

PREFACE

With its grounding in the “guiding pillars of Access, Equity, Equality, Affordability and Accountability,” the New Education Policy (NEP 2020) envisions flexible curricular structures and creative combinations for studies across disciplines. Accordingly, the UGC has revised the CBCS with a new Curriculum and Credit Framework for Undergraduate Programmes (CCFUP) to further empower the flexible choice based credit system with a multidisciplinary approach and multiple/ lateral entry-exit options. It is held that this entire exercise shall leverage the potential of higher education in three-fold ways – learner’s personal enlightenment; her/his constructive public engagement; productive social contribution. Cumulatively therefore, all academic endeavours taken up under the NEP 2020 framework are aimed at synergising individual attainments towards the enhancement of our national goals.

In this epochal moment of a paradigmatic transformation in the higher education scenario, the role of an Open University is crucial, not just in terms of improving the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) but also in upholding the qualitative parameters. It is time to acknowledge that the implementation of the National Higher Education Qualifications Framework (NHEQF) National Credit Framework (NCrF) and its syncing with the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF) are best optimised in the arena of Open and Distance Learning that is truly seamless in its horizons. As one of the largest Open Universities in Eastern India that has been accredited with ‘A’ grade by NAAC in 2021, has ranked second among Open Universities in the NIRF in 2024, and attained the much required UGC 12B status, Netaji Subhas Open University is committed to both quantity and quality in its mission to spread higher education. It was therefore imperative upon us to embrace NEP 2020, bring in dynamic revisions to our Undergraduate syllabi, and formulate these Self Learning Materials anew. Our new offering is synchronised with the CCFUP in integrating domain specific knowledge with multidisciplinary fields, honing of skills that are relevant to each domain, enhancement of abilities, and of course deep-diving into Indian Knowledge Systems.

Self Learning Materials (SLM’s) are the mainstay of Student Support Services (SSS) of an Open University. It is with a futuristic thought that we now offer our learners the choice of print or e-slm’s. From our mandate of offering quality higher education in the mother tongue, and from the logistic viewpoint of balancing scholastic needs, we strive to bring out learning materials in Bengali and English. All our faculty members are constantly engaged in this academic exercise that combines subject specific academic research with educational pedagogy. We are privileged in that the expertise of academics across institutions on a national level also comes together to augment our own faculty strength in developing these learning materials. We look forward to proactive feedback from all stakeholders whose participatory zeal in the teaching-learning process based on these study materials will enable us to only get better. On the whole it has been a very challenging task, and I congratulate everyone in the preparation of these SLM’s.

I wish the venture all success.

Professor Indrajit Lahiri
Vice Chancellor

NETAJI SUBHAS OPEN UNIVERSITY
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Module No.	Unit No.	Details of Content Writers	Course Editor
1	1	Manu Auddy Associate Professor of English, WBES	Dr Srideep Mukherjee Associate Professor of English Netaji Subhas Open University
	2	Pritha Banerjee Assistant Professor of English Vidyasagar Metropolitan College, Kolkata & Debottama Ghosh Assistant Professor of English Netaji Subhas Open University	
	3	Dr Kusumita Datta Assistant Professor of English Behala College, Kolkata	
	4	Dr Monisha Sarkar (Sinha) Assistant Professor of English East Calcutta Girls' College, Kolkata & Professor Himadri Lahiri Department of English Netaji Subhas Open University	
2	5	Professor Amrit Sen Department of English, Visva-Bharati	Professor Goutam Buddha Sural Department of English Bankura University Dr Srideep Mukherjee
	6	Gargee Adhikari NSOU Counselor (UG) & Alumna Maharaja Manindra Chandra College, Kolkata	
	7	Satyabrata Dinda Associate Professor of English Vivekananda College, Madhyamgram, Kolkata	
	8	Dr Abhishek Bhattacharya Assistant Professor of English Khandra College, Pashchim Bardhaman	

3	9	Enamul Kabir Pasa Assistant Professor of English Sripat Singh College, Jiaganj, Murshidabad	Professor Goutam Buddha Sural
	10	Satyabrata Dinda	Dr Srideep Mukherjee
	11	Mohona Chatterjee Assistant Professor Amity Institute of English Studies & Research, Amity University, Kolkata	
	12	Dr Anushila Bhattacharya Associate Professor of English, WBES	
	13	Sudeshna Mukherjee	
4	14	Dr Suvankar Ghosh Roy Chowdhury Assistant Professor of English Raidighi College, 24 Parganas (South)	Dr Srideep Mukherjee
	15	Debapriya Goswami Assistant Professor of English NSHM, Durgapur, Pashchim Bardhaman	
	16	Dr Chandrima Das Assistant Professor of English Durgapur Women's College, Pashchim Bardhaman	
	Format Editing, Design and Layout		Dr Srideep Mukherjee

Under Graduate Board of Studies for English

Smt Sandhya Sen, Formerly Reader in English, Sarojini Naidu College, Kolkata

Dr Jaydeep Sarangi, Principal, New Alipore College, Kolkata

Dr Tajuddin Ahmed, Associate Professor & Head,

Department of English, Aliah University

Professor Himadri Lahiri, Dept. of English, NSOU

Dr Md. Intaj Ali, Asst Professor of English, NSOU

Soumabha Chakraborty, Assistant Professor of English, NSOU

Debottama Ghosh, Assistant Professor of English, NSOU

Dr Srideep Mukherjee, Officer in Charge, School of Humanities & Head,

Dept. of English, NSOU

Notification

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**NETAJI SUBHAS
OPEN UNIVERSITY**

**BA in English
(Honours)
NEG**

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Module 1:
British Poetry from Chaucer to Milton

Unit 1 □ Geoffrey Chaucer: General Prologue to The *Canterbury Tales* – Portrait of The Wife of Bath

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- 1.1.1. Objectives
- 1.1.2. Introduction
- 1.1.3. Geoffrey Chaucer and his Works
- 1.1.4. The General Prologue to The *Canterbury Tales*
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- 1.1.9. Comprehension Exercises
- 1.1.10. Suggested Reading

1.1.1: Objectives

In the first Unit of your study of English literature per se, we will introduce you to a slice of the work of Geoffrey Chaucer [1340(?) -1400], whom many consider to be the first of the moderns among English poets. Having read about the Middle Ages in the previous course, it should naturally strike you as learners as to why we would apply the term ‘modern’ for a poet who lived and wrote as early as the fourteenth century. The best way to understand this is to have a glimpse of a fragment from Chaucer’s immortal work, The *Canterbury Tales*, a text that always appeals for its manifold revelations of the nature, scope, and even purpose of literature at large and poetry in particular. Accordingly, we have selected for you a small portion from Chaucer’s famous ‘Prologue’ to *The Canterbury Tales*, which will show you how the medieval poet could go beyond the confines of his time and work on elements of comic satire, dynamic characterisation, and of course an interesting narrative. We hope you will enjoy this acquaintance with Geoffrey Chaucer.

1.1.2: Introduction

Taking the cue from what we have said above, we can begin by saying that the contribution of Geoffrey Chaucer to modern English literature, especially poetry is immense. The introduction of socially relevant issues in the realm of literary creation, shifting the focus from the religious to the secular, can actually be said to have begun with Chaucer, even though he was writing at a time when the Church and religion held a large sway on the life of the common man. As such, we use the term ‘modern’ more in an inclusive sense to denote the era beginning from the Renaissance age, than any particular time frame. But with Chaucer, it is important to note that trends in English writing showed marked dissimilarities from the previous ages i.e. the Old English and early Middle English periods. His models were the classical, the Italian and French writers whom he read profusely in their originals. The ease in style and familiarity of tone made his works entertaining as well as instructive in a very subtle way. Among his works, *The Canterbury Tales* is universally acknowledged as the best of his literary creation. Within the framework of a pilgrimage, he introduces the reader to a cross-section of medieval society. The **Prologue** to the tales includes a set of characters, each replete with his or her own idiosyncrasies, offering rare insights into human nature. It is interesting how women figure in Chaucer’s ‘Prologue’ in a pronounced way, whether they are ecclesiastical (related to the Church) characters like the Prioress, or secular ones like the Wife of Bath, whose introduction you will read here. In a society where women were still not recognised as individuals, we can say at the outset that the Wife of Bath stands head and shoulders above her male compatriots, a vividly drawn portrait of a fiercely independent woman. In fact, if you can stretch your imaginative understanding to a certain limit, you will see some of the nuanced of modern day gendered understanding of character representation in the figure of the Wife of Bath. This Unit, dear learner, will therefore introduce you to the subtly nuanced character portrayal skills of the ‘Father of English Poetry’, as Chaucer is popularly known.

1.1.3: Geoffrey Chaucer and his Works

You will be surprised to know that the poet we are now studying was the son of a wine merchant! He was born in London around the year 1340. He not only

enjoyed the benefits of town life, but also the proximity of court life. The brilliant court of King Edward III and life there offered him tremendous opportunities for self enhancement. In 1357, he was made a member of the household of Elizabeth, wife of Lionel, son of Edward III. As a page boy, he had to constantly attend to his masters- being busy in the hall, serving dishes, wine and at the end of the meal, kneeling with the water bowl. The pages attended their masters even in their chambers, brushing and polishing their clothes. While waiting for orders, Chaucer spent his leisure hours observing and learning about his masters. He acquired proficiency in music, dance, chess and above all perfected himself in the formalities of address and the art of conversation in English and French. Chaucer's art and imagination were shaped by his experiences in court. This will give you an idea why and how he was ahead of his times and his fellow poets, so that he actually gained access to classical literature that largely shaped his skills.

Chaucer's works depict contemporary England, where people readily accepted the authority of the church and its teachings. The village parson, parish clerk, travelling monk or prioress were as much to be seen in real life as in the pages of Chaucer. The focus of religious life was the church building. The Wife of Bath refers to her constant attendance at church for marriages or other services of the Church.. The pages of Chaucer, Gower, Langland, together with many satirical poems of the fourteenth century are full of passages that reflect the many abuses of the time. Chaucer is recognised as the creator of the English versification. The octosyllabic line was in vogue when Chaucer began writing. From France, he also imported the decasyllabic line and under Italian influence, made it pliable. This was to be the heroic line.

Chaucer's first narrative poem, *The Book of the Duchess* (1369) is in the dream allegory convention. The elegiac poem is occasioned by the death of the Duchess Blanche, first wife of John the Gaunt. Chaucer's constant interactions with well-bred women gave him the intimate knowledge of good society of which he made full use in his innumerable feminine portraits.

In *The House of Fame* (1380), he returns to the dream vision. It is an unfinished poem, the subject matter based on the *Aeneid*. In his dream, the poet finds himself in a glass temple adorned with images of the famous and their deeds. With the help

of the very interesting character of the philosophic eagle, the poet goes through the House of Fame. He meditates on the nature of Fame and the role of the poet in reporting the lives of the famous. Chaucer's imaginative faculties are revealed in his splendid description of the magnificent castle. The poem is regarded as the first of Chaucer's Italian-influenced period and there are echoes of the works of Boccaccio, Ovid, Virgil's *Aeneid* and particularly Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The work shows a significant advancement in Chaucer's art from the earlier *Book of the Duchess*.

