



NETAJI SUBHAS OPEN UNIVERSITY

STUDY MATERIAL

PG : ENGLISH

PAPER - VIII

MODULE - 2

**POST GRADUATE
ENGLISH**



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.) Subha Sankar Sarkar
Vice-Chancellor

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POST GRADUATE : ENGLISH
[PG : ENG.]

Paper - VIII

Module — 2

Course Writing

- Unit 1 : Ms. Nabanita Sengupta
Unit 2 : Prof. Indranil Acharya
Unit 3 : Prof. Rafat Ali

Editing

Dr. Sudip Bhattacharya

Notification

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**NETAJI SUBHAS
OPEN UNIVERSITY**

**Post-Graduate
Course in English
PG English - 8**

Module

2

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Faculty of Education
Department of Education
100 King's College

UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTH ALABAMA


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UNIT : 1 □ OVID : AMORES

Structure

- 1.1. Introduction
- 1.2. Important Works of Ovid
- 1.3. The Amores : A Discussion
- 1.4. Reception of Ovid by Later Ages
- 1.5. Important Questions
- 1.6. Reading List

1.1 Introduction

Publius Ovidius Naso, one of the greatest poets of Latin literature was born on 20th March, 43 B.C. in what is now known as Sulmona, Italy, a small town near Rome. Belonging to an old, respectable and sufficiently well-to-do family, he was sent to Rome for education. Rome at that period was the best centre for learning. There he got the tutorship of the best teachers and was thought to have the makings of a good orator. But in spite of his father's repeated insistence, Ovid neglected studies and focussed on verse-writing which came naturally to him. Initially he spent a few years in an effort to build an official career, first spending a few years at the fashionable finishing school of Athens and then travelling to Asia minor and Sicily. After dutifully holding some minor judicial posts for some years, he left them to embark fully upon the career of a poet.

Ovid's first published work is *The Amores*, a set of love elegies written to, perhaps an imaginary, mistress Corinna. These were followed by *Heroides*, *Ars amatoria*, *Fasti* and *Remedia Amores*. These initial works immediately won him a large acclaim among the readers. But just as he began relishing the fruit of success, tragedy struck him in the form of the wrath of the Emperor Augustus and he was exiled from Rome forever to the almost barbaric, uneducated land of Tomis. The exact reason for the exile is not known but one of the reasons have been conjectured to be his amorous verses written and published at a time when Augustus was trying to instil moral reforms in Roman society. Another reason might be the poet's knowledge of some scandal in the imperial family involving the emperor's granddaughter Julia in which he might have been in a position to prevent or report to the emperor, but did neither. Tomis was the most unsuitable place for Ovid as he pined for the refinements of Rome and kept on sending letters of plea to Augustus and later

also to his successor, Tiberius; but neither relented. Ovid only got a release from his exile when he died in A.D 17. Whatever might have been the immediate reasons for the poet's exile, the desire to reduce Ovid's influence on the people must have also been in the emperor's mind. But in that Augustus has been greatly frustrated as even banishment could not reduce the poet's appeal to his readers and even today Ovid remains one of the most popular classical Latin poets.

Ovid's literary career can be divided into three phases. The first is marked by compositions of the *Amores*, the *Heroides* and the brilliant but calamitous trio of *The Art of Love*, *The Cure for Love* and *Cosmetics*.

The second phase of his literary life constitutes the next ten years when Ovid turned from amorous poems to serious themes. This phase marks his interest in Greek and Roman literature. His ambitious project of the *Metamorphosis*, a great poem on transformation and the greatest collection of mythology in any literature, belongs to this period. *Fasti*, a poetic calendar of astronomical data embellished with reference to the historical, political and social highlights of the Roman year was partially completed before the poet's sudden relegation to Tomis.

The final period of his literary career was the period of exile. *Letters from Black Sea* is a collection of letters sent to Emperor Augustus with pleas to change the location of his banishment. An autobiographical poem with allusions to his exile and its reasons, *The Sorrow*, was also written in this phase as was *Ibis*, a vicarious piece of learned abuses.

Ovid arrived at the literary scene when Virgil was dominating the Latin literary arena. Without any hostility towards the latter, Ovid led Roman poetry away from the manner and technique of epic poems such as *Aeneid* (29-19 B.C). He lacked the vision and greatness of Virgil but his skill lay in verse writing. His great talent covers a vast range of verses such as love elegy, mytho-historical epic, handbooks on love, set of fictitious letters written by mythological heroines, etc. He remains the most talented story-teller of the Western world. Apart from these he had also composed a tragedy, *Medea*, perhaps a rhetorical closet drama in the manner of Seneca, of which only two or three short fragments-have survived. But these fragments have the mark of genius in them.

1.2 Important Work of Ovid

- **Heroids or Letters from Heroines:** These are long, poetic letters, presenting the violently passionate private speeches of the most famous female figures from Greek

epics. While these women had been given minor roles, in those works, Ovid here makes them the centre of attraction, cutting their heroes down to size.

- *Ars amatoria* or The Art of Love: It is a didactic poem with several clever twists which also raise many political and ethical questions faced by us today. It used a serious poetic form to write on a trivial subject - advice on extra-marital love affairs. It is satirical in nature. Perhaps the seriousness of appearance of this book and its popularity earned the poet the anger of the emperor, and consequently life-long exile.
- *Remedia amoris* : A kind of recantation of *Ars amoris*, fragment of writing on cosmetics.
- *Medicamina Faciei Femineae* : A fragment of writing on cosmetics.
- *Metamorphoses* : A work in 15 books, it takes as its unifying theme the transformations recorded in mythology and legend from the creation of the world to the time of Roman emperor Julius Caesar, whose change into a celestial star marks the last of the series. Derservedly famous as a handbook of Greek mythology, it is composed in a witty and, at times, almost burlesque, or exaggerated spirit.
- *Fasti*: A poetic calendar describing the various Roman festivals and the legends connected with each. Of the projected 12 books, 1 for each month of the year, only the first 6 are extant.
- *Tristia* : Five books of elegies that describe his unhappy existence at Tomi and his appeal to the mercy of Augustus.
- *Epistulae ex Ponto* : Poetic letters similar in theme to the *Tristia*. These are letters written to Emperor

Augustus during his exile, asking for a change of his place of exile.

- Some other works of the poet are *Ibis* and *Halieutica*.

1.3 The *Amores* : A Discussion

The earliest published work by the poet; this is a collection of love elegies, most of them addressed to a certain mistress Corinna. *Amores* or 'The Story of Love', tells us the story of poet's relationship with his mistress Corinna, taking us through a wide range of experiences in the process. The identity of this lady is most probably fictitious, a fantastic figure, as no one has been able to ever identify her. It seems that the poet has adorned her with all his taste and ingenuity. As claimed by the books, these were initially five in number but had been reduced to three.

Ovid comes after Propertius and Tibullus, who had developed an elegiac genre in which the speaker is enslaved to a mistress and chooses a life of decadence and devotion rather than civic and military success. Ovid's amatory works put private life on display, or rather, shows us how private life is already on display. He differs from his predecessors in greater ebullience and wit as well as their versatile variety.

Ovid's *Amores* does not present us an atmosphere of bliss and serenity, instead, there are constant shifts of mood which makes the emotional weather quite precarious. It consists of a series of dramatic incidents and crisis, more so since the projected relationship is neither permanent nor secure. Corinna has a husband, a presence who makes Ovid the lover's position quite uncertain. There is even a reference to Ovid's wife in one of the elegies. The presence of such immediate 'others' creates a sense of urgency as well as an atmosphere of doubt throughout the poems. Hope, fear, uncertainty, all these sways the mind of the poet lover but he at the same time enjoys the thrills of all these emotions. The presence of a rival, real or imaginary, increases his desire for the beloved and the pleasure in the pursuit is heightened. Such a competition proves that the mistress is desirable. Though it makes his own state precarious, it also makes his success more valuable. Nothing is stable or final. The lover will sometimes swear eternal allegiance to his lady and mean it at that moment but in fact there is no bond that cannot be severed, just as there is no broken allegiance which cannot be mended.

The work is quite incoherent, in keeping with the erratic state of affairs. The arrangement of elegies does not exhibit any proper order. They seem to be deliberately confusing, and very rarely do we find one elegy beginning at a point left off by the previous. Each of the elegies has a separate existence, and together they narrate a tale of the poet's relationship with his mistress, their life and world. About twelve of these elegies are addressed to Corinna, but even in these we find the poet's attention

fleetingly hovering over other women. No one woman monopolises the poet's attention. In some of the elegies it also happened that the poet lover was unable to make up his mind about which of the two lovely girls he preferred, and hence devoted equal attention to both, pursuing the two with equal ardour. This gives ample scope for jealousy to arise in the hearts of both the partners. The rivals ensure that not a single dull moment exists in the relationship of the poet and his mistress. Loyalty does not find a priority in the lovers' world, perhaps in keeping with the tradition prevalent in that period of the history of ancient Rome. This was against Emperor Augustus' campaign for loyalty in marriage and later earned the poet his wrath when he pursued these themes extensively in his later works like *Ars anatoria*.

In these elegies, love as an autonomous occupation is frequently contrasted to other pursuits. In the very first two poems, love is compared to war. The two extremely opposite conditions, war with its violent destructions and love with its languid sentimentality, are juxtaposed against each other. The pain of love, inflicted by cupid's arrow becomes easier to bear when the poet decides to surrender, just as when the horse in harness stops being unruly, the leather hurts it less (I.ii). The ninth elegy of Book one is a direct comparison of the two arts of love and war with the poet emphasising on the fact that the age which is good for war is also good for love. He also draws the parallel that both have to face arduous roads in their way. Once, the poet also makes a remark to the effect that love is a kind of a man's war against an enemy in which team work is out of question and chance plays no part. Through this on poet emphasises the personal nature of love. Each man bears or enjoys for himself the effort and the achievement and glory thereof, all are his own. Ironically, Ovid was in reality against all kinds of warfare. He abhorred the cruelty associated with it and was strictly against the sordid greed that made people fought the wars. The worse case was when war pervaded the tender area of love. In one of his elegies, Ovid compares her mistress' surrender to one of the ruthless soldiers to the same kind of avarice and greed that made these men fight unnecessary wars and cause so much of blood shed. Just as the intruder has let his body to be used for war, in order to gain the fruits of its ravages, the woman has yielded in the same spirit of mercenary. He is against that kind of wealth which gradually begins to dictate the lives of men, investing in them the authority of rank and judgement.

