhood to adulthood and also the moment she loses her power. Thrushcross Grange and its values represent, according to Gubar, Gubar civilized culture and society which is essentially male-centric. 'Power' is something always associated with **Wüthering Heights**, though generally critics perceive Heathcliff as the locus of this power. Feminist criticism, interestingly, shifts this desire for power to Catherine and shows how she fails to achieve it.

This introduction to some of the major streams of literary criticism should encourage you to read some of the articles yourself. The two Casebook series are extremely helpful for students. The first is edited by Muriam Allot and covers the early phases as well as some of the later phase. The New Casebook (1993) is edited by Patsy Stoneman. Other books that you can consult are listed in the biography.

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## 7.7. Questions

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### UNIT 2 : Emily Brontë : The Formative years

1. Do you think the life of Emily Brontë throws any light on her creativity?

### UNIT 3 : The Background

1. What do you understand by the Industrial Revolution? How did it change the relationships between different social groups?
2. Does the historical context have any bearing on Wüthering Heights?
3. Consider Wüthering Heights as a powerful social text.

### UNIT 4 : NARRATIVE

1. Comment on the uses of two narrators in Wüthering Heights. Does it enhance the effect of the narrative?
2. Would you consider the narrative mode of Brontë's novel to be modern?
3. Do you think Nelly is a reliable narrator? Can any narrator be reliable?

### UNIT 5 : Heathcliff

1. Does Heathcliff suffer or does he inflict suffering on others?
2. Heathcliff is often associated with Christian symbols of evil. What are Emily Brontë's views on religion and what do you make of Heathcliff from that perspective?

3. Do you think our interest in Heathcliff diminishes after the death of Catherine?
4. Can *Wuthering Heights* be called a Gothic novel?
5. What Byronic elements, if any, can you trace in the character of Heathcliff?
6. Compare and contrast Heathcliff and Edgar.
7. Would "Heathcliff" be a more appropriate title for Emily Brontë's novel?

#### **UNIT 6 : Catherine**

1. Examine the significance of the roles of the two Catherines in the novel.
2. Is there a contradiction between the Catherine who loves Heathcliff and the Catherine who marries Edgar? Give reasons for your answer.
3. Do you think Nelly's assessment of Catherine is sympathetic and shows a correct perspective?
4. Critically assess Emily Brontë's representation of women characters in the novel.
5. Do you think the inclusion of the love story of the second generation has diluted the intensity and interest of the story?

#### **UNIT 7 : Criticism**

1. How does modern criticism of *Wuthering Heights* differ from nineteenth century criticism?
2. Does modern criticism enrich our understanding of the novel or confuse it?

#### **\* Questions on the whole text**

1. The story of *Wuthering Heights* is concerned not with love in the abstract but with the passions of living people. Do you agree.
2. Is *Wuthering Heights* a representative or a deviation from the tradition of the Victorian novel?
3. It has been said that Emily Brontë developed out of a single sociological conflict, an original psychological exploration. Do you agree?

Write short notes on—

- (a) The contents of Catherine's diary.
- (b) Instances of domestic violence
- (c) Catherine and Heathcliff's last meeting
- (d) Why did Heathcliff disappear after hearing Catherine's conversation with Nelly?
- (e) When does Isabella write a letter to Nelly and why?
- (f) Describe Thrushcross Grange as Heathcliff and Catherine first see it.

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\* The following short questions will help you to assess your reading of the text.

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## 7.8. Select Bibliography

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## NOTES

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