The poem *The Parliament of Fowls* (1382) is inspired by the poet's reading of *Somnium Scipionis* in Book VI of Cicero's *De Republica*. The poem begins with the narrator reading Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* in the hope of learning some "certeyn thing." The narrator then passes through Venus's dark temple with its friezes of doomed lovers and out into the bright sunlight where Nature is convening a parliament at which the birds all choose their mates. The description of the garden in the poem is very like the setting of *Roman de la Rose*. He soon comes upon the goddess Nature presiding over the birds, who have come to choose their mates on St. Valentine's Day. Three tercel eagles make their case for the hand of a formel eagle until the birds of the lower estates begin to protest and launch into a comic parliamentary debate, which Nature herself finally ends. None of the tercel wins the formel, for at her request Nature allows her to put off her decision for another year. Nature, as the ruling figure, in allowing the formel the right to choose not to choose is acknowledging the importance of free will, which is ultimately the foundation of a key theme in the poem. Nature allows the other birds, however, to pair off. The dream ends with a song welcoming the new summer. The dreamer awakes, still unsatisfied, and returns to his books, hoping still to learn the thing for which he seeks.

Within the garden, we are meant to contrast Venus and Nature. Venus personifies passionate, carnal love. Nature personifies the creative, reproductive force and also represents order and harmony manifest in God's scheme of creation. The poem thus presents the major problem of the dualism of the world and the subsidiary comment on the two kinds of love.

Troilus and Criseyde (1385) is a profound and moving treatment of love. A tragedy, set against the backdrop of the Trojan War, it tells of the love of a

faithful man for a woman who ultimately proves faithless. The source of the poem is Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*. Chaucer's command over the high style is evident here. Troilus and Cressida are deeply in love with one another, but after a period of intense happiness, the lovers are separated when Cressida is involved in an exchange of prisoners with the Greeks. She deserts Troilus for Diomedes, a Greek warrior. Chaucer is interested in the study of character and an interesting character is Pandarus, the uncle of Criseyde. Chaucer tries to capture the flavor of antiquity as the plot is set in pagan times.

The *Canterbury Tales* represents by common consent his final poetic achievement. Chaucer may have been describing a real pilgrimage. There had been several previous collections of tales like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. A closer parallel is afforded by the *Novelle* of Giovanni Sercambi, which actually employs the setting of a pilgrimage. It was written around 1374 and Chaucer was probably acquainted with the collection and its author. Pilgrimages were a common feature of medieval life and the shrine of St. Thomas Becket of Canterbury, which is the destination for the pilgrims in Chaucer's work, was the greatest of English pilgrimages. Chaucer was provided an opportunity to bring together a representative group of various classes of society, united by a common religious purpose, yet ready to give themselves over to enjoyments of the kind that would usually not be available to people living within strict social codes. With *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer actually moved away from early dream poetry to the romance of *Troilus and Criseyde* and thence to the present time in England. The set of twenty nine pilgrims set out on their pilgrimage to the shrine in Canterbury. They assemble at Tabard's Inn at Southwark and decide that each pilgrim should narrate two tales on the onward journey and two on the return journey. But the company never reaches Canterbury and only twenty three pilgrims get their turn. Some tales are left unfinished. Chaucer's method of handling his tales is very sophisticated, belonging more to the French school. He is objective, detached and says things without self-commitment. The twenty nine pilgrims are chosen from the whole strata of medieval society. Besides their social existence, they have a universal existence.

The framework of the tales is provided by the **General Prologue**, probably composed around 1387, along with individual prologues. The intention was to convey

verisimilitude, if not realism. The Prologue offers the reader a proper perspective from which to view the individual tales. The pilgrims described in the Prologue narrate tales that correspond to their persona and enrich our understanding of the larger picture.

1.1.4: The General Prologue to The *Canterbury Tales*

As you might have gathered from the drift of this lesson, Chaucer's purpose in The *Canterbury Tales* is to use the popular form of the pilgrimage, not so much for the religiosity of its intent as to bring out the popular mood of an excursion that such a social gathering can offer. This turn towards secular themes in itself, is an instance of the modernity of Chaucer. As you go into the text of the 'Prologue', the first thing you find is that the narrator is talking about the sunny season after a long period of winter inactivity – it is perhaps more the joyous mood than the aspect of faith that brings people out of doors! In essence therefore, pilgrimage as a form becomes a validating factor; it is the resumption of springtime activity that becomes the point of celebration! For this, the 'Prologue' serves the all important purpose of an introduction. Under the pretext of introducing the characters who will go on to narrate their tales en route the journey to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket, we actually evidence many aspects of human life and characters that basically do not have much to do with the holiness of a pilgrimage.

The General Prologue in Chaucer has no past model. None of Chaucer's predecessors presented a gallery of portraits like that in the Prologue. A Prologue is often included in collections of stories with the purpose of announcing the nature of the tales to follow or the circumstances under which the tales are told. The **General Prologue** to The *Canterbury Tales* does not reveal such a purpose until the end. The major part of it is designed, not simply as an introduction but on the model of an independent genre, that of the estates satire. You must understand that in an otherwise highly stratified society, a pilgrimage would offer the only possible opportunity for people across all classes and sections of society to come together. So in the 'Prologue' we virtually have a glimpse of English society at large. Among other things, this allows for the category of literature that is called estates satire, something that was common in medieval Western Europe. The various estates or

classes and professions in society are understandably the subject matter of such satiric literature. Estates satire aims to give an analysis of society in terms of hierarchy, social function and morality; the object being to show how far each falls short of the ideal to which it should conform.

The simplest division of society was into three estates, those who fight, those who pray and those who labour typified by the knight, the priest and the ploughman. The satire starts from the top and works down through different examples to peasants. Women were treated as an estate to themselves. The Wife of Bath is capable of counterbalancing some twenty seven men. The basic tripartite division of society is reflected in Chaucer's making his Knight, Parson and Ploughman the three ideal characters on the pilgrimage. Chaucer gives us a chance collection of individuals from real society from professions one might actually find on a pilgrimage in fourteenth century England.

The pilgrims are individuals as also representative. Many of them exhibit types of character or of professional conduct. The clergy, regular and secular, are included and there are also represented the learned professions of law and medicine, the merchants and the craftsmen of the guild, officials of the manor, the sailor and the common peasant farmer.

Chaucer does not consciously try to maintain any social hierarchy while introducing the characters in the Prologue. The Knight, who is the first pilgrim described is a replica of the ideal knight of the middle ages. He is said to have just returned from the Crusades, where he has rendered invaluable service. He has not even changed his clothes, he is described as wearing the muddied and blood stained tunic. It is his religious fervor that has brought him to join the merry party. Heroic prospects are tempered by religious prospects in the knight. Chaucer endows him with the qualities of chivalry, love of freedom, honour and courtesy. The Squire, who is the Knight's son, comes next. He is a character from the new generation and so does not care for the spiritual values of the old world. His character is defined by his love for rich and fashionable clothes and ardor for his beloved. The Yeoman serves as the connecting link between the courtly group and the religious group. Of the women characters, the Prioress is a typical medieval nun, who comes from an aristocratic family. For many dowerless women of the age, this was a ready

option. It is a beautiful merging of the aristocratic, romantic heroine and nun. The phrase 'simple and coy' is a formula of approval for courtly heroines. She has the courtly name 'Eglentyne' with its association of white and red roses to which poetic heroines are compared. The stern faced would say that she is an imperfect Prioress, and not quite right as a courtly lady either. Her French is the provincial convent school variety. And yet, Chaucer invests her with a charm that is undeniable, his mention of her adornments and demeanour being interesting hints. Chaucer's method is to treat as positive virtues all the things that the satirists regarded as topics for condemnation. She displays the difference between the woman and her office. And all this is done in an apparently simple narrative pattern, where the reader is to make out the differences between the ideal and the actual! You will find the same pattern used for characters like the Monk, the Friar, the man of law, the Franklin and many others.

The inclusion of a Haberdasher, a Dyer, a Carpenter, a Weaver, and a Carpet-maker reaffirm Chaucer's commitment towards social reality. The Doctor too is a worthy man as his knowledge of medicine is sound and he takes every opportunity of showing off his merits but we are told that he has amassed all the gold he has during pestilences in the country.

Among all these characters, one of the most interesting is definitely that of the Wife of Bath. No single motif can be said to dominate this portrait, and she is a mix of many things taken together. She is deaf; she has a loud voice and would rather listen to herself than to others. Her vices might include pride, wrath, envy, immodesty, lust and so on. Chaucer steers clear from leveling moral accusations against her and chooses to stress on her professional pre-eminence, her clothes, marital status, conduct in church and her sociability. She appears larger than life. She is so widely travelled that only the Knight and the Shipman have travelled farther than she has. She has been to Jerusalem three times and it is obvious that her motive is not simply religious, but because of her love for company; pilgrimage for her is a cover for other activities. She is a great feminist if we might say, and a personification of sovereignty and mastery over the other sex.

Activity for the Learner

Classify Chaucer's characters in The 'General Prologue' according to their occupations, gender and manners. You will find interesting patterns of the cross section of contemporary English society. You might as well tally these with your readings from the Social History of the period.

1.1.5: The Wife of Bath (General Prologue)

Having given a general introduction to all the characters described by Chaucer in **The General Prologue**, we now come to the narrative of the Wife of Bath. Notice for yourselves the subtleties of narration in the portrait:

A worthy *woman* from beside *Bath* city
Was with us, somewhat deaf, which was a pity.
In making cloth she showed so great a bent
She bettered those of Ypres and of Ghent.
In all the parish not a dame dared stir
460 Towards the altar steps in front of her,
And if indeed they did, so wrath was she
As to be quite put out of charity.
Her kerchiefs were of finely woven ground;
I dared have sworn they weighed a good ten pound,
465 The ones she wore on Sunday, on her head.
Her hose were of the finest scarlet red
And gartered tight; her shoes were soft and new.
Bold was her face, handsome, and red in hue.
A worthy woman all her life, what's more

- 470 She'd had five husbands, all at the church door,
Apart from other company in youth;
No need just now to speak of that, forsooth.
And she had thrice been to Jerusalem,
Seen many strange rivers and passed over them;
- 475 She'd been to Rome and also to Boulogne,
St. James of Compostella and Cologne,
And she was skilled in wandering by the way.
She had gap-teeth, set widely, truth to say.
Easily on an ambling horse she sat
- 480 Well wimpled up, and on her head a hat
As broad as is a buckler or a shield;
She had a flowing mantle that concealed
Large hips, her heels spurred sharply under that.
In company she liked to laugh and chat
- 485 And knew the remedies for love's mischances,
An art in which she knew the oldest dances.

Annotations

1. L455- She is a middle aged woman and as she mentions in her Prologue, much married, five times in all and ready for her next husband.
2. L456- In her Prologue, she narrates the details of her marital life. Her fifth husband had struck her hard on her ear which caused her deafness.
3. L463- The kerchief was in style from the middle of the century.
4. L466-67- The red hose and soft shoes were highly inappropriate for the occasion. On a pilgrimage, it was customary to dress in sober colours and wear sturdy and simple footwear.