There is a comment on the material aspect of love in one of the elegies. A slight lack of delicacy on the lady's part makes the poet complain in bitter indignation that his feeling towards her has changed because she has been asking for gifts from him (Book I, elegy X). The poet is no more captured by the beauty of his mistress as it has been tarnished by her greed for material gains. Such an action of the mistress is then compared to the action of selling and not bestowing the favours on her lover and this causes great bitterness in the lover. There is a note of relenting in his voice when

he condescends that there is no harm in asking gifts of a rich man, while at the same time stressing on the immortality that the mistress can achieve only through her lover—poet's verses. What has hurt the poet more is not the fact that he will have to give the gifts but the fact that his mistress could demand so as a return for her love. So for Ovid love has its own spirit of propriety and code of conduct, deviation from which hurts the lover. Just as a war, love has its own set of rules which must be followed by its participants.

In the game of love the reality and fiction mingle. Often the poet prescribes the willing suspension of reality for himself when he asks his beloved to deny the existence of any rival of the poet even though she might have just bestowed her favours on them. In Book I, Elegy-5, he begs her to not to be kind to her husband in the game of love and if at all she has to relent, then, to deny to the poet that she has been kind to him in her favours. The semblance of loyalty is more important than actual virtue. Neither the poet, nor the lady claim to possess exclusive loyalty for each other. If there is the husband for the lady, the poet—lover too has fleeting affairs with other women including one of her slaves. So in this particular form of poetry, self-deception and delusion are considered meritorious whenever they satisfy the emotions. Here Ovid's love elegies differ greatly from the epics. Deliberate self-deception does not have a place in this world! as in the world of elegies.

In another of the elegies he admits that her beauty gives her the right to 'sin', to be unfaithful in love but the poet refuses this truth to be forced upon his consciousness. True to the maxim of ignorance being bliss, the poet would willingly keep himself deceived regarding the loyalty of his mistress. Though he indulges in jealous suspicions about his beloved, which are at times unfounded, he would not like the suspicions to be confirmed. The transgressions in this world are no transgressions if they can be well disguised so as not to hurt the sentiments of the lover. Both the partners indulge in transgressions but try to keep it well hidden from the other.

This make-believe world of Ovid is governed by the dictates of emotions and feelings. The double life that the poet wants to thrust upon his mistress is for the sake of the game of war. It is a part of the code of conduct demanded by this game and is essential for the sentiments to range far and wide.

Ovid's world is frequently governed by a conflicting state of emotions. In the last of the elegies of the second book, the poet wants his mistress to be guarded heavily by her husband. The inaccessibility will make her more desired by the poet as what is hard to get is always dearer. But earlier, in Book I, Elegy 6, he himself begs the door keeper to take pity on him and let him reach Corinna who is also waiting there for him. Such contrasting feelings are in keeping with the sentimentality of love which is not governed by reason but by emotion. Similarly, while the lover at one point professes eternal faithfulness, at some other time is torn between his love for

two different women. In another example, the lover complains of the jealous nature of his mistress which finds out problems even when there are none, calling her allegations to be completely baseless (Book-II. Elegy- 7) and in the very next one gives her the cause to be suspicious by his attentions to Corinna's slave Cypassis and asks the latter how Corinna became aware of their secret meetings.

According to Hermann Frankel, to write poetry, means among other things, to transform reality, lifting it to a level where it can satisfy man's finer thoughts and nobler sentiments. This is performed by love, by what could be regarded as a species of madness. Therefore we find Ovid weaving his poetry and his love into one texture. He enters an amorous affair with an artist's eye, converting it into verse, an act of creation. Herein lies the realism of erotic poetry. It is more substantial than either drama or epic because here the author is composing his own life in verse. Ovid believed that the emotional experiences of the people too deserved a right to be recorded in verse just as the myths, fables and heroic deeds did. So he became the voice of the human soul.

The private world of Ovid's *Amores* in actuality is very crowded. There is a wide range of people who act as a foil to the intimate relationships. The slaves form one such group. They in their powerlessness form an interesting counterpart to the poet-lover who is equally powerless and a willing slave of his mistress (Book II. Elegy-17). In the erotic world of *Amores*, slavery then becomes an important metaphor for poetry. Ovid the lover is in constant need of favours from Janitor (1.vi), Cypassis (2. vii), Nape (Li), Bagoas (2. ii and iii) in order to win favours from his lady.

Apart from the slaves the Ovidian world is peopled by other characters, various addressees who go by proper Roman names - Atticus (1. ix), Graecinus (2. x), Macer (3. xviii), Ovid's wife (3. xiii)

Another group of important 'others' are the lovers, rivals and fiends who add to the thrill of the pursuits of love. So the private world of the Ovidian erotic does not comprise only that of the poet-lover and his mistress, it is peopled by many others who play minor roles in the game of love.

When Ovid embarked upon his literary career, love poetry already existed and had been developed by a generation of poets before him. Ovid included the autobiographical mode of composition in his verses. Unlike other poets the use of autobiography is not to express any inner feelings, but because follows the characters and situations to be taken for granted. More than their intellectual depth, his verses are notably graceful. Fittingly, the important aspects of *Amores* are its verbal and metrical dexterity. There is an epigrammatical quality found in these verses. At the same time, there is a slight incoherence in the creation. But all these are fit for the theme of the composition, which is dominated by unpredictability of the lover's heart. There is balance and

contrast both in thought and expression. Ingenuity is evident in word-order, brevity, compression, allusion and also in an attempt to maintain a deliberate ambiguity. Imagery does not form an important constituent of his poetry. The chief characteristics of his poetry are irreverence and bawdiness, playfulness and irony and a lyrical quality.

Amores is not beyond criticism. Its style has often been considered by critics to be superficial. The majestic element found in the epics is absent in this type of poetry, neither does it pose any serious intellectual problems. Yet these poems are not fully superficial or lacking in purpose. It touches on the important theme of the poetic immortality, which these verses can offer to the mistress. It also comments on the Augustan regime where the dictates of heart suffers a setback. *Amores* offers an alternative approach to love characterised by the difficulties, follies and deceptions of the lover, which are in direct contrast to the stance of the moralist, as well as that of the emperor Augustus himself. The poet, through these verses, is directly opposing the Augustan attempt to reform marriages. But there is no political stand in the work making it apolitical in nature.

1.4 Reception of Ovid by Later Ages

From the 4th till the 11th century, the literary language of Europe was Latin. But this language was in the clutches of the religious leaders as they formed the majority of the educated class. Pagan works were not encouraged and in fact even destroyed. Still, many classical works, including those of Ovid survived that age. Since then Ovid has remained one of the most influential Roman poets down the centuries.

There was a rapid growth of trade and development of cities around the 11th and 12th centuries which led to a spread of education through systems independent of the churches. Ovid gained steady popularity in this period as literature now was released from the iron hand of the churches. His stories influenced the songs of troubadours of Southern France, popularising the idea of courtly love.

In Italy, Ovid's poetry reinforced the love for "dolce stil nuovo" (literally, my sweet new style) poets for their personal, emotional writings. This was also a period of development of national language and Ovid exercised quite an influence on the Italian vernacular.

Ovid's popularity grew during the Renaissance, particularly among humanists who were striving to re-create ancient modes of thought and feeling, and printed editions of his works followed each other in an unending stream from 1471. A knowledge of his verse became must for a man of letters and in the 15th—17th centuries it would be difficult to name a poet or painter of note who was not in some

degree indebted to him. The *Metamorphoses*, in particular, offered one of the most accessible and attractive avenues to the riches of Greek mythology. But Ovid's chief appeal stems from the humanity of his writing: its gaiety, its sympathy, and its exuberance, its pictorial and sensuous quality. It is these things that have recommended him, down the ages, to the troubadours and the poets of courtly love, to Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, J.W.von Goethe, and Ezra Pound.

1.5 Questions on Ovid

- 1) Analyse Ovid as a love poet.
- 2) The influence of Ovid was more in the renaissance and not in the early middle age. What factors were responsible for this?
- 3) How is Ovid's *Amores* opposed Augustus' moral reform plans?
- 4) Critically analyse the *Amores* as a series of amorous elegies.
- 5) Contrasting emotions and feelings rule the poet-lover of the *Amores*. Show how it is reflected in the elegies.
- 6) The *Amores* is not about fidelity in love, instead the presence of rivals increases its interest. Examine the elegies in the wake of this statement.
- 7) Analyse the style and techniques employed by the poet in the *Amores*.
- 8) Who are the various other people that populate the world of *Amores*??

1.6 Reading List

- L.P. Wilkinson, *Ovid Recalled* (1955)
Hermann Fränkel, *Ovid: A Poet Between Two Worlds* (1945, reissued 1969).
Philip Hardie (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid* (2002).
Ron Padgett (ed.), *World Poets Vol-II* (2000)
Robert V. Young (ed.). *Poetry Criticism, Vol II* (1991)

UNIT : 2 □ SENECA : THYESTES

Structure :

- 2.1. Introduction
- 2.2. The Legend of Tantalus
- 2.3. The Legend of Thyestes
- 2.4. The Plot of Thyestes
- 2.5. Closet Drama
- 2.6. Chrous
- 2.7. Revenge Motive
- 2.8. The Charactor of Atreus
- 2.9. The Character of Thyestes
- 2.10. Sample Questions
- 2.11. Select Readings

2.1 Introduction

Seneca, 'The Younger' or 'The Philosopher' (C. 4 BC - AD 65) was the second son of Seneca the Elder and was born at Corduba (Cordoba) in Spain. He was brought as a child to Rome and educated there in rhetoric and philosophy. Embarking on a senatorial career he became an advocate, quaestor, and senator, and achieved a considerable reputation as an orator and writer, so much so that he provoked the jcalousy of the emperor Caligula and in 39AD narrowly eseaped death sentence. Under Claudius Seneca occupied a position at court. In 41AD he was banished to Corsica for alleged adultery with Julia (also callid Liviela), the youngest daughter of Germanicus and Agrippina the Elder, and sister of Caligula. Julia's sister, also called Agrippina (the Younger), mother of Nero, had him recalled in 49 AD and he was made tutor to the Young Nero. In 51 AD Burrus, who later became Seneca's friend, was made prefect of praetorians. On the accession of Nero in 54AD. Seneca became the Emperor's political advisor and for the next eight years Rome enjoyed good .governemnt under the direction of Seneca and Burrus. But Nero gradually became capricious and after Burrus death in 62 AD the willingness of others to condone the emperor's excesses reduced Seneca's influence. He left Rome and dovoted the next three years to philosophy. In 65AD he was implicated in the unsuccessful conspiracy of Piso and forced to commit suicide. His courageous death is described by Tacitus.

The inconsistencies between Seneca's moral principles, his political life, and the behaviour of his pupil emperor have provoked much speculation, and he has been severely judged. He condoned the murders of Claudius, Britannicus, and Agrippina, and he acquired enormous wealth at a court where his professed moral principles were ignored. He conformed to his principles too late to save his reputation. However, he was a humane and toterant man, for many years a successful politician and an influence for good, and a writer of considerable and varied talent.

Seneca's most important poetical works are nine tragedies adapted from the Greek : **Hercules furens**, **Medea**, **Troades (Trojan Women)**, **Phaedra** (all based at least in part on Euripides), **Agamemnon** (probably indebted to Aeschylus), **Oedipus**, **Hercules Oetaeus** (the former very Sophoclean, the latter, similar to Sophocles' **Trachiniae**), **Phoenissae** (owing a little to Sophocles' **Oedipus Coloneus**), and **Thyestes** (a gruesome story with no extant source). A tenth tragedy is attributed to Seneca, **Octavia**, without concrete evidence. The plays are written on Greek lines, that is. with dramatic episodes separated by choral odes. It is likely that Seneca intended his tragedies for private recitation rather than for acting. They are exaggerations of the Euripidean style, showing psychological insight but markedly rhetorical and pointed in manner, and Seneca loves to dwell on the horrific and macabre elements of the plot. But the stichomythia is often more effective than that of the Greek original. The ending of Seneca's **Medea** is more dramatic than that of Euripides. There are fine passages of description, much moralizing, and some striking epigrams. The plays also convey the Euripidean sense of the individual as victim. They exerted a great influence during the Italian Renaissance and in Tudor and Jacobean times in England. Stock characters in the romantic plays of Shakespeare, such as the ghost, the nurse, and the barbarous villain, were transmuted from the Greek through the medium of Seneca.

Any Elizabethan writer who has used Revenge as his theme is willy nilly a Senecan. Two forces - 'Ate' and 'Nemesis' underlie the Greek treatment of Revenge. Seneca has not made use of these forces. His dictum was :

"Nothing avenges crimes
But what surpasses them."

Shakespeare's **Titus Andronicus** and **Richard III** are unmistakably Senecan. In **Julius Caesar** Mark Antony predicts evil days :

"Caesar's spirit raging for revenge,
With Ate by his side come hot from hell."

In **Richard III** Shakespeare has portrayed Queen Margaret as symbol of the spirit of Revenge. She cries out passionately :

"Bear with me; I am hungry for revenge,
And now I cloy me with beholding it,
Thus hath the course of justice wheel'd about."

Hamlet is Shakespeare's supreme achievement as a Revenge play and invites comparison with Kyd's **The Spanish Tragedy**. In **Macbeth**, when Shakespeare writes, "Will all great Neptune's Ocean wash this blood/ Clean from my hand?" he actually reproduces an expression from Seneca's **Phaedra**. King Lear cries out :

"I will do such things—
What they are yet I know not-but they shall be
The terrors of the earth."

The idea and even the language are taken from **Thyestes**.

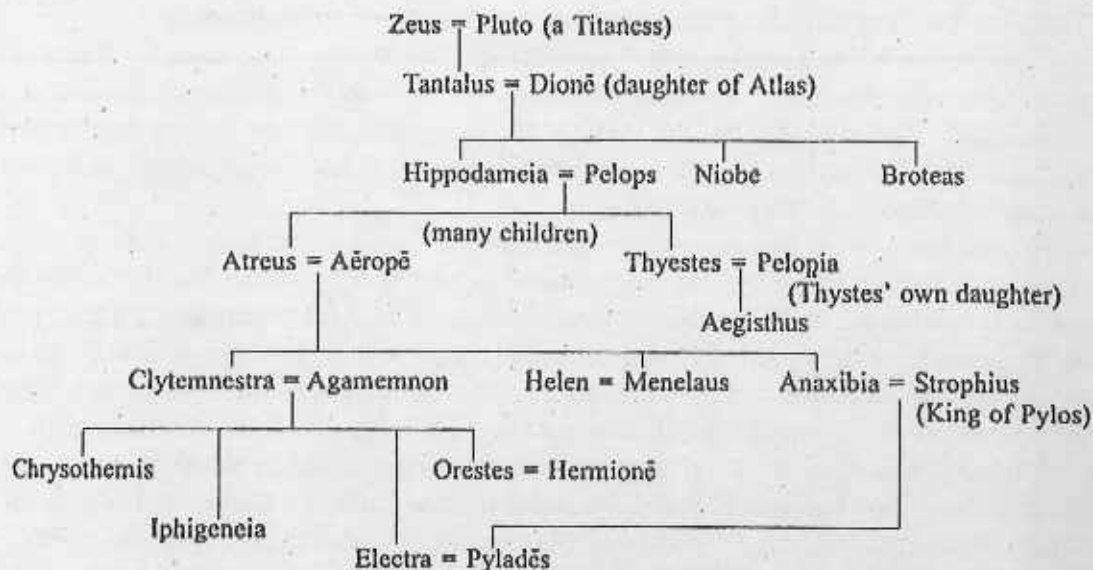
2.2 The Legend of Tantalus

Tantalus, in Greek myth, was the son of Zeus and the Titaness Pluto ('wealth'), king of the region around Mount Sipylus in Lydia. He married Dionē, daughter of Atlas, by whom he became the father of Niobē and Pelops, and thus the ancestor of Pelopidae. Tantalus offended the gods and was punished in Tartarus by being set, thirsty and hungry, in a pool of water which always receded when he tried to drink from it, and under fruit trees whose branches the wind tossed aside when he tried to pick the fruit. Another account of his punishment was that a great stone was suspended over his head, threatening to crush him, so that he was in too much terror to enjoy a banquet which was set before him. The reason for these punishments is variously described : either he invited the gods to dinner and served them his son's flesh, or he stole nectar and ambrosia from the gods' table, where he had been invited, and gave them to his friends, or he told his friends the gods' secrets.

2.3 The Legend of Thyestes

Pelops, in Greek myth, was the son of the Lydian king Tantalus. Two of Pelops' sons were Atreus and Thyestes, in whom the curse was manifested. Atreus became king of Mycenae, and Thyestes seduced his brother's wife Acrope; thereupon Atreus banished Thyestes but later recalled him on pretence of being reconciled and prepared a banquet for him consisting of the flesh of his two sons. When Thyestes realized what he had eaten, he fled in horror, calling down a curse on the house of Atreus. He now became, by his own daughter Pelopia, the father of Aegisthus, who was exposed at birth by his mother but brought up by shepherds; when Atreus heard of the boy's existence, he set for him and brought him up as his own child. When Aegisthus was grown up, Atreus sent him to kill Thyestes, but the latter recognized him as his own son and the two contrived the death of Atreus instead. Atreus was the father of Agamemnon and Menelaus. When Agamemnon led the Greek expedition to Troy and left the kingdom of Mycenae in the care of his wife Clytemnestra, his

cousin Aegisthus seduced her and joined with her in murdering Agamemnon on his return. Later, Agamemnon's son Orestes, with the help of his sister Electra, avenged their father by killing Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. The curse on the house was not finally expunged until the purification of Orestes. A simple genealogy may be constructed as follows, but there are very many variations of relationships in the sources.



2.4. The Plot of Thyestes

The play opens with the ghost of Tantalus lamenting his own misfortune and shuddering at the horrible crimes to be committed by his descendants. He was in hell, living in continual thirst and hunger. The huge stone was always hanging over his head, keeping him in perpetual alarm. Megaera, the Fury drew a macabre picture of the sins to be committed by Tantalus' descendants. Parents would be cruel to their children. Children, in their turn, would perform unnatural acts. The arrogant and ambitious brothers would fight for the throne. Bad people would seize power by force. There would be an atmosphere of hatred, bitterness and suspicion. There would also be a saturnalia of passions. Lust would conquer reason. Truth and justice would be overshadowed by falsehood and tyranny. The household gods would be rejected summarily. Men would engage in indiscriminate killing. Bedlam would be

unleashed and vandalism would hold sway. Thyestes' children would be cooked in a cauldron.

The ghost of Tantalus felt the atmosphere stifling. He decided to return to hell. He prayed to his father Jupiter not to punish his children. He had experienced abject misery. Let his children escape the fatal consequences of the sin of the forefather. Megaera offered no consolation to the ghost. She said that his eternal thirst for water would become, in his children, an eternal thirst for blood. The sinful touch of Tantalus would infect all the members of his family for generations.

The chorus of the Argive elders repeated the harrowing tale, told by Tantalus' ghost and Megaera. They invoked the power of the gods to bring benediction in a cursed land. Tantalus set the ball rolling. He had killed his son Pelops and served his flesh at a banquet to the gods. For that savage feast he was punished in hell in a manner which was unprecedented.

Atreus, the son of Pelops and the grandson of Tantalus, was in a state of fury. He was reproaching himself for his inability to take revenge upon his brother, who had seduced his wife. He should no more indulge in idle lamentations. All the men of Mycenae should be alerted in order to find out Thyestes. Revenge was his watchword. His minister tried to restrain him from his act of vengeance. The people were not interested in the matter at all, and yet they were forced to be involved in it.