5. L468- The red hue of her face is indicative of her lifestyle. She loved good food and led a lustful life.
6. L470- In her Prologue, she talks at length of her five husbands. The custom of celebrating marriage at the church door was usual from the tenth till the sixteenth century. The service was in two parts- the marriage proper and the nuptial mass, afterward, celebrated at the altar.
7. L471- In her Prologue, she proudly boasts of her male admirers and how she enjoyed the company of men.
8. L473- Though her actions do not suggest that she was a pious woman, she loves to project herself as one. Chaucer ironically mentions her trips to Jerusalem, where she may have gone for reasons other than religious ones.
9. L475- A fragmentary image of the Blessed Virgin is venerated here. At Cologne was the shrine of the Three Kings. Since all these places were frequented by pilgrims, it was not unusual for the Wife of Bath to have ventured out. As she states in her Prologue, her motives were not strictly religious. In fact, the pilgrimage in Chaucer's day was a favourite form of traveling for pleasure.
10. L478- The Wife of Bath attributes her amorous nature to 'gap- teeth' or teeth set widely apart.
11. L479- For a widely travelled woman riding at ease on an ambling horse was quite natural.
12. L480, 81- Her hat suggests her fondness for dressing, regardless of the occasion.
13. L482- the flowing mantle is the outer skirt. Her large hips are suggestive of the weight she has gained with age.
14. L484-6- She is quite at home among strangers and laughs and chats with gay abandon. She is quite adept in the art of love. She knows the cures of love and all the rules of the game. With her wide experience she is acknowledged as an authority on the subject.

1.1.6: Paraphrase

There was with us an admirable lady from Bath, who was quite an imposing figure. It was a pity that the lady was deaf. But she had many accomplishments. She was such a good weaver that the fame of her prowess spread far and wide. She was reputed for weaving cloth of such quality that she surpassed the famed weavers of Ypres and Gaunt. These were famous centres of the Flemish wool trade.

During the time of church offerings, she aggressively tried to stay ahead of others and if anyone dared to usurp what she felt was her position, the offender had to face her wrath.

Whereas the other pilgrims seemed unconcerned about their dress and appearance, this lady was careful. She covered her head in expensive handkerchiefs which must have weighed at least ten pounds. Her hose was red in colour and tightly gartered round her thick calves. The shoes she wore were very soft and new. She had a bold look on her remarkable face, which shone bright and red.

She was actually a praiseworthy woman of many talents. She had five husbands who were all dead and gone. She had honourably been married to all of them and her exploits had extended beyond her husbands to other young men too, when she herself was a young woman.

A deeply religious woman, she had been to Jerusalem thrice and passed over many regions and rivers. She had been to Rome, Boulogne and Cologne as she loved travelling. She was a habitual traveler, who loved to explore the world around her.

Her appearance was somewhat unpleasant as she had gap-teeth but it hardly mattered to her. She rode well sitting quite comfortably on an ambling horse. She had a wimple to cover her head as well as a broad hat. To appear young and attractive she tried to hide her ample girth under a flowing cloak. But she knew what she was about and so sharply used her boots to spur on the horse she was riding. She enjoyed the company of her fellow creatures and laughed and chatted merrily with them. One art in which she had no competitor was that of the tactics of love. She knew the remedies and solutions to all problems concerning love and the rules governing the workings of love.

1.1.7: Critical Understanding of the Text

The first thing you must have noticed about this description is the plain-faced manner in which the character is described. All through the ‘Prologue’, this is Chaucer’s style. He never makes any kind of judgment of characters he describes, only faithfully (and of course with naughty humour) goes on saying about men and women what they are and as they appear. Quite clearly, this brings out the difference between what one should be like, and what one actually is. He thus leaves his readers to find out the gap and therein lies his humour and satire too. Now it is upon you, dear learner, before you proceed, to point out what appears a deviation from the expected, in case of the portrayal of the Wife of Bath.

Chaucer’s account of the pilgrims described in the Prologue offers an insight into multiple issues that enrich our understanding of the middle ages and the sensibilities of the people of the age. We do not read *The Canterbury Tales* merely for the stories and so also do not read the General Prologue *only* to know more about the tales. The Prologue is a unique creation of Chaucer in which he combines wit, irony, humour and a deep understanding of human nature to create a world of the pilgrims, who belong to the age and are for all times. His criticism of the shortcomings of the flock is not harsh or unforgiving but tempered with a sense of toleration. This is where he differs from Langland, whose attack on the religious orders is relentless.

Chaucer brings to life his characters with his subtle hints, insinuations and suggestive comments rather than direct attacks except with characters like the Summoner and the Pardoner.

The portrait of the Wife of Bath is supplemented by her own account in the Prologue to her tale. Chaucer drew on the satirical anti-feminist literature of the age for the Wife’s version of her life. In the Prologue to her tale, which may be read as her confession, she reveals all the tricks of her successful domination of her husbands. She condemns celibacy, describing her life with her five husbands and also confesses her womanly vices. Her assertion is a superb satire on women and her Prologue a comedy of wifely oppression. Her story seeks an answer to the question, “what do women most desire?” and the correct answer is “sovereignty”. This is what she seeks to affirm through her speech and actions.

We know more about the Wife of Bath personally and perhaps more intimately than any other pilgrim. This is because of the detailed account of herself that she gives the reader in her Prologue. The vividness of the description makes her what we understand as a 'real character'. Her personal appearance does not take up more than a line. We are told she has large hips. Chaucer begins the description with the mention of her deafness, suggesting that she spoke more than she listened. But this detail turns out to be significant when we get to know the reason of her deafness from her Prologue; it was caused by the blow that she got from her fifth husband. She is skilled in weaving and this detail is very important because it explains why she is the only woman in the group who travels unaccompanied. She is one of the few women of her time who earned her own living. She was a regular church-goer but more concerned about her social standing and thus got angry if anyone went up to the altar before her. Her fine stockings and footwear are signs of her prosperity. She is an experienced lady with five husbands and other company in her youth. Her extensive pilgrimages suggest leisure and prosperity and perhaps devotion. Her widely spaced teeth were a sign of her flirtatious nature, and the medieval insistence on physiognomy as upholding vital character traits would also associate this with her lustful nature. Her bold mannish nature is suggested by her use of the sharp spurs. Chaucer creates in her not only an individual, but also a type.

In the case of the other important woman pilgrim in the group, the Prioress, we further observe how the irony works, by pointing out the ideals to which an individual is expected to aspire. The characters of the pilgrims are determined by the contrast between their estates, or occupation and the persons they actually are. Chaucer was concerned with types as well as with persons.

Now that you have had a primary acquaintance of the characters in the **General Prologue**, and seen for yourselves the vivacious Wife of Bath, it would be relevant to institute a comparative study between the two women that Chaucer shows – the Prioress and the Wife. It is interesting to note that the characterisation of the Prioress is extremely subtle and the satire sympathetic. As usual, Chaucer dwells at length on the physical details of her dress and manners. As noted previously, she shares traits of the romantic heroine in contemporary literature. Her name, Madame Eglentyne, has the association of elegance and beauty, not quite in keeping with the sedate

nature of her calling. Chaucer's intention was not to disparage her as a nun but to point out some laxities in her conduct.

The mention of her nasal intonation need not be taken too seriously as it was traditional with the recitative portions of the church service. So also her French spoken in the Stratford *à la Mode* style was to be expected, as her knowledge of French was such as was derived from an English nunnery. Her immaculate table manners are individualizing traits that make her a remarkable figure. We ought not to read too much in the motto inscribed on her brooch, *Amor vincit omnia*, as it referred both to religious and romantic love. On the other hand, the poet does not seem to be too forgiving about her over indulgence of her pet dogs. It was quite against the rules. We are also to believe that going on a pilgrimage was not expected of a Prioress. The ambiguity of the poet's attitude adds layers to our perception of the woman's position in the middle ages.

The Wife of Bath is admirable for being a mistress of herself in spite of her immoderation, as she does not bear any social responsibility to be a paragon of virtue, whereas the Prioress must display exemplary conduct. The religious orders are viewed from the perspective of idealistic behavior and any departure from convention is unpardonable. It is therefore difficult to group the two women characters in the same category. They belong to a society where different standards apply to the various classes of individuals.

1.1.8: Summing up

- Geoffrey Chaucer represented his age as well as influenced later writers. He was the foremost writer of the Middle ages whose works looked forward to the future with respect to style, technique and subject matter.
- His art was influenced by the French style of writing. He did away with the heavy and antiquated style of the middle ages and made his lines easy and flexible.
- He brought the French decasyllabic line to England, instead of the weak octosyllabic line. He used it in much of his later poetry.

- Though Chaucer did not belong to the royalty, his employment as a page boy in the court and royal household shaped his art. His close acquaintance with the nobility is evident in many of his poems he wrote like *The Book of the Duchess*.
- Chaucer's works depict contemporary London with all classes of people engaged in myriad activities. Corruption at various levels is pointed out.
- Dream vision poetry was a common form in the middle ages. Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*, *House of Fame* and *Parliament of Fowls* are dream vision poems.
- His most famous work, by common consent, is *The Canterbury Tales*, written around 1374. It has the framework of a pilgrimage. A group of twenty nine pilgrims set out on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury. To pass the time, they plan to entertain themselves by telling tales as they halt in the inn at Southwark.
- The company includes people from all walks of life, and all have their idiosyncrasies, which makes them a merry band of pilgrims, out to have some fun as they travel.
- One of the most interesting and complex character is that of the Wife of Bath. She is alone a match for the many male pilgrims who accompany her.
- The Wife of Bath has had five husbands in the past and is ready for the sixty. She is a skilled weaver and a much traveled woman. Her dress, appearance and ways suggest her affluence.
- Many of the details about this lady offer us a glimpse into the intricacies of Chaucer's insight into the social realities of the age as well as his understanding of human nature.
- Chaucer is a writer whose keen observation of the people and life around him and vivid imagination bring to life the pilgrims, whose journey to Canterbury symbolizes the journey of life itself.

1.1.9: Comprehension Exercises

A. Long Answer Type Questions:

1. Which features of the Wife of Bath's persona make her a memorable character?
2. Assess the contribution of Chaucer as a poet who brought in a new style and outlook to English poetry.
3. What have you learnt of the structure of *The Canterbury Tales* and the character sketches in the General Prologue?
4. In what ways does the General Prologue reflect Chaucer's contemporary life?

B. Mid Length Answer Type Questions:

1. Compare and contrast the Wife of Bath with the other woman character in the Prologue, the Prioress.
2. Give a sketch of the character of the Wife of Bath.
3. Comment on the use of irony and humor in the portrayal of the Wife of Bath.

C. Short Answer Type Questions:

1. What, according to you, are the advantages of Chaucer's choice of the motif of pilgrimage to describe his characters?
2. How important was religion in the lives of the people of the middle ages?
3. Why do you think the manners of the Prioress inappropriate to her social position?
4. Describe in short the physical appearance of the Wife of Bath.
5. Comment on the physical characteristics of the Wife of Bath as described by Chaucer.

1.1.10: Suggested Reading List

Aers, David. *Chaucer*. Harvester Press, 1986.

Boitani, Piero and Jill Mann (Eds.). *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*. CUP, 2004.

Cooper, Helen. *The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd Edn. Part of *Oxford Guides to Chaucer*. OUP, 1996.

Rigby, Stephen H (Ed.). *Historians on Chaucer: The 'General Prologue' to the Canterbury Tales*. OUP, 2004.

https://chopracollege.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Historians-on-Chaucer-the-General-Prologue-to-the-Canterbury-Tales-by-Chaucer-Geoffrey-Minnis-Alastair-J.-Rigby-Stephen-Henry-z-lib.org_.pdf

For the full text of the General Prologue, see this link:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43926/the-canterbury-theses-general-prologue>

Unit 2 □ William Shakespeare: Shall I compare thee to a summer's day (Sonnet 18); My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun (Sonnet 130)

Structure:

- 1.2.1. Objectives**
- 1.2.2. Introduction**
- 1.2.3. The Elizabethan Sonnet Tradition**
- 1.2.4. Brief Overview of Shakespeare's Sonnets**
 - 1.2.4.1. History**
 - 1.2.4.2. The Fair Youth Sonnet Sequence**
 - 1.2.4.3. The Dark Lady Sonnet Sequence**
- 1.2.5. Text: Sonnet 18**
 - 1.2.5.1. Analysis of the Lines from the Sonnet**
 - 1.2.5.2. Critical Appreciation of the Sonnet**
- 1.2.6. Text: Sonnet 130**
 - 1.2.6.1. Analysis of the Lines from the Sonnet**
 - 1.2.6.2. Critical Appreciation of the Sonnet**
- 1.2.7. Shakespeare's Usage of Language and Balance of Form in the Sonnets**
- 1.2.8. Summing Up**
- 1.2.9. Comprehension Exercises**
- 1.2.10. Suggested Reading**

1.2.1: Objectives

This Unit will introduce you to the rise of the sonnet as a significant poetic form in Renaissance England. The present Unit seeks to acquaint you with what is considered the most mature and best expression of the English sonnet—the Shakespearean sonnet. You will be shown how the sonnet evolved both in form and content from the early practitioners in English who were mostly adapting Petrarchan themes in their efforts to give this new found literary type a sound footing in English. The spotlight will be

on two particular Shakespearean Sonnets that are part of your syllabus. You will be expected to understand Shakespeare's contribution to the development of the sonnet form, and develop a fair idea of the kind of 'sonneteering' practised by him. In fact, Shakespeare so popularised the sonnet as a poetic form that is still known by his name to this day and celebrated across the world as a fine example of love poetry. This 'love' however takes different and complex forms, so much so that there are still endless debates on it. This happens largely because of the very Shakespearean trademark of introducing the sudden *volta* (comes from Italian and literally means turn of thought). Effectively, this becomes an implicit questioning of the very form or content he is describing and using. As learners, you are therefore encouraged to analyse the sonnets closely, discover the adept use of all such poetic devices, and go through the activities suggested so that there is a comprehensive understanding.

1.2.2: Introduction

The word 'Sonnet' has been derived from the Italian word 'Sonnetto' meaning a little sound or strain. Sonnet is a poem expressing one main idea or emotion consisting of fourteen decasyllabic lines. Though it is chiefly associated with the famous Italian poet Petrarch, but it has been earlier used by Dante. The sonnet is chiefly found in two forms (i) Italian or Petrarchan, (ii) English or Shakespearean. However, some deviations from these two forms have also been noted. For example, Spenser evolved a new variety.

In the Italian sonnet (or, Petrarchan) which is considered to be the legitimate form, alone recognises that peculiar balance of parts divided through a certain rhyme scheme within fourteen lines, which is its salient characteristic. The English sonnet does something rather different with the form which is not as subtle as its Italian counterpart. The Italian Sonnet is composed of two parts— the Octave, a stanza of eight lines and the Sestet, a stanza of six lines. The Octave has two rhymes arranged according to the following scheme; *a b b a, a b b a*. The *Sestet* has sometimes two rhymes, sometimes three, different from the rhymes of the Octave— *c d e, c d e, c d c, d c d, c d e, d c e*. The Octave may be divided into two quatrains, the Sestet into two tercets. At the end of the Octave, i.e., after the eighth line, there is a conspicuous pause or Caesura (it is often indicated by a space) followed by a *Volta* or a turn in the thought. But it may be noted that in Italian sonnets this break of thought is not found as a rule.

The Italian poet, **Francesco Petrarca** (Petrarch), the great master of the sonnet of idealized love. The sonnet, one of the most popular verse forms not only of Elizabethan literature in England but of Renaissance European literature as a whole, developed first in Italy in the twelfth century before passing into France and then into England. Wyatt, facing the problem of restoring gravity and cogency of utterance to English verse after a period of linguistic change during which pronunciation had altered and metrical patterns had gone to pieces, turned to the Italian sonnet for help. Here, was a highly conventional verse form, a form which demanded discipline and craftsmanship on the poet's part, a form which challenged the poet to mould his thought with wit and aptness to the precise shape of these fourteen balanced lines.

The sonnet was not simply a stanza of fourteen lines with a certain rhyme scheme: the lines were deftly balanced, the links and pauses between them creating a movement which in most Italian sonnets, was in four parts— two of four lines each (quatrains) and two of three lines each (tercets). There were other ways of balancing the sonnet— such as Shakespeare's; he balanced it on a final couplet of rhyming lines— but the pattern most common in Italy employed two quatrains with a single pair of rhymes, *a b b a, a b b a*, the first and fourth rhyming and the two middle lines rhyming, followed by two tercets in any one of a variety of arrangements— *c d c, c d c*; or *c d c, d c d*; *c d e, c d e*; or other groupings. In such a scheme the four parts of the sonnet really resolve themselves into two, the first consisting of two pairs of four lines (the octave) and the second of two pairs of three lines (the sestet). There were many other ways of patterning the fourteen lines, but this was most frequently used by Petrarch, whose sonnets celebrated his ideal love of Laura were immensely influential and represent the most important single influence on later love sonnets throughout Europe.

The whole nature of love idealised in sonnet was formed on the nature of relation between the poet and his beloved. It became conventionalised in terms of idealised courtly-love which Petrarch manifested towards Laura in his love sonnets. This notion of the lover as the humble servant of the often-cruel fair wounded by a glance of her eye, tempest-tossed in seas of despair when his love is rejected, changing in mood according to the presence or absence of his beloved, is derived from the medieval view of courtly love. Petrarch moved this courtly love to a high, ideal plane of his own, and subsequent sonneteers for the most part kept it there. The Petrarchan sonnet thus provided the English poet with both a conventional form and conventional sentiments.

1.2.3: The Elizabethan Sonnet Tradition

The sonnet was introduced in England in the first half of the 16th century by **Sir Thomas Wyatt** and **Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey**, both of whom were well-known politicians and statesmen of England. Wyatt (1503-42) borrowed from the Italian certain poetic forms which were new to English lyricists of the time. One of these forms was the Petrarchan sonnet. The sonnet effectively conveyed through apt lyricism subjective feelings of the poet. The brevity of the sonnet form demanded considerable labour from the poet. Impassioned language, grand declaration of love and usage of metaphors was quite unknown to English writers before Wyatt. It is agreed that Wyatt's sonnets are divided, after the Italian manner, into octave and sestet; but his custom of rhyming the last two lines of the sestet is looked upon as evidence that he divided this part of the sonnet into a quatrain and a couplet. The rhyme scheme of Wyatt's sonnets *a b b a, a b b a, c d d c, e e*.

The changes in the language itself since the fourteenth century, brought with them a certain flexibility in accentuation during a transitional period, made it possible for Wyatt to experiment freely and effectively in numerous short line stanzas where the sustained gravity of regular metrical utterance throughout a series of long lines was not required, however, they seriously handicapped him in writing the heavier kind of line demanded by the sonnet.

Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, the only one of the "courtly makers" whose name appeared on Tottel's title page, was born fourteen years after Wyatt. Surrey seems to have drawn his inspiration from Wyatt. The first thirty-six poems in *Tottel's Miscellany* (1557) were by Surrey, and four more were later included. But it is perhaps in some impersonal sonnets that his poetic flair shows the best. Surrey, developed the less elaborate English style, that Shakespeare later adopted. This form consisted of three quatrains with different rhymes, followed by a couplet. The sonnet of Surrey is universally described to have been derived from Wyatt's. Surrey particularly introduced a rhyme-scheme, different from the Italian model. His sonnets are divided into three quatrains (of four lines each followed by a rhyming couplet of two lines). Shakespeare has followed the pattern of Surrey in his sonnets.

The sonnet found its way to the Tudor court of England through Wyatt and Surrey. Even then the point of the Italian form was not entirely grasped, for Wyatt's sonnets all ended with a couplet, and Surrey, after some experimentations, used a

pattern of alternately rhymed quatrains, which encouraged logical exposition right up to this final couplet and postponed the turn. The English sonnet has no pause or turn of thought at the end of the eighth line. It works right up to the final couplet, where the highest peak of the poet's thought is reached. Its rhyme scheme is *a b a b, c d c d, e f e f, g g*. The Elizabethans enjoyed using the sonnet to write long sequences, occasionally varying the form with tetrameters or alexandrines, or even the insertion of quite irregular pieces. Though primarily considered to be love poems, these sonnets often took a philosophical turn, and sometimes seem to be arranged to symbolise a major idea.

The difference between Wyatt and Surrey can be summed up in a phrase: Surrey has less strength and more polish. Wyatt is a greater poet, wielding a less perfect instrument, Surrey is the competent and graceful craftsman; his sonnets run with greater metrical smoothness than Wyatt's. Surrey was an accomplished versifier whose responsiveness to the cultural movements of his time, together with his aristocratic idealism of mind, his quickness of wit, and his technical curiosity about his craft enabled him on occasion to write poetry of grace and eloquence. And to write English poetry of grace and eloquence in the first half of the sixteenth century was a historically important achievement, one which had great influence on the subsequent course of English poetry.

Sidney's sonnet-sequence known as *Astrophel and Stella* (1582) created a taste for the sonnet form. Spenser's *Amoretti*, a collection of about eighty-eight sonnets, is marked with sincerity. In these sonnets Spenser can be seen to express his genuine feelings without recourse to allegory. Then the sonnet form had to wait till Milton in the post Elizabethan period, for the English passion for sonneteering died out in the early 17th century. It was Milton who widened the scope of the sonnet which had hitherto been a vehicle to express only love and friendship.

Edmund Spenser (1552-99) significantly shaped the Elizabethan sonnet by introducing a distinct rhyme scheme and interlinking the quatrains, which differentiated his sonnets from the English or Shakespearean form. He wrote *Amoretti*, a sequence of eighty-eight sonnets, addressed to Elizabetha Boyle whom he married in 1594. His rhyme scheme, *a b a b b c b c c d c d e e*, created a tighter connection between the quatrains, fostering a sense of continuity and building upon the themes presented. While Shakespeare's sonnets often present distinct metaphors or ideas in each quatrain, culminating in a concluding couplet, Spenser's sonnets weave a

more intricate tapestry, with the final couplet reflecting on the preceding twelve lines and reinforcing the overall theme. This structure allowed for a more complex exploration of emotions and ideas within the sonnet form. Additionally, Spenser's *Amoretti* sequence frequently employs a third-person perspective when addressing the beloved, a stylistic choice that sets it apart from other sonnet sequences of the time. This approach creates a sense of distance and reverence, further contributing to the unique character of Spenserian sonnets.

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86), set the vogue of writing sonnet-sequences. In fact, after Wyatt and Surrey, the sonnet was neglected for a number of years. It was for Sidney to revitalise this form by composing one hundred and eight sonnets, all put in the *Astrophel and Stella* sonnet sequence.

Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* stands as a cornerstone of the Elizabethan sonnet tradition, not solely for its intrinsic literary merit, but also for its innovative approach to the form and its profound influence on subsequent poets. Sidney's sequence, published posthumously in 1591, injected a new dynamism into the sonnet, moving beyond the established Petrarchan conventions to explore the complexities of love with psychological depth and emotional honesty.

One of Sidney's key contributions lies in his masterful use of the sonnet to chart the trajectory of a passionate, yet ultimately unfulfilled, love affair. *Astrophel and Stella* chronicles the speaker's internal struggles, his hopes, frustrations, and self-deceptions, with a raw vulnerability rarely seen in earlier sonnet sequences. This introspective focus, combined with Sidney's conversational style and witty wordplay, imbues his sonnets with a sense of immediacy and authenticity, drawing the reader into the emotional world of the speaker.