Atreus was a despot. As a king he had the prerogatives to what he liked. He recalled how Thyestes had seduced his wife, tried to grab his throne and stolen the ram with the golden fleece. Atreus wanted to punish his brother in a horrible manner. Then he gave an outline of his devilish plan. He would invite his exiled brother and then serve the flesh of his sons to him. Atreus would send his sons Agamemnon and Menelaus to find out Thyestes. He would be tempted to come for he had a passion for rule. The bait would prove irresistible. The minister advised Atreus not to send his sons, for in future they might apply the same trick on their father. But Atreus would test whether Agamemnon and Menelaus were his sons or their uncle's. If they refused to execute the plan, the conclusion would be irresistible that they were the children of Thyestes.

The chorus, when informed of the attempt of Atreus to bring back his brother, felt happy at the prospect of reconciliation. Thyestes was returning home after a period of exile. He was accompanied by Tantalus and two other sons. It may be noted here that Tantalus was Thyestes' son, named after his great grandfather. Thyestes felt happy to be back in Mycenae. He was, of course, in his brother's palace, but his mind was filled with uncanny fear. Tantalus watched his father with concern. He failed to understand why his father wanted to leave. Atreus wanted to give Thyestes half the kingdom. But Thyestes had dark premonition which he failed to account for. The prospect of becoming a king did not delight him. He became almost a philosopher—a stoic in his attitude to life.

Tantalus advised his father not to be so indifferent to things. But Thyestes had misgivings about the honesty of Atreus' intention. He was concerned about his sons who might be the victims of Atreus. It was expedient to go away from that cursed place.

Atreus in a soliloquy stuck to his idea of revenge. He was glad that Thyestes was at his disposal. As soon as Thyestes came he extended to him a hearty welcome. It was indeed a good beginning. But Atreus had no idea of reconciliation. Outwardly, he was repentant. He offered royal robes to his brother. Thyestes had no more misgivings. He prayed to God for the happiness and prosperity of Atreus. Atreus said that henceforth two kings would rule in Mycenae. Thyestes was no more interested in being a king. Atreus insisted and at last Thyestes agreed to be a king.

The chorus rejoiced at the reconciliation between the two brothers. But things were not what they seemed. The Messenger entered in a breathless state and exclaimed that Atreus had done a horrible deed. He narrated a gruesome story. Atreus sang a sacrificial song and led the three sons of Thyestes to a grove. Like a priest he stood before the altar. Then he stabbed Tantalus, who faced death quietly. He did not appeal to Atreus to grant him his life. The second one to be beheaded "was Plithenes. The third child of Thyestes was also not spared. Atreus was so much emotionally distraught that he hacked the body into pieces.

The chorus stood completely dazed. The Messenger said that it was but the beginning of crime. Atreus cut the three bodies into pieces. The severed limbs were roasted upon the spits. The sun could not watch such a ghastly show. It was darkness at noon. The cooked flesh would be then daintily served to Thyestes and unknowingly he would eat it.

The earth and the sky were completely enveloped in darkness. The chorus wondered at this freak of nature. The daylight could not be seen. What was adumbrated became a reality. Atreus, full of malicious glee, became as proud as the Olympian gods. He would "watch his brother thyestes enjoying the feast.

A grand banquet was ready. The wide hall was illuminated. Thyestes was lying supine on gold and purple. He had drunk to his heart's content. The wine was mixed with the blood of his children. Unknowingly, Thyestes had eaten the flesh of his own children.

Thyestes was sitting alone at the banquet table. Some dark premonition of evil weighed upon him. He was wondering why in spite of the sceptre and the crown, he was in a state of despondency. He could not celebrate the yultide. An inner voice was preventing him from wearing the crown.

Atreus had been watching his brother with diabolical glee. He now approached Thyestes and asked him to celebrate the occasion. Thyestes tried to recover from the state of depression. He wished his sons were also present. Atreus said feelingly that Thyestes' sons were within himself. For the spectators the assurance of Atreus was equivocal. It Could not assure Thyestes. He cried passionately and asked

his sons to come to him. Atreus appeared with a covered platter in his hands. As the platter was uncovered, Thyestes said the severed heads of his sons. Mad with grief, he asked the earth if she could stand this ordeal. He wondered why the city of Mycenae had not yet been razed to the ground. The wailing of Thyestes did not move Atreus at all. He asked Thyestes to embrace and kiss his sons. Thyestes anxiously asked if the dead bodies of his sons were the food for the wild birds or beasts. Atreus, no longer equivocal, replied that Thyestes had feasted upon his own sons. Thyestes realised why the sun had reversed its course and why there was darkness at noon. His sorrow was too deep for tears. He asked Atreus to give him a sword, so that he might rip his own bowels for the flesh of the children to come out. Atreus replied that he had a mind to make him drink the hot blood of his sons. Thyestes' crime and treachery fully warranted that. He then recounted the circumstances under which the sons were slain. Thyestes appealed to the gods and Nature to listen to his tragedy. He was praying for his slain sons. Thyestes' grief heightened the joy of Atreus. Thyestes asked why the sons had to pay the penalty for the sin of the father. He also called upon the gods to redress the wrong. But Atreus said that Thyestes was grief-stricken not because he had eaten his children but because he could not prepare a dish out of the flesh of Atreus's sons. Thyestes sought to provide similar food for Atreus with the aid of the treacherous wife, whom he had seduced. Thyestes went away cursing Atreus and praying for divine punishment.

2.5. Closet Drama

The age of Seneca may be considered as a period of decline of the tragic art that developed in Greece. In fact, the amplitude of tragic violence and intrigue in real life, perhaps, contributed to the dislike for presentation of artistic violence on stage. Again, Seneca himself protested against the organised spectacles of butchery in the amphi-theatre. These perhaps, blunted the taste of the Roman people for tragedy as a dramatic art. Seneca's plays in general were intended for recital at private gatherings and it was never expected to be performed on the stage before the general audience. It has also been suggested that there had been implied criticism of the aristocracy and sporadic topical references. Naturally, the plays of Seneca would have been dangerous for him personally, if they would have been performed before the public. Moreover, the decline of tragic art is largely responsible for the development of the

closet dramas. Critics have suggested that in Nero's time a kind of drama which was almost a halfway house between ballet and opera was very popular. It laid emphasis on song and mime. There were, of course, personal attempts to write tragedies. Thus Cicero and his brother Quintus wrote tragedies. Julius Caesar wrote a play entitled *Oedipus*. Ovid was also renowned for his composition called *Medea*. Varius Rufus wrote a tragedy *Thyestes* on the occasion of the victory of Actium. Thus, to write a play for a specific occasion had been just a matter of accident. But regular public performance of tragedy was very rare.

While the Greek were largely imitated in respect of comedy, giving way to the great achievement of Plautus and Terence, Greek model of tragedy had never been particularly imitated. It is because the diffuse Roman society and the increasingly sophisticated Roman mind could never recapture the singleness of spirit which in a Greek city state found expression in the ritual of tragedy. The Roman mind did not accept the Aeschylean and the Sophoclean model of tragedy; rather they turned to the sceptical rationalism of Euripides. Seneca, in particular, concentrated on the ideal of rhetoric which found a stimulating example in Euripides.

Thus, Seneca in his *Thyestes* opted for high sounding speeches which were full of moral maxims and judicious wisdom. What is really striking in *Thyestes* is that the dialogue generally arises even from the most gruesome situation. Thus, when the Fury foreshadows the future tragedy of *Thyestes*, he suddenly becomes inordinately rhetorical—

“Let loose the Furies on your impious house
Let evil vie with evil, sword with sword
Let anger be unchecked, repentance dumb.”

This rhetorical elaboration is also noticed in Atreus' decision to take revenge. He digresses into the primitive mythology of the House of Teius. He even amplifies this by referring to the atrocity which occurred in Daulis and exclaims :

“Mother and sister of Daulis give me guidance!
My case is yours, help and direct my hand.”

The song of the chorus is also loaded with sublime moral speeches which are not associated with the central point of action. Thus the second song of the chorus says :

“A king is he who has no ill to fear,
whose hand is innocent, whose conscience clear.”

The play is also extremely burdened with reflective speeches. While *Thyestes* talks to his son about his guilt and expresses his sense of repentance, he begins to reflect on the situation in an elaborate manner :

“While I stood among the great
I stood in daily terror;
The very sword I wore at my own side I feared.”

Again, Atreus, devising his motive of revenge, reflects on his deceptive manoeuvre in terms of the image of a net :

"The net is spread, the game is in the trap. I see my brother with his hateful sons close by his side."

The critics have sometimes come to the conclusion that Senecan drama, not only was never acted, but never would be. The stagecraft of Seneca has been dismissed as impractical for no better reason than that he represents persons talking in a way in which no living person ordinarily talks. But *Thyestes* was never meant to be acted on stage. It can be said that a closet drama like *Thyestes* can never be a successful stage production. In fact Seneca has never been a constructor of tragic plots. What he intends to show in his play is the eternal conflict between the forces of good and evil. In the human society Seneca must have noted the gradual depravity of the human mind in terms of deception, treachery, villainy and so on. Thus, his plays may be considered as dramatic discussions which in an implied manner reflect the inner voice of the author. In this way closet drama becomes a convenient medium for Seneca to elaborate his personal views on questions of moral depravity. In this tragic world *Thyestes* is already depraved, but he is repentant. Atreus presents an aggressive form of treachery and wickedness. Thus, on the basis of the dramatic sense of revenge, Seneca highlights his views on temperance, morality, wisdom and endurance. Senecan tragedies were never meant for actual performance on stage. They were chiefly intended for reading or recital at private gatherings. It is true that the artistry required for such emphasis on recitation made the chorus highly formal in nature. We note that the nearest approach to tragic acting in Nero's time has been something between ballet and opera, with an emphasis on the individual's art of evoking the passions through song and mime. Thus Senecan tragedy or more particularly *Thyestes* presents the formal movements of the chorus.

In many cases the chorus has been largely rhetorical in nature. But it may be suggested that the Senecan chorus has not been imitative of either Aeschylean or Sophoclean forms of the chorus. It is implied that Seneca concentrates on the Euripidean form in general. Naturally the choric tradition is also based on the Euripidean model. But apart from this, certain distinctive changes have been coming into being. In Euripides changes have been made in the modulation of the chorus. In Euripides it is sometimes felt that the chorus is behaving in an improbable fashion. It refers to the fact that it is gradually becoming a kind of burden to the essential action of the play. In Seneca the pattern of change is all the more clear. In fact the synthesis of dialogue and choral song in a single poetic structure was falling apart, until the function of the chorus lingered on only as an ornament contributing nothing to the theme of the play. The development was accompanied by a modification of the form of the theatre itself when the reduction of the circular orchestra to a semi circle

o less brought about a notable change. This perhaps transferred the emphasis from the poetic ritual of the chorus to the display of acting on the stage. Thus the function of 'melos' comes to be largely kept to a minimum in many places. For instance, in *Thyestes* the entire fourth act is a dialogue between the Messenger and the chorus. The Messenger reports the gruesome spectacle of the killing of Thyestes' two sons and the chorus becomes the central acting character, in the entire act and it helps the evocation of proper emotions in the mind of the audience. In other words, it may be suggested that the Senecan chorus is gradually becoming 'dramatic' in nature.

The use of 'sententiae', so popular in the rhetorical tradition of drama began to exercise an influence on the Senecan chorus. It is generally said that Seneca's use of the chorus is in many cases unconvincing. Yet at its best the Senecan chorus supplies examples of his best writings. It is very often written in a concise style and Latin language seems to be the most perfect instrument for executing this kind of style. Thus it happens to be highly effective when there is a philosophical speculation made by the chorus in its speech on humble and relaxed life. It seems that Senecan chorus sometimes reaches the highest peak of lyricism and this lyricism may be judged for its own sake without consideration of the dramatic context :

"Let others scale dominion's slippery peak;
Peace and obscurity are all I seek
Enough for me to live alone
And please myself with idleness and leisure
A man whose name his neighbours would not know
I'd watch my stream of life serenely flow
Through years of quietness, until the day
When an old man, a commoner, passed away."

Again sometimes Seneca tries to generalise the immediate dramatic situation through creating general referential frame. Thus in the third act the chorus is anxious with a fear of civil war. Moreover, the chorus is convinced that something terrible will happen especially after Thyestes' frank admission to his son of his own guilt. The chorus makes a long speech on the immediate dramatic situation. But it is worth nothing how it generalises the idea of restless warfare :

"So when the north gales fall up on the sea
And breakers roll in from the deep, the caves of Scylla
Echo their pounding beat, and sailors yet ashore
Tremble to see the swelling waters which Charybdis
Greedily swallows down and vomits up again."

The Senecan wisdom arising out of his belief in Stoicism and contemporary consciousness of fatalism may also be found in the general speeches of the chorus. Thus in Act III the chorus says :

“No state of life endures; pleasure and pain
Take each their turn; and pleasure’s turn is shorter.”

Seneca’s plays were meant to be recited and this is perhaps because in many of the choric speeches there is an implied condemnation of autocracy and the power of the king. Thus in the choric speech of Act II he has registered his long protest of the autocratic power of the king. Again in Act III the chorus points out that even the kings should try to obey the divine law :

“Kings of the earth must bow to a higher kingdom
Some, whom the rising sun sees high exalted,
The same sun may see fallen at it departing.

Thus it is clearly noticeable that Seneca has made an artistic use of the chorus. Generally the Latin dramatic dialogues used to be written in iambic trimeters. In *Thyestes* Seneca has again and again made use of the iambic lyrical meters which bring about a larger variety and melodious modulation in the choric speeches.

2.7. Revenge Motive

Seneca’s *Thyestes* depicts the fiendish vengeance wrought by Atreus upon his brother Thyestes. Atreus, upon the death of his father Pelops’ had taken possession of the kingdom of Argos. Thyestes too had claimed the throne and sought to gain it by foul means. He had seduced his brother’s wife and with her assistance had stolen a magical ram. Thyestes was exiled for his crime, but Atreus planned a more complete revenge upon his brother. The play relates how Atreus, pretending friendship, murders Thyestes’ sons and serves their flesh to the father at a banquet.

Indeed, *Thyestes* is the most gruesome of Seneca’s tragedies and in many respects one of the most famous. The blood-curdling character of the play depends a great deal on the inclusion of sensational elements which appear to range beyond credibility. It may be said that much of the appeal of the play is attributed to the characters which indulge in all sorts of immoral behaviour. For example, in the play the revenge motive is stretched to the farthest point of possibility. The dramatic action that centres round the theme of justice is related to the idea of revenge. *Thyestes* in fact, is one of the early plays in the European tradition which gives a dramatic articulation to the concept of revenge as a wild justice. What is more remarkable about *Thyestes* is the atmosphere which is thoroughly pagan with overn in sistence on murder, design to murder, limitless anger and fury, seduction at the worst and most heinous level and the idle ambition of the individuals. In *Thyestes* Seneca quite correctly takes us back to the pagan past, never mellowed by the Christian spirit. During the time of Seneca Christianity itself was yet to be born and the associated idea of Christ was really foreign.

In this connection, it may be pointed out that before the time of Seneca tragedies on the story of Thyestes had been written by Sophocles, Euripides, Ennius, Accius and Varius, the friend and contemporary of Horace and Virgil. None of these plays survive and it is impossible to compare Seneca's treatment with the earlier versions. There seems little doubt, however, that the distinctive features of the play are Seneca's own contribution. The scenes between the ghost of Tantalus and the Furies give an atmosphere of gloom to the play at the beginning. The terrible events to follow are foreshadowed and the reluctance of the ghost to be a party to the crime intensifies the horror of the situation. The foreboding of disaster which Thyestes is unable to shake off on his return and the presentiment of evil that hover over him at the banquet are typical devices employed by Seneca to make the effect of the crime more appalling.

Indeed, Thyestes contains the kind of irony which is hideous and typical of Seneca's treatment of the revenge motive. Even in the characterisation of individual figures the paraphernalia of revenge has left its positive mark. It is through the character portrait of Atreus that much of the horror and terror of the play are conveyed to the spectators. Atreus is considered to be villainy personified. His own hypocrisy and cruelty are apparent in the delight he takes in his plan of revenge. The messenger's description of his ruthless act of slaughtering the sons of Thyestes makes Atreus an inhuman monster. He delights in the slaughter and in his cold-blooded revelation of the truth to Thyestes he appears to be the very embodiment of heartless cruelty.

The typical features of Senecan tragedy are also revealed in the dramatic style. The declamatory speeches of characters are in close conformity with the highly tense situations and atmosphere of the play. The play is steeped in elaboration — elaboration of ideas and emotions. That is why the pomposity of style goes well with the gorgeousness of feelings. It is the high flown rhetoric of Seneca which is contributory to its theatrical appeal.

2.8. The Character of Atreus

Atreus has been called by Duckworth "a masterpiece of villainy, and, as such, is one of Seneca's most striking characterisations." Atreus is an autocrat and he is more diabolical than Shakespeare's Aaron, Richard III, Iago or Edmund. He is more sinister than Webster's Cardinal and Ferdinand, Kyd's Lorenzo and Balthazar, Marlowe's Barabas, Chapman's Montsurry and Marston's Vindice. Yet we must say that Atreus' revenge, however gruesome, was motivated. Thyestes seduced Aerope, the wife of Atreus, and persuaded her to steal the golden fleece of a magical lamb, lying in Atreus' possession. Atreus, maddened by lust, took revenge upon Thyestes in a manner that was too horrible to be described.

Atreus has been called "a criminal maniac", a case for psychological investigation. A man may commit murders in the heat of the moment. But the pre-planned, cold-blooded assassinations that Atreus had committed reveal the aberrations in his mind. Of course, he had reasons to feel wounded. Like Hamlet, he expressed himself in a soliloquy that he was simply killing time when he should have taken up weapons against the sea of troubles and devised ways and means for avenging the wrong :

O slothful, indolent, weak, unavenged

.....
....., after so many crimes,

After thy brother's treachery to thee,
After the breaking of all laws of right,
Dost thou, O angry Atreus, waste the time
In idle lamentations?

The Minister tried to curb his wild spirit of revenge, but without success. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Atreus had become a despot. As king he had the authority to do whatever he liked :

Herein is the greatest good of royal power
The populace not only must endure
Their master's deeds, but praise him.

Atreus insisted that his subjects should have blind allegiance to the king. Along with loyalty they should also praise him. A hypocrite that Atreus was, he expected hypocrisy from his subjects. The memory that Thyestes was treacherous constantly haunted him. He was an embodiment of cruelty. When asked if he had no more piety, he replied :

If e'er it dwelt
Within our home, let piety depart.
Let the grim company of Furies come.
Jarring Erinys and Megaera dread
Shaking their torches twain. My breast burns not
With anger hot enough, I fain would feel
Worse horrors.

He continued :

..... I will leave no crime
Untried, and none is great enough for me.

Jago in *Othello* was an artist in villainy. Atreus was not an artist, but crude and savage :

The father, hungrily, with joy shall tear
His children, and shall eat their very flesh.

A Machiavellian villain that Atreus was, he thought that all the methods were good enough for the achievement of his object. He would send his sons with a message that Atreus was repentant, and therefore, he was extending a hearty welcome to Thyestes to return to Mycenae and share the throne with him.

Thyestes responded to the call, and returned home, but with a reformed attitude. He had no more greed for wealth and power. Atreus was an adroit actor, who heartily welcomed his brother. He appeared to be shocked to see Thyestes in rags.

The Messenger informs us how Atreus took the innocent children of Thyestes to the grove of Minerva and slaughtered them. Like a priest, taking the sacrificial animal, Atreus escorted three children and sang merrily the sacrificial song. Even the earth trembled at the devilish act, but Atreus remained unperturbed :

.....
So cruel Atreus gazes on the heads,
Devoted sacrifices to his rage;
He hesitates which one shall first be slain,
Ad which be immolated afterward;
It matters not and yet he hesitates,
And in the order of his cruel crime
Takes pleasure.