Sidney expanded the thematic scope of the sonnet beyond the conventional praises of the beloved's beauty. While elements of the Petrarchan tradition remain, *Astrophel and Stella* delves into the psychological complexities of desire, jealousy, and the tension between reason and passion. This thematic richness, coupled with Sidney's skilful use of rhetorical devices such as irony and self-deprecation, adds layers of meaning to his sonnets, inviting multiple interpretations and sparking ongoing critical debate.

Sidney's experimentation with form also left its mark on the Elizabethan sonnet. While adhering to the basic structure of fourteen lines, he played with rhyme schemes and variations in meter, demonstrating the flexibility of the form and

paving the way for later poets to push the boundaries of the sonnet even further. His use of enjambment and caesura creates a sense of natural speech, enhancing the conversational tone of his sonnets and contributing to their emotional impact.

In conclusion, Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* represents a pivotal moment in the evolution of the Elizabethan sonnet. His innovative approach to theme, style, and form, combined with his profound exploration of the human condition, not only established him as a major literary figure but also laid the groundwork for future generations of sonneteers. His influence can be seen in the works of Shakespeare, Spenser, and other Elizabethan poets who followed in his footsteps, further enriching the sonnet tradition and solidifying its place as a central genre of English literature.

While Wyatt and Surrey's sonnets were important for acquainting English poets with the form, it was Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* (1591) which really popularized the sonnet sequence in England and started the trend of sonneteering amongst poets of the Elizabethan era. Some of the well-known English poets of the time who proved their mettle in the form are Edmund Spenser, Michael Drayton, Samuel Daniel, Fulke Greville, William Drummond of Hawthornden and, of course, Shakespeare among many others. For most of these poets, their sonnets were inspired by the Petrarchan tradition, describing the poet's love for a woman in idolised and idealized terms. The lady is seated on a pedestal too high to be reached and won.

The Elizabethan poet's consciousness suffered from the dichotomy of permanence and change, of eternity and mutability. As we have seen, Elizabethan mind was much influenced by the philosophy of Plato who assured it that there was a permanent and eternal Being which was the reality; on the other hand, the change, the mutability, was only phenomenal, illusory and unreal. The *daimonic* Plato told the Elizabethan poets of the permanence, but they saw only mutability all around. Therefore, they questioned themselves: could mutable beings be made eternal? And they found the answer: only in art could beings be eternal. Shakespearean sonnets become a testimony to this ideal.

One of the special features of the Sonnets of the Elizabethan period is their concern about time and eternity. The Elizabethan poet wanted to immortalise the beauty of his beloved and his love for her. This is also particularly true of Shakespeare's Sonnets. The sonnet, since its invention, has always strived to express the suffering and self-pity of the lover — of the individual poet. Shakespeare's Sonnets are distinctive in the sense that they do not so much as express the suffering and self-pity of the poet

himself, but rather they express the objective and impersonal emotions tangentially related with the poet. According to Joan Grundy one of the most significant features of Shakespearean sonnets is, “Shakespeare’s love is not self-regarding, he therefore does not go into surveying or displaying it in his verse, and does not conjoin self-portraiture with the portrayal of his beloved. This introduces a fundamental change from the Elizabethan sonnets. The sonnet sequence in Shakespeare’s hands loses its affinity with the love-complaint. Here there are no ‘tears of fancie’, no ‘blackest face of woe’” (Jones, 191).

Shakespeare introduces many changes as he plays upon the Petrarchan theme to write about the poet’s love for a young man, a dark unconventional mistress and also a rival poet with whom the poet competes for the fair youth’s attention. When he does describe the ‘Dark Lady’ of his sonnets the terms used make fun of the Petrarchan idealisations, bringing his readers face to face with reality and its multiple and complex emotions. Idealised love is instead reserved for the Fair Youth of his sonnets who he eulogises, praises, desires but is unable to own or be united with permanently. These sonnets then become a space for reflection on various other themes such as death, mortality, politics, immortality wrought through verse, sexual desire and conventions that define beauty and gender. In comparing the early and later Elizabethan sonnet tradition, you can thus understand how the dramatic genius of Shakespeare affected in a positive way and brought about a maturing effect in poetry.

In the Shakespearean sonnet, the poem is rhythmically divided into three quatrains and a couplet, usually rhymed as a-b-a-b, c-d-c-d, e-f-e-f, g-g in iambic pentameter. Most of the sonnets published in the 1609 quarto are in this schema, except Sonnets 99, 126 and 145. The unexpected *volta* usually appears in the couplet where anew perspective is added to the theme of the poem and is intrinsic to the charm of the Shakespearean sonnet.

Activity for the learner

Make a comparative study of the pre-Shakespearean and Shakespearean sonnets in your syllabus. You could focus on areas like Theme, Versification, Rhyme scheme, reversal or parallelism in the development of the thought process. Identify what we have called the ‘volta’ here.

1.2.4: Brief Overview of Shakespeare's Sonnets

Now that you have a fair idea of the rise and growth of the sonnet tradition in English literature, we will come to more details about the Shakespearean sonnet.

1.2.4.1: History

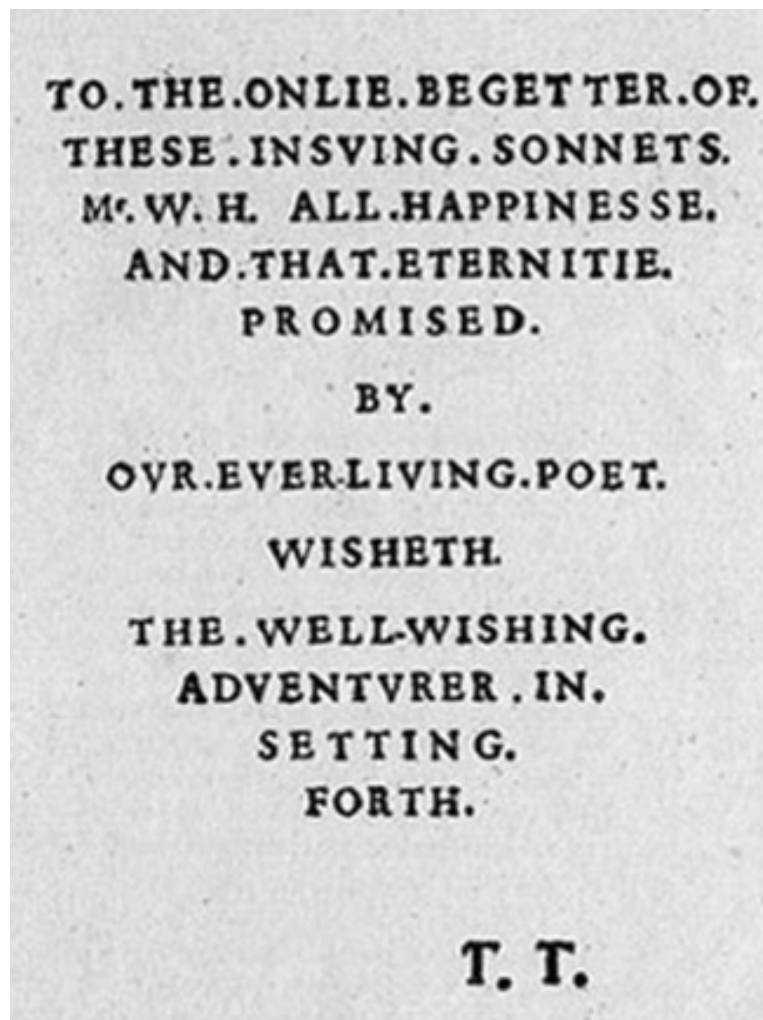
Shakespeare's sonnets appeared in Quarto form in 1609 when it was published by Thomas Thorpe. It announced the sonnets to be "Never before imprinted" although sonnets 138 and 144 had been published previously in *The Passionate Pilgrim*. There is a great deal of debate on whether Thorpe published a stolen copy of the sonnets or not, owing to the fact that he signed the Dedication which the poet usually signed. However the sonnets are arranged so methodically, it seems unlikely that Shakespeare had not wished them to be published. The first 126 sonnets are addressed to the 'Fair Youth' loved by the poet, sonnet 127-152 to the 'Dark Lady' desired by the poet, the last two sonnets a little set apart and disconnected from the sequence, sonnets 78-86 within the first sequence as a subset describing the Rival Poet with whom the poet of these sonnets competes for the Fair Youth's attention and the ending of the sequence with a long narrative poem called "A Lover's Complaint" written in seven line stanzas in rhyme royal (a-b-a-b-b-c-c).

The Dedication at the beginning of the sonnets has been scrutinised in detail to find clues regarding the identity of the dedicatee and hence the 'Fair Youth' and also for the circumstances of publication. You might wonder why that is necessary, but these details are taken as being important signifiers in analysing so complex and richly allusive a collection of poetry as the sonnets we are studying now.

The Dedication:

"TO.THE.ONLIE. BEGETTER.OF.
THESE.INSUING.SONNETS.
Mr.W.H. ALL.HAPPINESSE.
AND.THAT.ETERNITIE.
PROMISED.

BY.
OUR.EVER-LIVING.POET.
WISHETH.
THE.WELL-WISHING.
ADVENTURER.IN.
SETTING.
FORTH.
T.T.”



(Image Source: <https://hankwhitemore.com/tag/dedication-of-sonnets/>)

‘The Onlie Begetter’ of the sonnets could refer to the inspiration behind the sonnets Mr. W.H. to whom happiness and eternity are wished by the poet. The word ‘onlie’ might be thus interpreted as ‘sole’ or ‘peerless’.

There are many speculations regarding who Mr. W.H might be, the main contenders being William Herbert, the Third Earl of Pembroke (who was the dedicatee of Shakespeare’s First Folio as well) or Henry Wriothesley, the Third Earl of Southampton, his initials reversed (the dedicatee of Shakespeare’s poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*). However, it remains a puzzle why a Lord should be addressed as ‘Mr.’ by the publisher Thorpe. The Earl of Southampton remains a popular choice given his friendship and patronage of Shakespeare for many years and his handsome appearance correlating with the ‘Fair Youth’ described in these sonnets.

There is of course another theory as propounded by Bertrand Russell that W.H is a typing error for W. S or W.Sh or the poet’s initials who is therefore the only ‘begetter’ or creator of these sonnets and is wished happiness and eternity by the ‘Ever-Living-Poet’, i.e. God who ‘makes’ or ‘creates’ us all.

The capital letters and periods following every word of the Dedication might be an attempt to make it resemble a Roman lapidary inscription in keeping with Shakespeare’s ardent wish that the sonnets confer immortality to his feelings for the Youth and more than any monument shall be able to outlive the ravages of time. He insists in Sonnet 55,

“...you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone, besmeared with sluttish time”

A closer study of this particular sonnet reveals certain important themes Shakespeare reflects on in his collection. He seems to be making an effort towards endearing the young man to the importance of his sonnets in enshrining the youth’s beauty and qualities of a lover and at the same time perhaps engaging in this exercise of writing the sonnet as a means of keeping or capturing a portion of the youth’s memory for himself in the face of mortality and loss:

“So till the judgement that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lovers’ eyes.”