He even committed the most horrendous crime :

O crime incredible to every age !
O crime which future ages shall deny !

He cut the bodies into pieces and put the severed limbs upon the spits and roasted them by slow fire :

The father mangles his own sons, and eats
Flesh of his flesh, with sin-polluted lips.
His locks are wet and shine with glowing oil;
Heavy is he with wine; the morsels stick,
Between his lips.

The act of revenge was almost complete. But unless the unfortunate father bewailed his lot, Atreus could not enjoy the sadistic pleasure. He felt happy, proud and exultant. He was so heartless that he was out-Heroding Herod. He said to Thyestes :

Brother, let us together celebrate
This festal day.

When the poor father, full of dark misgivings wished to see his sons, Atreus with malicious glee replied :

Believe thy sons are here in thy embrace,
Here are they and shall be, no single part

of the loved offspring shall be lost to thee.

.....
Father, spread wide thine arms, they come, they come.

Atreus uncovered the platter on which lay the heads of Thyestes' sons. When Thyestes stood there completely dazed, Atreus chuckled merrily and said :

.....
Thyself hast banqueted upon thy sons,
An impious feast.

Atreus was still not satisfied. He had a warm desire to pour the hot blood of the victims into the mouth of Thyestes. But he could not execute the plan as he, in a hurry, killed the sons. Atreus was happy :

"Now in my work I glory, now indeed
I hold the victor's palm."

Hence, the observation that Atreus was a despot maddened by lust for revenge holds ground.

2.9. The Character of Thyestes

Thyestes is presented as a victim-figure in this play. The audience's sympathy is with him although he does not bear a sound moral character. It was he who seduced Aerope, the wife of Atreus, and persuaded her to steal the golden fleece of the magical ram, lying in Atreus' custody. The crime is serious, but that does not justify the punishment meted out to Thyestes. Even the warmest advocate of Atreus will say that Thyestes is more sinned against than sinning.

Thyestis was exiled for his act of treachery. Atreus sent his two sons Agamemnon and Menelaus to bring back Thyestes, so that he could be reconciled to him. Thyestes was easily taken in. He had a spiritual transformation. In most of the plays of Seneca there are some characters, who, whatever be their antecedents, become stoical in the long run. Thyestes is one such person, who had outgrown the craze for materialism. The stoic mode of philosophy, Thyestes thought, would guarantee peace of mind. He felt that the kingdom of God was within ourselves. Internal peace was desperately sought by him. Conquest of self is much greater than the conquest of the external enemies and territories.

Thyestes, in a sense, became the mouthpiece of Seneca, the Stoic philosopher. Seneca in his personal life was profoundly influenced by three philosophers — Sotion, Attalus and Fabianus. All of them advocated a life of renunciation and austerity. Seneca ultimately became a victim of Nero's jealousy. The emperor was seeking an opportunity to put an end to Seneca. In 65 A.D. he was falsely charged with ambitious designs of being the Emperor himself. Nero ordered him to commit suicide. That was

the acid test of his Stoical conviction. Seneca calmly committed suicide. He faced death like Socrates.

Thyestes, in this way, embodies to a certain extent Seneca's personal melancholic experiences before his end. Thyestes returned home after a long sojourn. Once so sick of exile, he wanted to be on exile once again :

“Rather return to exile in the woods
And mountain postures, live the life of brutes
Among them. This bright splendour of the realm
With its false glitter shall not blind my eyes.”

Thyestes' mind was filled with dark forebodings. The crown appeared to him to be meretricious. If he chose to remain a simple man, he would feel safe and secure. A simple man does not fear anybody, nor is an object of terrors. He is nobody's slave, or nobody's master :

“Great peace attends on humble circumstance
He has a kingdom who can be content
Without a kingdom.”

Thyestes might be a Stoic philosopher, but he could not have implicit faith in his brother. He, however, resigned himself to his fate :

“It is too late to seek security
When one is in the midst of ill.”

But soon his fears were allayed. He was sorry for suspecting Atreus, who seemed to be very affectionate. When the crown was offered, Thyestes behaved stoically :

“Alas, my wretchedness
Forbids me to accept the royal crown,
My guilty hand shrinks from the sceptre's weight;
Let me in lesser rank unnoted live.”

He persisted in refusing the offer :

“Firm is my resolution to refuse
The kingdom.”

Atreus at last is able to squeeze a reluctant consent from him :

“I take it then.
I'll wear the name of king, but law and arms
And I shall be thy slaves, for evermore.”

Atreus behaved inhumanly in the banquet scene. Thyestes, though stoical, had great love and affection for his sons, whom he lost. He did not know that he had unknowingly devoured the flesh of his sons. He moaned :

“Come, children, your unhappy father calls;
Come, might I see you all this woe would flee.”

As soon as the platter was uncovered, he could see the severed heads of his sons. Atreus exclaimed with diabolical pleasure :

“Thyself hast banqueted upon thy sons,
An impious feast.”

Thyestes invoked the gods and appealed to them to curse Atreus and his family. His sorrow was too deep for tears.

2.10. Sample Questions

1. Comment on Seneca's handling of theatrical devices in *Thyestes*.
2. Seneca's plays rely for their impact more on sensational episodes than on portrayal of character or development of action. Is this observation valid in the case of *Thyestes* ? Give reasons.
3. Comment on the element of horror in Seneca's *Thyestes*.
4. Critically consider Seneca's art of characterization in *Thyestes*.
5. Analyse the character of Atreus as “an autocrat maddened by lust for revenge.” Answer with reference to the text.
6. *Thyestes* is a typical revenge tragedy. Discuss.
7. Examine Seneca's excellence in the artistic blending of themes in *Thyestes*.
8. Do you agree with the view that *Thyestes* is a dramatic failure ?
9. Comment on the dramatic importance of the chorus in *Thyestes*.
10. Is it possible to regard the character of *Thyestes* as an embodiment of Seneca's personal melancholic experiences?

2.11. Select Readings

1. The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature by M. C. Howatson (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1997)
2. Moses Hadas : Introduction to classical Drama (New York : Bantam Books, 1966)
3. J. W. Cunliffe : Influence of Seneca on Elizabethan Tragedy.
4. J. Gassner and Edward Quinn (eds) : The Reader's Encyclopaedia of World Drama.
5. F. L. Lucas : Seneca and Elizabethan Tragedy.
6. Allardyce Nicoll : The Word Drama.
7. F. E. Watling : Seneca : Four Tragedies and 'Octavia'.

UNIT : 3 □ DANT - INFERNO

Structure :

- 3.1. Brief Note on **The Divine Comedy**.
- 3.2. **The Divine Comedy** as an epic.
- 3.3. **Spiritual Odyssey : The New Structure of the Christian Epic**.
- 3.4. Historical Context of **Inferno**.
- 3.5. Biographical Note : **The life of Dante**.
- 3.6. The personal and universal Note in **Inferno**.
- 3.7. **Inferno** as a literary text.
- 3.8. Influence on later poets and present day relevance of **Inferno**.
- 3.9. Translation of **The Divine Comedy** into English.
- 3.10. An outline of the text of **Inferno**.
- 3.11. Suggested Reading.

3.1. Brief Note on **The Diving Comedy**

In a famous letter to his benefactor, Can Grande de Scala Dante writes, "Here begins the Comedy of Dante Alighieri, a Florentine by birth, not by character" complete title of his poem written during the long and painful years of his exile between 1307 and 1319. 'Commedia' or Comedy in the Aristotelian tradition in Dante's Age was a poetic narration which began with harsh complications but ended in prosperity and tranquility. Though the categorization was specific to drama, Dante's Comedy in its subject matter is essentially epic. It is a vast tale where the poet as the central character undertakes an imaginary journey through the three regions of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise to understand human nature and finally overcoming all trepidations ascends towards the absolute Truth of a benevolent god. His object as stated in the same letter to Can Grande de Scala was "to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and lead them to the state of felicity." The word 'Divina' or Divine was thus prefixed to this happy ending of an arduous journey of mankind, much later in the sixteenth century by an unknown editor, is completely relevant.

The object of our Study in the following pages will be the first cantiche with the poet's descent to **Hell or Inferno**. This first stage is necessary to understand the nature of evil and its punishment which then opens the vision of **Purgatory** and **Paradise**.

3.2. The Divine Comedy as an epic

Dante's *The Divine Comedy* may be termed an 'epic' only by extension to a general understanding of the genre, which includes a long verse narrative, told in a formal and elevated style, on a serious subject concentrating either on a hero (Like Achilles in the *Iliad*) or a civilization (like the Roman civilization in the *Aeneid*) or even mankind (as in *Paradise Lost*). Though Dante's poem differs in many respects from the general model of the epic, his supernatural voyage to Hell and beyond, reflects the epic spirit and grandeur in scale of its scope as a narrative. The *Inferno*, which is the first part of the voyage, is a microcosm of eternal pain and hopelessness. It is an expression of Dante's profound revulsion against a hopelessly degenerate and corrupt world. It is considered an encyclopedic overview of the mores, attitudes, beliefs, philosophies and aspirations, as well as material aspects of the medieval world.

3.3. Spiritual Odyssey : The new structure of the christian Epic.

Dante explained the subject matter of the *Inferno* as "the state of souls after death" in the literal sense as well as the allegorical. As Domenico Vittorini realises, it is the reflection of the world of nature with all the tendencies that lead man to evil and perdition. The poem then is about humankind, who by exercising free will, bring either "rewarding or punishing justice" upon themselves. It is divine justice that manifests itself through the law of retribution. Underlying its horrible reality is the Creator's Divine Love, as Dante understood it, which is merciless to the unrepentant. Those who recognize and condemn their own sins are given, through the arduous process of purification, the opportunity to attain paradise.

The *Inferno* then, is the beginning of the spiritual odyssey of the poet. The basic pattern of this voyage is a movement from ignorance to self-knowledge, from presumption to humility. St. Augustine in his commentary of the Gospel of John had explained this transition in Peter's life - from youthful self-reliance to confession and contrition which occurred in his middle age. The *Inferno* in fact begins with similar words :

"In the middle of the journey of our life. I came to myself
within a dark wood where the straight way was lost".²

1. Domenico Vittorini A concise history of Italian Culture in the years of the Early Renaissance : The Age of Dante, Syracuse University Press 1957.

2. John D. Sinclair ed., The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri *Inferno*. Italian text with trans and comment (Oxford University Press 1939 rpt 1975)

This sort of spiritual voyage was not only a biblical theme but part of ancient philosophical allegories of the descent and ascent of the soul, from Plato and earlier classical philosophers. Dante's journey, in the middle of his life, the poem being written in 1307, is also "an autobiography represented schematically in a synthesis of Platonic allegory and biblical motifs, just as it was in St. Augustine's *Confessions*"³ John Freccero, considering specific episodes like the navigation of Ulysses and his shipwreck in Canto XXVI, concludes the narrative as a particular and typical Christian critique of philosophical presumption - a sin which Dante acknowledges of having committed himself in his youth.

This brings us to another feature of the poem as being a new kind of epic, written in the first person. The narrative unfolding against a vast background which is also a detailed analysis of the hero's soul is a transition already seen in Virgil's *Aeneid* if one compare it to the epics of Homer. The greater interest in psychology, however, in Dante is tapering towards a revelation of Divine Love to the lost soul. Such a notion, with its thescentrism, however also distances him from the humanism of the Renaissance.

3.4. Historical context of the *Inferno*

The *Inferno* as a microcosm of medieval life and in particular fourteenth century Italy is Dante's profound expression of despair against a corrupt and degenerate world. It is teeming with those the poet saw as directly or indirectly responsible for the sorry state of Christian Europe. The inescapable political reality of his day was the bitter struggle between the papacy and Empire for power. The Holy Roman Empire which had been the highest political authority in Europe declined after the death of Frederick II of the German Hohenstaufen family. In Italy, the papal interests were represented by the Guelfs and the imperial party was the Ghibellines. Dante himself believed in a divinely inspired monarchy in which spiritual and temporal power would co-exist in absolute harmony but Florence was always a Guelf city, unable to efface its defeat at the hands of the Ghibellines at Montaperti in 1260. Canto X of the *Inferno* describes Dante's engagement with this in his meeting with the Ghibelline leader Farinata degli Uberti. Even within Florence, there were factions emerging from the quarrels of the nobility, the Donati and the Cerchi whose adherents came to be known as 'Whites' and 'Blacks'. Despite the predominance of papal forces in Florence, Dante actively participated in political life, aligning himself with the Whites who had

3. John Freccero, "Introduction to *Inferno*" in Rachel Jacoff ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*. (Cambridge University Press-. 1993)

a softer stand towards the imperial party of the Ghibellines. Several attempts were made at the reconciliation of the popular factions, the most significant being the meeting at Florence between Pope Gregory IX and the Emperor Charles of Anjou in 1273, but in vain.

Dante became a member of one of the Guilds, the Guild being a powerful machinery in the government of the Commonwealth of Florence. In 1300, he was also one of the six Priors who together with an official known as the Gonfalonier of Justice, formed the Signory, which was the supreme executive authority in the state. In the same year, following an alliance between the 'Black' leaders and Pope Boniface VIII along with the French forces of Count Charles of Valois, the 'Whites' were overthrown and the 'Blacks' established themselves as absolute rulers. Dante, along with many other prominent Whites were stripped of their possessions and public positions and banished from Florence. He was in this state of exile from his fatherland till the end of his life in 1321. The narrative of the *Inferno* in fact begins from this date when Dante finds himself lost in a dark wood and his road to salvation obstructed by the fierce beasts.

3.5. Biographical Note : The life of Dante

To discuss Dante's life we will begin with the assumption that the life of a great poet coincides with the history of his own times.⁴ In the wilderness of the tumultuous fourteenth century Italy, Dante's life was a constant struggle with despair and broken dreams and his poetry is woven from the meaning of human nature and life, not to be effaced but to recognize with admirable courage, its happy ending in the adherence to one's beliefs and the benevolence of God.

His life was a poetic quest, from understanding the nature of an empirical material world to a realm of imagination and vision. Dante's life, as recorded from the time of his earliest biographers like Giovanni Boccaccio and Leonardo Bruni, what is celebrated is the poetic heroic temper of the central protagonist of the *Divine Comedy*, who bravely survives his arduous journey to find his own lost self.

Dante Alighieri was born in Florence in 1265. He was of gentle birth and ancient lineage, and his ancestor Cacciaguida (mentioned in *Paradiso*) was a crusader knighted by the Emperor Conrad III. His family was of moderate fortune. A significant event of his childhood was his meeting with Beatrice in 1274 in Florence, which would have an unforgettable and unique influence on his life and who was destined to play a providential role in his poetic vision. Nine years later he began to write lyrics in

4. Giuseppe Mazzotta, "Life of Dante" in *Cambridge Companion to Dante*. (Cambridge University Press, 1993)

her honour which are collectively known as *Vita Nuova* or *New life* (1293 - 94) — a transfiguration of his life by his love and devotion to Beatrice.

However, as we move on to Dante's participation in public life, we observe the other things that affected a sensitive mind. The civil strife that Italy was embroiled in during his day and his own allegiances, owing to his beliefs of solving the perpetual disharmony of the warring factions which finally led to his exile have already been mentioned. What we need to understand is the pain of the fugitive poet during these years of his life. Defeated politically, Dante continued his struggle poetically and the series of works that he wrote, *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (1304 - 1307) the *Convivio*, *De Monarchia* (1310) and the *Commedia* (1307 - 14) comprise the history of his life which was illuminated for him from the darkness of his exile. Though he moved around like a 'rudderless ship' and 'a beggar' - Forli in 1302, Verona in 1303, Arezzo and Padua in 1305, Venice, Lunigiana, Lucca in 1307 - 09, once again in Verona in 1315 (where he was under the protection of can Grande de Scala) and finally in Ravenna - where the spirit of his life was tested and rewarded.

Another significant stage in the poet's life was from 1308 - 1313 which consolidated his ideas of the necessity of Empire as the sole solution to the endless bloody violence of his times. In November 1308, when Henry VII of Luxemburg descended to Italy for his coronation as the Holy Roman Emperor, Dante felt a ray of hope as he tried to wrest Italy from papal control. But the failure of the Emperor was to seal Dante's destiny forever.

His final years in Ravenna brought about the culmination of his imaginative powers, and emerging from the *Inferno* of his own times, he was able to crystallize the concluding parts of his *Comedy*. The totality of history would be eclectically made up of elements of theology and philosophy and that which could not be reconciled in the warring world of politics : Dante succeeded in thus representing history in his poetry.

The history of his poetry having finally reached its culmination in a deep contemplation of the meaning of life itself, Dante breathed his last on September 13, 1321.

3.6. The personal and Universal Note in the *Inferno*

The American Transcendentalist philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, in an essay 'The Poet' says, "Dante's praise is that he dared to write his autobiography in colossal cypher, or into universality." The *Commedia* was so personal in its subject, that as an epic, it added a new dimension to the genre. Yet the hero of this journey of the soul, from the sufferings of the *Inferno* towards reconciliation with God, is not only

a fourteenth century Florentine but Everyman, or humankind in general. In his letter to can Grande de Scala, Dante defined the *Commedia* as 'polysemous', specifying the principal levels of meaning as literal and allegorical. As the central protagonist of the drama, as it were, he is a faithful reporter of the sufferings of the "state of souls after death" in the *Inferno*. His Hell is teeming with his friends, his countrymen, his masters, his literary models. It is he who at the age of thirty-five, gets lost in the dark wood, hounded by the three beasts who obstruct his way to the high hill of Salvation. The allegory, if taken at a personal level, deals then with the political as well as moral crises in the poet's life, which he is able to overcome with the guidance of Virgil and Beatrice and St. Bernard. It is his transition from philosophical presumption to an aesthetic theology, rising above all levels of devotion to a single notion or tradition, that marks his greatest achievement.

But the poet has to realize the nature of sin first, in himself and in the process makes the reader probe into it as well. The intellectual framework against which the sins are measured is, of course, a theocentric worldview and Dante's belief in a certain system of political and spiritual authority which would solve the eternal problems of strife ridden Italy. It is here that the allegory merges into the theological and from Dante's personal specific context, it develops not only into a summa of medieval life but the trepidations and aspirations to overcome them, of humankind in general, regardless of temporal or spatial specificity. "The arduous path up from the centre of evil to the stars of a hopeful dawn in the last canto of the *Inferno* (in which reason and the dead weight of Sin have their part) the triumphant winning of spiritual innocence and serene self-assurance, are ours as much as Dante's."⁵

3.7. The *Inferno* as a literary text

In the medieval ages, poetry was recognized as a vehicle of education through allegorical truths but in comparison to other forms of cultural discourse, such as philosophy and theology, was considered inferior. It was only the work of the classical poets of the distant past, like Virgil, Ovid or Horace and their poetry - in Latin - that was given reverent commentary. Vernacular poetry during Dante's age was not qualified for any serious commentary. The *Commedia* traces, in its vernacular medium, the struggle of Dante to write that 'total poem', a process which began as early as *vita Nuova* and reached an intense conflict with *Convivio* (written in Italian) and *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (written in Latin). The former accepts and reinforces the medieval notion that Latin is a nobler and more rational language than the vernacular, while

5. Thenas Godard Bergin, *An Approach to Dante*. (The Bodley Head, London' 1965)

the latter opposes the same idea. If Dante was attempting to integrate himself into the authority of the Latin authors, he was also trying to ensure that his new authority would be transferred to a new cultural entity. From the *Inferno* of this struggle, Dante transcends into a higher realm in the totality of the *Commedia*.