At the same time, it is to be noted how he introduces doubt in the verse written by him to immortalise the qualities of his beloved, in the image of ‘lovers’ eyes’ which were always unreliable given the proverb ‘Love is blind’. Hence while the rhyme is powerful as is the ambition of the poet, there is the fault of imperfection in the vision of those who shall read the verse and be influenced by it.

We can see how Shakespeare introduces several trajectories of thought in the space of a verse, including imagery reminiscent of old, decrepit buildings, war, and ravages of time and events even as he describes his loved one and his wish to secure immortality in some form for him.

1.2.4.2: The Fair Youth Sonnet Sequence

The collection of sonnets begins with the poet/speaker urging the youth to procreate and thereby leave a legacy of his beauty and fine qualities. In fact, Sonnets 1-17 are often grouped together as the ‘Procreation Sonnets’ owing to their repeated elaboration of the passage of time, its ravages to be wrought on the young man’s physical beauty and the only means of continuation being in the form of children who carry forth their father’s beauty and accord him a certain form of immortality and solace. He chides the young man he loves, thus:

“...if thou live remembered not to be,
Die single, and thine image dies with thee.” (Sonnet 3)

Or,

“Thy unused beauty must be tombed with thee,
Which used, lives th’executor to be.” (Sonnet 4)

While the sonnets might appear to be repeating the same idea over and over, you might wish to delve into them to understand where their charm really lies. It is in the multiple ways of presenting the same idea that Shakespeare really stands out. Every sonnet in this section uses a different framework, different references and completely different images to persuade the youth to stop wasting his worth and beauty on himself and to procreate for the benefit of the world. He utilises the imagery of time passing by—the flowers wilting, the trees shedding leaves, summer giving way to winter and attempts to make the youth realize that his beauty which he is so proud of, is after all bound to time:

“Then of thy beauty do I question make,
That thou among the wastes of time must go.”(Sonnet 12)

From Sonnet 18 a slight change in mood may be observed in the poet’s treatment of impending mortality. In this oft quoted sonnet, the poet places greater hope in his verse as a means of protecting and enshrining his beloved. We shall be reading this sonnet in considerable detail a little later. The theme is continued in new terms in sonnet 19, as the poet challenges ‘Time’ to devour and destroy everything in nature except his fair friend “O carve not with thy hours my love’s fair brow” with the usual turn of thought in the last couplet where he declares that even if ‘Time’ does not listen to his orders, his verse shall suffice as vessel enough for his love to survive in:

“Yet do thy worst, old time, despite thy wrong,
My love shall in my verse ever live young.”

In Sonnet 37 we see the poet describing the young man’s love and success and qualities as worthy recompense for all his losses. “...I in thy abundance am sufficed, /And by a part of all thy glory live...” This too is a theme oft repeated as in Sonnet 30 where the poet takes stock of his past losses and failures, finding restoration in his dear friend. It is the memory of his love that soothes the poet in Sonnet 29, uplifting him to better thoughts, a state he would not forsake even to be a king:

“Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising,
From sullen earth sings hymns at heaven’s gate.”

Even as the young man wrongs his lover the poet, the latter advocates for the young man in Sonnet 35, providing yet another shade to the love and bitter sweet relation that they appear to share or are projected to share by the poet/speaker of these sonnets. However, in Sonnet 41, we see the poet’s pain at being cheated by both his beloved fair youth and his own mistress who appear to have sexual relations with each other breaking their pledge to the poet—she of her constancy and he of his bond of friendship. We see the poet’s exercise in self-consolation in the next sonnet (Sonnet 42), where he tries to persuade himself that his mistress and beloved friend desire each other because they were both in love with him. However as in

most of Shakespeare's sonnets the logic is self-reflexive as the poet always casts doubt on his own rhetorical exercises of persuasion whether of the youth or himself:

"Both find each other, and I lose both twain,
And both for my sake lay on me this cross:"

It is interesting to note the poet's proposal that a separation between the two shall enable him to write better verse praising the young man. "That by this separation I may give / That due to thee that thou deserv'st alone" (Sonnet 39). Separation also brings forth outstanding poetry as he describes days as nights when he is apart from his dear friend and nights as days when he sees the beloved in his dreams (Sonnet 43).

The sonnets reflecting on the young man's wavering interest in his poetry and developing affections for a rival poet are in a cluster 78-86 where he expresses his deep devotion to his Muse, the young man who is the sole inspiration and content of his verse. He argues for his art;

"In others' works thou dost but mend the style,
And arts with thy sweet graces graced be;
But thou art all my art..." (Sonnet 78)

He even argues for the plainness of his poetry being a virtue since it best represents the qualities of the young man who needs no artificial rhetoric to be described as in the other's verses (Sonnet 82). The intense rhetorical strategy Shakespeare employs to make the youth realize his worth in the plainness of his style is quite marvellous in Sonnet 79, as he strains logic to assert that every device used by the rival poet to thrill the young man is no virtue of the rival poet, but instead the youth's own abilities and qualities that engender such poetry.

"Then thank him not for that which he doth say,
Since what he owes thee, thou thyself dost pay."

There has been much speculation regarding the identity of this rival poet. Many critics have suggested Christopher Marlowe or George Chapman or even an amalgamation of several competitors in the figure of the rival. If we note closely these sonnets continue the preoccupations of the previous sonnets regarding the value of the poet's versifying the young man's beauty, albeit in different contexts and using different rhetorical devices.

Right after, in Sonnet 87, we see the poet engaging in a self-depreciating discussion, relinquishing claims on his beloved, seeing himself as unworthy of his affections and positing that the youth was misplacing his attentions:

“Thus have I had thee as a dream doth flatter,
In sleep a king, but waking no such matter.”

Another recurring theme in the sonnets is the poet’s reflection on the deceptive nature of appearance and expectations aroused by one so fair. In Sonnet 94, he asserts that one who has been gifted beauty ought to behave virtuously also, since viciousness from one so fair is more terrible than where one expects it:

“For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.”

Absence and separation become a common theme in the next few sonnets as the poet explores different ways of describing the pain of separation. The poetry born of this separation is described by the poet as orphan children born in absence of the one that fathered them. Then again he starts berating his poetic Muse for abandoning his true subject of poetry, his love for the young man and his efforts at preserving his beloved in verse, warring against time and decay. “Give my love fame faster than time wastes life” he exhorts his Muse. At the same time there is also much debate on the style of writing required for one so fair as his beloved: “Because he needs no praise, wilt thou be dumb?” However, he keeps praising his own style of what he calls plain verse in describing his beloved. It may be noted that in each of these sonnets, the poet manages to describe all possible contours and emotions arising from his relationship with the young man and the verses become really an exercise in rhetoric and linguistic play as he repeats themes in various ways, stretching the possibilities of his art.

The ideal of love described in Sonnet 116 seems difficult to attain, as his return to the young man is fraught with uncertainty and a sense of futility and confinement in sonnet 110. “...love is not love/Which alters when it alteration finds” says the poet. However, this “ever-fixed mark” of love which is unshaken by tempests and is eternal is elusive and the very subject of desire in his poetry. The poet’s relationship with the fair youth never conveys a sense that the love they share is constant. It

seems rather the poet's effort to immortalise it and retain its freshness and vigour in the face of the 'tempests' and 'bending sickle's compass' that is constant. It is one of the most memorable sonnets in the collection perhaps for its desperate yet forlorn tone of wishing to believe in the quality of love experienced and shared.

The last sonnet in the section relating to the fair youth (126) ends with two blank lines in parenthesis in place of a couplet. He returns to his predominant theme of time, here personifying nature as holding back her darling youth from death but must ultimately repay her debt to time by handing over the young man no matter his beauty and nature's love for him. "Her audit, though delayed, answered must be, / And her quietus is to render thee." The empty bracketed lines at the end have been analysed and critiqued in many ways. Some like Graziani see in them the shape of an empty hourglass, signifying that time has run out and thus verse too has ended. Lennard sees them as half-moons suggestive of waxing and waning and hence the trajectory of time passing by. It may also be seen as a space of silence, the grave into which the "lovely Boy" of these sonnets must now reside after all his praises have been sung by the poet.

1.2.4.3: The Dark Lady Sonnet Sequence

It is generally agreed that Shakespeare wrote 28 sonnets about the Dark Lady: Sonnets 127- 154. The Fair Youth 'sonnet-sequence' and the Dark Lady 'sonnet-sequence' were written at two different periods, having a gap of about 2/3 years between them. This is manifest in the fact that there are more parallels between the 'Fair Youth Sonnets' and such plays as were written between 1593 and 1598, particularly the comedies, such as *Love's Labour's Lost* (1595) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1598), than between the 'Dark Lady Sonnets' and those plays. Parallels to the 'Dark Lady Sonnets' are to be found mostly in *Love's Labour's Lost* (1595), *Romeo and Juliet* (1598), and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607).

After 1598, we hear nothing from Shakespeare about the 'man right fair' or the Fair Youth of the Sonnets. In his place, we find a 'woman colour'd ill' — the 'Black Mistress' or the 'Dark Lady' — the two terms coined by modern fancy. Ivor Brown wrote about her: "For years the Dark Lady, in my opinion, kept him (Shakespeare) on edge, a figure adored and loathed, a memory that shone and

scorched and tormented” (Brown, 196). Shakespearean critics like G.W. Knight and Arthur Compton-Rickett, have contributed much regarding the identities of the Fair Youth and the Dark Lady.

Rather than coming to a much reductive conclusion that Shakespeare highlights the Dark Lady’s physical unattractiveness (“my mistress tread,” music “hath a far more pleasing sound” than her speech). There are Sonnets that talk about the licentiousness of the Dark Lady (Sonnets 137 and 138). But what remains consistent throughout all of these Sonnets is the poet’s infatuation with her. In Sonnet 145, Shakespeare admits that he cannot escape the Dark Lady’s love because she is sometimes merciful, especially when the poet is full of sorrow: “But when she saw my woeful state, / Straight in her heart did mercy come.”

Now, as in the case of the Fair Youth, so in the case of the Dark Lady also there are a number of contending candidates for the title of the Dark Lady: Lady Anon, Luce Morgan, Mary Fitton and the Italian ‘Anastasia.’ The name of Luce Morgan was submitted by Hotson. Luce was in Queen Elizabeth’s (1558-1603) retinue from 1579 to 1581. J.M. Murray wrote that Luce “seemed to have been a woman of the courtesan type, whose attraction for Shakespeare and whose hold on him was purely sensual” (Sethna, 117). Hotson saw notable parallels between Luce and the Sonnets 40-42 and 127-152. She came from a noble family but lost all her dignities through her licentiousness. K.D. Sethna admitted that Luce’s candidature was certainly strong: “Hotson’s case is indeed the best so far. And Luce Morgan falls even within our own time-bracket” (Sethna, 124).

Her dark eyes are often the subject of the poet’s adoration, as he sees them as ‘mourners’ for women falsely made up. His mistress’s being unpretentious is valuable to him after the deceptive fair appearance of his beloved youth perhaps. The poet’s sexual desire for the dark lady is the predominant manner of his relating to her. His sonnets become spaces where he explores the lust that drives him and the effects of this physical craving on his emotions. In Sonnet 129, he describes the madness that possesses one desiring the woman “Mad in pursuit, and in possession so,” and the fallout of this desire being unhappiness. The anticipation of sexual union is joy, but after the physical act, there appears no fulfilment in the poet’s view. “Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.” The frustration of the poet’s relationship with the

mistress finds expression in the early part of this section of sonnets. However, he seems to love her too, as seen in the famous sonnet 130 where he plays advocate for his mistress' appearance, praising her in words of critique. At the same time, there is fondness for her earthiness perhaps. Notice for yourselves how very different and a shade realistic too perhaps his depiction of this love is:

“I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.”

Here the poet introduces an important self-reflexive discussion on the act of representation in verse, especially the Petrarchan mode of praising the object of love and affection. His comment can be seen as an extended theme throughout his sonnets where he always undercuts the praises he heaps on his beloved or his mistress. Representation is always tinged with an element of doubt in the art of rhetoric which creates fancy images whence none exists. In Sonnet 138 he acknowledges the lies which forge his relationship with the dark lady. Despite him knowing her unfaithfulness and she his progressive age, they continue to 'lie' with each other in both senses of the term refusing to lose the companionship they share.

Sonnet 144 however tips the balance in favour of the young man, as he describes the youth as his good angel and the mistress as his bad angel. However, he does declare his love for both “Two loves I have, of comfort and despair,” though he seems helpless as the youth and the mistress engage in a relationship with each other which he only suspects but can never know for sure. The sexual agency of the mistress is constantly described as a threat to both the poet's emotional balance and the fidelity of the young man to the poet. In a lot of ways, the poet's relationship with the youth is thus privileged over that with the mistress, both being however deeply embedded in his psyche and finding a place in his verses. The emotions surrounding the dark lady are more complex and steeped in guilt and distress in the absence of the young man but at the same time there is a certain comfort he finds in her that is never found in his relation with the young man described always in terms of pleading for affection and grace. The equality found in the darklady sonnets is absent in the fair youth sequence. Of course, we might read that as the poet's acquired stance as he plays with the Italian sonnet tradition that placed the

beloved on a pedestal and then again subversion of that poetic mode as he makes fun of such rhetoric in the dark lady sequence.

After understanding the range of themes and ideas explored in his sonnet collection, let us now venture to read two of Shakespeare's sonnets in detail.

1.2.5: Text: Sonnet 18

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day

- i. Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
- ii. Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
- iii. Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
- iv. And summer's lease hath all too short a date.
- v. Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
- vi. And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
- vii. And every fair from fair sometime declines,
- viii. By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed;
- ix. But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
- x. Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
- xi. Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
- xii. When in eternal lines to Time thou grow'st.
- xiii. So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
- xiv. So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

(The line numberings and the spacing have been inserted to help you understand the form – content patterning of the Shakespearean sonnet. The first 3 sections each form a quatrain where you will find parallel ideas being expressed in different words and thought; the last 2 form the couplet that is the most striking feature. The subsequent sections will help you in establishing the vital links between these divisions of the poem.)

1.2.5.1: Analysis of the Lines from the Sonnet

i. The poet searches for an appropriate object or scene of comparison with the loveliness of the young man and wonders if the beauty and joy surrounding the image of a summer's day in England might be the best. Summer is a season of bloom and joy for a cold country when nature comes alive with beauty and freshness.

ii. **temperate:** well-tempered or moderated, steering a middle course between extremes and therefore perfect and more lovable than a summer's day which might still have imperfections in it.

iii. **Rough winds.... May:** the image of spring blossoms destroyed by the ravages of nature hints at early death or young love blighted by circumstances.

iv. **summer's lease.... date:** the season summer has a short tenancy in nature's schema of seasons and has to give way to other seasons of depletion and decay... as autumn and winter. Notice Shakespeare's use of vocabulary. The word 'lease' as you know, is mostly used in legal terminology to imply a contract made over a span of time. Here the idea is that summer as a season has its own predetermined span of time in the annual cycle of seasons.

v. **too hot the eye of heaven:** the sun. Identify the figure of speech used here!

vi. conceiving of the sun as a beautiful male (Phoebus Apollo) and reflecting on the fact that the sun too is subject to the vagaries of nature—on some days shining brightly and on others dimmed by the weather perhaps.

vii. Every beautiful object or person eventually becomes less beautiful. The first 'fair' refers to the beautiful and the second 'fair' to beauty that is lost by the beautiful. The word 'declines' continues the allusion to the sun which may be pictured as setting.

viii. decay, change and decline may be caused by accident, the cyclical course of nature, deprived of its trimmings and adornment. There might be an allusion to menstruation in 'nature's changing course' connecting with a double meaning in the previous line—positing women as 'fair' whose variability shall now be contrasted with the constancy of the youth.

ix-x. the beauty of the young man is compared to a summer season that shall not be subject to nature's cycles of change and he shall not lose his 'fairness' or beauty since it shall be enshrined in these lines of verse.

xi. death is personified and placed in conflict with the youth's beauty, however he shall not be able to boast about his victory over the young man's beauty and youth. The darkness of death is pictured as his 'shade' as in the *Psalms* 23.4 'the valley of the shadow of death'

xii. the young man shall 'grow' through these 'eternal' lines written by the poet in readers' minds as a concept or an ideal of beauty and love. 'lines' has also been associated with the threads of life spun by the Fates. Thus, it imprints the importance of these verses in ascertaining the youth's fate.

xiii-xiv. As long as life exists on this earth, the verse shall exist as a living monument to the young man and endow him with life long after his physical body is snuffed out by Death. this: this sonnet or these sonnets. Thus, the movement in the poem is from the beauty of the young man to the effectiveness of poetry as art in preserving such beauty.

Activity for the Learner

This idea of preserving human attributes like beauty (as in this poem) is something that has repeatedly been toyed with in literature. Do you think art as a representation of life can really do this in a perfect manner? With help from your counsellor, read John Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', and write on the relationship between Art and Life with these two poems in mind.

1.2.5.2: Critical Appreciation of the Sonnet

In this much-loved sonnet by Shakespeare, the poet searches for an apt description for his beloved fair youth. A 'summer's day' might be an ideal comparison for the freshness and beauty of the beloved, particularly in Petrarchan style, but for Shakespeare who is celebrated for his innovative turn of thought, this imagery is not sufficient for the one he loves. In a cold country, a summer's day brings happiness and joy. However, for the poet, his beloved is more beautiful and temperate than such a moderate summer's day. The weather may have imperfections, but not his beloved.

The precious buds of May which are about to bloom are often shaken off the branches by rough winds. The much-awaited summer season also arrives with its 'lease' fixed from before. Thus, what is a strictly legal terminology becomes used in an extremely poetic sense, in a manner that might almost be considered metaphysical in intent! Here, the poet uses two images suggesting the temporal quality of all beautiful things in nature, wishing to contrast them with his perceived immutable beauty of the youth. However, it is important to note that the poet includes his own critique in his lines. If all precious things in nature are subject to degeneration, how can the poet's beloved be saved from such transformation and change? It prepares the ground for affirming the significance of the poet's words in immortalising the youth.

The poet then continues extending his analogy, describing the variation in the way the sun is perceived and its effect on the weather experienced by us. Sometimes, the sun, described as 'the eye of heaven' shines with great intensity and at other times, its glorious golden hue is concealed by clouds. Hence, its beauty is inconstant and largely dependent on other aspects of the weather in creating the perfectly moderate and temperate summer's day. He concludes thereby that everything that is beautiful declines in its beauty at some time or the other, shorn of its beauty and adornments either by chance or owing to the vagaries of nature. It is often thought that the poet is alluding to menstruation in 'nature's changing course', referring to the double meanings of the word 'fair' used in the previous line, further suggesting the inconstant nature of women's beauty and their love as compared to the constancy of the poet's affections for the young man.

The poet tries to convince his beloved that his 'eternal summer' shall not fade with time as the poet will enshrine the young man's beauty in verse. Note the use of the phrase 'eternal summer' which by itself appears to be an oxymoron, impossible by virtue of the description of summer enunciated by the poet in the previous lines. This impossible ideal is however made possible by the poet's feelings for his beloved and the quality of his poetry.

Death and decay devour all things, but shall not be able to snuff out the fair youth's freshness and beauty. Death is personified as one who brags about his conquests. In this case however, Death's shadow cannot loom over the poet's beloved,

as he shall keep living eternally in these verses by the poet.

In the ending couplet that gives this sonnet its own unique effectiveness, Shakespeare reinforces his vision that his sonnets shall live as long as men live and breathe and see, playing a role more powerful than “Death” in being able to grant life to his beloved’s beauty and youth forever.

Note how the poet extends the subject of his poetry from describing his beloved’s beauty to extolling the virtues of his own poetry. See also that every analogy falls short for describing the fair youth’s charm. At the same time, he highlights the ephemeral nature of that charm and contrasts the same with the immortal quality of his love and his ability to capture the young man’s beauty in his lines.

1.2.6: Text: Sonnet 130

My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun

- i. My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;
- ii. Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;
- iii. If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
- iv. If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

- v. I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
- vi. But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
- vii. And in some perfumes is there more delight
- viii. Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.

- ix. I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
- x. That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
- xi. I grant I never saw a goddess go;
- xii. My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.

xiii. And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare

xiv. As any she belied with false compare.

1.2.6.1: Analysis of the Lines from the Sonnet

Sonnet 130 stands alone as a unique and startlingly honest love poem, an antithesis to the sweet conventions of Petrarchan ideals which were prominent at the time.

Line 1: Shakespeare does not hold back in his denial of his mistress's beauty. The usual tradition was to compare a lover's eyes to the sun and sunlight—Shakespeare completely negates this, using the phrase “nothing like” to emphasise the fact that this female's eyes are not bright. They were, according to a line in Sonnet 127, raven black.

Line 2: The second line disrupts the Petrarchan tradition of depicting the lady's mouth as a source of great beauty. Instead of comparing the mistress's lips to the redness of coral, as was common in love poetry of the time, Shakespeare directly states that “Coral is far more red than her lips' red.”

These first two lines are caesura-free, there is no natural pause for the reader, and the iambic beat is dominant.

Lines 3 and 4: In lines three and four, the anatomy of the mistress is further explored in unorthodox fashion. In Shakespeare's time, the ideal woman was white, slender, blonde-haired, red-lipped, bright-eyed and had silky smooth white skin.

Lines 5 and 6: In the second quatrain, the notion that this mistress is not your ideal female model is reinforced. She doesn't have rosy cheeks, even if the speaker has seen plenty of natural damask roses in the garden.

If the classic, lovely and fragrant English Rose is absent, at least his mistress has no pretence to a sweet-smelling breath.

Lines 7 and 8: Her breath reeks, which may connote either an unpleasant odour or the act of emanating or rising, as some scholars suggest that in Shakespeare's era the term “reek” could signify the latter meaning, akin to the rising of smoke. However, within the context of the preceding line referencing perfume, the former denotation of a foul smell appears more plausible.

Lines 9 and 10 mark a shift in Sonnet 130, as the poem becomes more abstract and conceptual. The third quatrain introduces the reader to the physical attributes of the mistress, specifically her voice and gait, but does so in a manner that avoids any grandiose or idealised portrayals. Instead, Shakespeare presents these features in a straightforward, understated manner, eschewing the hyperbolic descriptions common in Petrarchan love poetry. This stylistic choice serves to further emphasise the poem's departure from conventional representations of the female beloved, reinforcing the speaker's honest and unromanticised approach to depicting his unconventional mistress.

Lines 11 and 12: In these lines, Shakespeare continues to defy the typical Petrarchan portrayal of the ideal woman. He acknowledges that his mistress's gait and voice do not possess any extraordinary qualities, in contrast to the graceful and melodious depiction of a woman in much Renaissance poetry. The speaker simply states the facts about his mistress, avoiding any embellishment or idealisation.