Even the technical aspect of the poem, in its execution, shows an immense sense of harmony. The recurrence of number three almost achieves an esoteric mystical quality. The entire *Commedia* being written in the three cantiche- *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* and each cantica has thirtythree cantos (with the exception of the *Inferno* which has thirtythree and one which serves as an introduction to the entire poem.) Each stanza has three lines, the first and third lines rhyming with each other, while the middle line links the first stanza to the first line of the next stanza. This rhyme scheme was what was known as the terza-rima which was to influence several poets of later generations.

Corresponding to this intact structure is the architecture of the *Inferno* with nine circles, the *Purgatorio* with nine ledges and the *Paradiso* with nine heavens.

3.8. Influence on later poets and Present day relevance of the *Inferno*.

Dante's vision of Hell in the *Inferno* has been an omnipresent, almost mythical influence on European culture, inspiring numerous poets to undertake similar spiritual journeys. His revolutionary new style of the earliest epic in the first person made it possible to give themes which had hitherto been possible only in the lyric form, an epic dimension. It is said to have made possible Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Pound's *Cantos*. It would be a turning-point for newer poets to experiment with varying degrees of originality, with the epic form. Chaucer and Langland during their own time went on to tell their tales which, inspired with Dante's vision, portray a vivid picture of their own real worlds. Following in line would be later great figures of Western literature like Coleridge, Eliot, William Carlos Williams with their versions of poems that would not be in the central line of the epic but an all embracing narrative which celebrate life in their existential integrity.

Not only in literature but even great music composers and celebrated artists have been inspired by themes from the *Inferno*. Some significant ones being Franz Liszt's *Dante Symphony* and Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky's *Francesca da Rimini*. Illustrations of the unforgettable episodes from the *Inferno* have been immortalised in the works of Sandro Botticelli, Michelangelo Buonasotti, Eugene Delacroix, William Blake and Gustave Dore.

In the face of a strife-torn world, with unholy alliances and nexus of power and knowledge where moral values and spiritual concerns are fast wearing off under the pressures of materialism, the *Inferno* surely blurs our distinction between reality and fiction. It is only a probing into his own times, so close to Dante's *Inferno* that needs to be accompanied by understanding its abominable nature that can stir the modern reader to embark on yet another spiritual odyssey with the hope of a reconciliation with the Absolute Truth.

3.9. Translation of *Dentis commedia* into English

In 1802, the first complete English translation of the *Commedia* was published by an Irishman, Henry Boyd.

In 1814 H. F. Cary, an Anglican clergyman brought out a powerful and poetically moving English translation of the *Commedia* which was acknowledged by Wordsworth as 'a great national work'.

In 1867 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow published his translation.

Besides these masterpieces in their own right, more recent translations are.

John Ciardi's translation of the *Inferno*.

Dorothy L. Sayers' translation in verse and John D. Sinclair's prose translation with comments on each canto are extremely useful.

3.10. An outline of the text of the *Inferno*

Hell is an enormous, conic shaped chasm, wedged in the Northern Hemisphere between Jerusalem and the centre of the Earth. It is divided into nine circles. In the First circle, which is a neutral zone, dwell the virtuous Heathen philosophers of Antiquity and the Islamic world along with the legendary Muslim warrior king, Saladin. The justification for the clubbing of all these men together as virtuous Heathen being the denial of Baptism and the saving grace of Jesus to them either because they lived before Jesus and for the latter, a corrupt clergy in the poet's own time did not show them the path of salvation.

The next five circles are the dwelling place of the Incontinent, or the sins resulting from the inability to restrain the passions or appetite. Lower in the descent are the three rings of the seventh circle where the sins of violence against others self and against God, nature and art are punished. Lowest in the plan are the Sins of Fraudulence at the bottom of which lies the arch-fiend of mankind, Lucifer in his doomed glory, for the entire punitive system is after all a grand scheme of Divine Justice and God's

love for humankind. Hell, as said earlier, then incarnates ultimate justice, which in Dante's view springs from Divine Love. By the exercise of free will, the souls will bring eternal rewarding or punishing justice upon themselves. Dante's pilgrimage to Hell is painful, but necessary, because it is impossible to reject sin without knowing its very nature. But he is unable to make this perilous journey alone and needs a powerful guide who will safely ferry him through the Nine circles till he reaches its lowest point from which he will begin his ascent to Mount Purgatory in the next stage of the **Commedia**.

The first canto of the poem serves as an introduction, not only to the **Inferno** but the entire **Commedia** whose Dante, the central subject of the poem and the one who undertakes the epic journey almost like a mythical quester of the Divine Truth, is at once Dante Alighieri the Florentine and Everyman. The narrative begins in the middle of the journey of our life "which coincides with the historical events of the poet's life during the year 1300 when Italy was plagued with civil strife in which Dante was exiled from his native land because of his political allegiances. In the poem, he finds himself lost in the dreary wilderness and in his efforts to emerge from the wilderness by climbing the hill with morning sunshine on it, he is stopped by three beasts symbolising three forces of evil — a leopard or lust, a lion or pride and a she-wolf or covetousness. The only other way which can lead to the hill is a long and arduous journey which the poet is unable to make alone. It is at this point that following Providential scheme, Virgil, the symbol of Reason for the poet becomes his guide and thus begins the painful and perilous journey to the **Inferno**.

Inscribed in dark characters over the gateway are the words.

“Through me the way into the woeful city,
Through me the way to the eternal pain,
Through me the way among the lost people.
Justice moved my maker on High,
Divine Power made me and Supreme wisdom and primal love
Before me nothing was created but Eternal thing and I
endure eternally.
Abandon every Hope, ye that enter.”

As Dante makes the descent with Virgil he meets the Sinners at various circles and with intense artistry and drama, his relationship with the sinners are unfolded. This is the education of the poet to understand the nature of the very forces of evil and its retribution. In this synthesised topography of classical and medieval hell, there are the Lesivous gluttons avaricious and prodigal, wrathful, Heretics, lower are the violent followed by the Fraudulent who are divided into those simply fraudulent as

the panders, seducers, flatterers, Simonists, Diviners, Barrators, Hypocrites, Thieves, False counsellors, makers of discord, falsifiers and the other category of the fraudulent is the teacherous — to kindred, to country and cause, to guests and finally in league with Lucifer, to lords and benefactors.

The categories mentioned above, who fill the *Inferno* are either contemporaries of the poet or historical figures from classical and Biblical narratives. Through strange powers of prophecy or a deep insight into their very condition, the inhabitants of Hell educate the poet about the present state of affairs in Florence and even Providential History. For instance, in Canto VI, Ciaccio, a prominent Florentine, when asked of the future of Florence replies.

“After along strife they shall come to blood and the party of the rustics shall drive out the other with much offence; then, by force of one who is now manoeuvring, that party is destined to fall within three years and the other to prevail, long holding its head high and keeping the first under grievous burdens, for all their tears and shame.”⁶

Other unforgettable episodes are the encounters with Paolo and Francesca of Rimini in canto V which is profoundly moving. George Santayana writes, “Can an eternity of floating on the wind in each others’ arms be punishment for lovers ?” In canto X, Dante meets the great Ghibelline leader Farinata degli Uberti, whose tragic figure is one of Dante’s greatest colossal sculptures in the *Inferno*. His words echo endlessly as they had in actual life at the Ghibelline council after the defeat of Florence at Montaperti — “Whoever he be that would destroy her, while life is in my body, I shall defend her sword in hand.” When all victors and victims had been overwhelmed by base passions, he alone was the true lover of his country.

The incredible flight on Goryon, reminiscent of allusions to flights of the soul in ancient classical literature, the Giants between the Eighth and Ninth circles before the descent to Cocytus are remarkable features of Dante’s realism in his fictive journey till he finally meets Satan who continuously devours the archetypal traitors to church and Empire — Judas, Brutus and Cassius.

Before moving on to the next stage of his journey, Dante is armed with fortitude and even before leaving Cocytus, he is in a new relation to the Heavens. Though it is a long way yet to go, through arduous purgation, the stars are shining at him in the end of the first stage of the narrative.

6. John D Sinclair ed., *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Inferno*. Italian text with trans and comment (Oxford University Press 1939 rpt 1975)

3.11. Suggested Reading

A bibliography on Dante would be an almost endless task, given the amount of critical attention a single work like the *Divine Comedy* has generated. The following would be a list of readily available works which will give a fairly comprehensive view to the discerning student.

1. Rachel Jacoff ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*. (Cambridge University Press 1993)
2. Thomas Goddard Bergin, *An Approach to Dante*. (The Bodley Head, London, 1965)
3. Eric Auerbach, "Figura" in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, Trans. by R. Manheim. (New York : Meridian Books, 1959)
4. Eric Auerbach, *Dante : Poet of the Secular world*, Trans. R Manheim. (Chicago : Chicago University Press, 1961)
5. John Freccero ed., *Dante : A collection of Critical Essays* (Prentice Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs. N. J. 1965)
6. Uberto Limantani, *Divine Comedy : Introductory reading of selected cantos*. (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

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মানুষের জ্ঞান ও ভাবকে বইয়ের মধ্যে সঙ্কিত করিবার যে একটা প্রচুর সুবিধা আছে, সে কথা কেহই অস্বীকার করিতে পারে না। কিন্তু সেই সুবিধার দ্বারা মনের স্বাভাবিক শক্তিকে একেবারে আচ্ছন্ন করিয়া ফেলিলে বুদ্ধিকে বাবু করিয়া তোলা হয়।

— রবীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুর

ভারতের একটা mission আছে, একটা গৌরবময় ভবিষ্যৎ আছে, সেই ভবিষ্যৎ ভারতের উত্তরাধিকারী আমরাই। নূতন ভারতের মুক্তির ইতিহাস আমরাই রচনা করছি এবং করব। এই বিশ্বাস আছে বলেই আমরা সব দুঃখ কষ্ট সহ্য করতে পারি, অশুকারময় বর্তমানকে অগ্রাহ্য করতে পারি, বাস্তবের নিষ্ঠুর সত্যগুলি আদর্শের কঠিন আঘাতে ধূলিসাৎ করতে পারি।

— সুভাষচন্দ্র বসু

Any system of education which ignores Indian conditions, requirements, history and sociology is too unscientific to commend itself to any rational support.

— *Subhas Chandra Bose*

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