Lines 13 and 14: In the final couplet, the speaker provides a full rhyming affirmation of his love for this unconventional mistress. Throughout the sonnet, the speaker has demonstrated a refreshing honesty, eschewing the idealized portrayals of women common in Renaissance poetry. Rather than make extravagant claims about his mistress's beauty, the speaker prefers to celebrate her as she truly is, enhancing her natural qualities.

1.2.6.2: Critical Appreciation of the Sonnet

Sonnet 130 ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun") is one of those sonnets that seem to have served as touchstones for Shakespeare's dramatic imagination. The sonnet foregrounds Shakespeare's cynicism and disenchantment in romantic vision. He takes upon a realistic vision of love and transforms it into strangely affirmative and idealistic vision. And this transformation is accomplished through the minutest semantic and syntactic adjustment.

The Sonnets on the Dark Lady are instances of love void of idealistic vigour: "My mistress 'eyes are nothing like the sun;/ Coral is far more red than her lips' red" (Sonnet 130). In Shakespeare's amusingly satirical Sonnet 130, lines eleven and twelve, "I grant I never saw a goddess go, — My Mistress when she walks treads on the ground."

Sonnet 130, has many a times been called an anti-sonnet. An anti-sonnet is something which attempts to break free from conventional sonnet traditions by denying usual images. In their general note to this sonnet, Ingram and Redpath wrote: “This sonnet is not a denigration of the attractions of the poet’s mistress, or even an admission that she did not have the conventional beauties and graces. It is a satirical repudiation of false comparisons current in contemporary poetry. In line 3 for example, he is not simply saying that his mistress’ breasts are “dun,” but denying that the colour of snow would be appropriate to her breasts and by implication, to those of any desirable woman, since “any she” would be “belied with” that “false compare” (Ingram, 298).

The conventional sonnet form praised the beloved lady’s idealised beauty. However, Shakespeare rejects these conventions in Sonnet 130. Instead of exaggerating the woman’s beauty, he satirises the concept of the ideal woman. Shakespeare asserts that the woman he loves is not a “goddess.” However, she is still beautiful, and his admiration is intended to seem more genuine by being expressed in realistic, rather than conventional, exaggerated, or clichéd terms.

The sonnet, then, presents us with a series of inversions. Shakespeare is aware of the conventional trope that the beloved’s eyes are “brighter or more lovely than the sun,” and he directly refutes this in the first line. The subsequent lines each subverts a common poetic compliment: the woman’s breasts are not the proverbial “as white as snow,” but rather a dull or greyish colour. Her cheeks lack the blushing hues of damask roses. Her breath is not particularly sweet-smelling, her voice is not musical, and she does not possess a graceful gait. And the hair that grow on her head are like black wires, and not like golden wires that are generally held in admiration, “If hair be wires, black wires grow on her head.” Kerrigan wrote about these lines, “The conventional mistress of the Elizabethan love poetry had blond tresses (...), frequently compared to wires or drawn gold, the kind of precious thread used in fine embroidered cloth” (Kerrigan, 359).

The poet further says that the scent of the breath of the Lady that is being exhaled (“reek”) from her mouth, is also not as pleasing (“delight”) as the scent of some essences (“perfumes”). The poet says that he knows well that her voice

is not as pleasing as the sound of music. The Dark Lady could not be compared to any goddess, though the poet wished to, “I grant I never saw a goddess go, —/ My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.” In the ending couplet, the poet swears by heaven and proclaims that his love for the Lady is as rare and precious as any other true love, and that she does not admit of any comparison with any other lady, because such comparison will be false. The poet admires her beauty, but insists that he will not engage in the game of falsely exaggerating that beauty. In the final couplet, Shakespeare asserts that the distinction between his love and the artificial, idealised, or hyperbolic love of the conventional sonnet is that his love is based on “true” rather than invented descriptions.

The tone that is established here — and the sonnet as a whole manages to sustain a gentle, resolved, lovingly acceptance. The note of affection tends to come through even more strongly, in fact, in “And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare/As any she belied with false compare” (Lines 13 and 14, Sonnet 130). The intimate, almost complacent tone is simultaneously a seduction and a provocation: what should be a logical contradiction is presented as if it were matter-of-factly intelligible; what seems an obvious piece of self-deception communicates lucidity and peace of mind.

Yet beneath the sonnet’s apparent off handedness, fine and crucial distinctions are continually being made. Curiously enough, Shakespeare does not mention the destructiveness of Time, or even simply refer to Time, in his sonnets on the theme of the Dark Lady. Perhaps, the reason is that when the poet was writing sonnets on the theme of the Fair Youth, he was engrossed in pure beauty, the eternal beauty, that Time was intent upon destroying. His meditation on pure beauty, led him to the thought of temporality — to the thought of Time. He desired to preserve pure beauty for eternity. On the other hand, in the ‘Dark Lady Sonnets’ he was concerned with sensuality which, perhaps, he never desired to preserve, and therefore, time did not enter into his consciousness. The anti-climatic lines that often thwart reader’s expectations in the Dark Lady Sonnet sequence anticipates the conventions that would later become typical of metaphysical conceits in the poetry of Donne and Marvel.

1.2.7: Shakespeare's Usage of Language and Balance of Form in the Sonnets

The language of Shakespeare's Sonnets exhibits a high degree of compression and structural complexity. While frequently examined in terms of its imagery, metrical patterns, and other formal elements, the linguistic fabric of the Sonnets, akin to that of Shakespeare's plays, also merits rigorous scholarly attention, particularly regarding fundamental linguistic components such as lexical choice, syntactic arrangement, and sentence structure.

The most significant feature of Shakespeare's word choice in the Sonnets is his use of words in which multiple meanings function simultaneously. The choice of the word "lease" often significant because of its legal usage, here becomes a metaphor for short-lived days of summer which will end too soon. Sonnet 18, showcases a deliberate and effective vocabulary that contributes to the poem's enduring appeal. He employs vivid imagery drawn from nature, using words like "summer's day," "darling buds," "rough winds," and "gold complexion" to paint a picture of both beauty and transience. Shakespeare personifies the sun, calling it "the eye of heaven" with "his gold complexion dimmed" – the sun's complexion dimmed in comparison to the beloved's. The use of personification, as seen in "Death brag thou wander'st in his shade," adds a dramatic dimension to the poem's exploration of immortality. Finally, the relatively simple and direct language, devoid of overly ornate or obscure terms, ensures the poem's clarity and accessibility, allowing its message of love and enduring beauty to resonate with readers across centuries. Something striking about this poem is how neat and perfectly tied up it is. Every single line is in perfect iambic pentameter and there is no enjambment.

Sonnet 130, one of Shakespeare's most famous, plays an elaborate joke on the conventions of love poetry common to Shakespeare's day. Challenging the Petrarchan conventions head-on, the sonnet uses phrases like, Sonnet 130 subverts the typical Petrarchan metaphors by presenting a speaker who appears to praise his lady love with a hint of bemusement and chooses to convey the unvarnished truth. The opening lines directly contradict the conventional Petrarchan tropes— no longer we find the

mistress to be cruel, with her eyes like cupid's hooting arrows. Shakespeare challenges the conventions—"Your mistress' eyes are like the sun? That's strange - my mistress' eyes aren't at all like the sun." (My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun...) Similarly, "Your mistress' breath smells like perfume? My mistress' breath reeks compared to perfume." (And in some perfumes is there more delight/ Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.) In the final couplet, the speaker makes clear his intent, which is to assert that genuine love does not necessitate such rhetorical conceits; women need not be idealised as floral or celestial beauties in order to be considered truly beautiful. We have moved on from the Platonic idealisation of true beauty and love.

The rhetorical structure of Sonnet 130 is crucial to its effect. In the first quatrain, the speaker dedicates one line to each comparison between his mistress and something else (the sun, coral, snow, and wires—the sole positive comparison in the entire poem). In the second and third quatrains, he expands these descriptions to occupy two lines each, so that roses/cheeks, perfume/breath, music/voice, and goddess/mistress each receive a pair of unrhymed lines. This creates an effect of an expanding and developing the comparisons, and neatly prevents the poem—which does, after all, rely on a single kind of argument for its first twelve lines—from becoming stagnant.

When Shakespeare made the decision to compose his sonnets using the English (in contrast to the Italian) sonnet form, he seemed at the same time to have settled on the syntactical structure as well. While Shakespeare finds almost infinite ways to provide variety within the tightly controlled form of the English sonnet, and while the occasional sonnet is made up of a single sentence (e.g., Sonnet 18), his sentences tend to shape themselves within the bounds set by the quatrain and the couplet—that is, most quatrains and most couplets are each made up of one sentence or question, with occasional quatrains made up of two or more sentences or questions. In a radical departure from the previous sonnets, the young man's beauty, here more perfect even than a day in summer, is not threatened by Time or Death, since he will live in perfection forever in the poet's verses, and therefore the poet assures, "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,/ So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."

1.2.8: Summing Up

We have discussed the development of the Sonnet form in England. We have discussed Shakespeare's style of writing and themes in great detail. It is interesting to read the two sonnets in our syllabus in view of the entire corpus and see a reflection of most of the themes of Shakespearean sonnets expressed in these selected poems. It is also significant since, by Shakespeare's own admission, the sonnets repeat ideas but present them in new ways, displaying the skill of the sonneteer who claims to be able to defy the passage of time with his art and the flame of his love for the young man. Many shades of love are explored in all their nuances—whether betrayal, separation, reunion. However, in all the sonnets we might critically examine the notion if the waves and crests of emotion created by the poet are not ultimately done for the sake of showcasing his art. While Shakespeare's sonnets are read autobiographically, they might also be read as an intelligent sonneteer's use of events moulded for the sake of his art, which ultimately forms the centrepiece of his verses. Through the narration of love, it is his sonnets that become immortalised in the history of verse writing.

1.2.9: Comprehension Exercises

A. Long Answer Type Questions:

1. How is Shakespeare's idea of love portrayed in his sonnets? Discuss with reference to the sonnets in your syllabus.
2. How does Shakespeare visualise Time in his sonnets and how does it relate to his concept of writing verse?
3. What is your understanding of the relationship between the poet and his beloved as you read Shakespeare's sonnets?
4. Do you think Shakespeare's sonnets may only be read autobiographically? Give reasons in support of your view.
5. How does Shakespeare reconcile his admiration for the Dark Lady with his moral judgements about her behaviour?

B. Medium Length Answer Type Questions:

1. Critically discuss the image of seasonal cycles in the sonnets in your syllabus.
2. Critically analyse the closing couplet of Sonnet 130 with respect to your understanding of the sequence of Dark Lady sonnets as a whole.
3. “So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, /So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.” Discuss these lines with respect to Shakespeare’s valuation of his own art in the sonnets written by him.
4. How does Shakespeare subvert traditional poetic conventions in Sonnet 130?
5. How does Shakespeare explore the duality of love and lust in his sonnets? Discuss with reference to the sonnets in your syllabus.

C. Short Answer Type Questions:

1. “And every fair from fair sometime declines,” —What does the poet mean? Explain with reference to context.
2. “But thy eternal summer shall not fade,”—How can the poet prevent the ravages of time? Explain with reference to context.
3. What is the rhyme scheme of Sonnet 130 ?

1.2.10: Suggested Reading

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Unit 3 □ Section A -John Donne: The Good Morrow

Section B – George Herbert: Virtue Andrew Marvell – To His Coy Mistress

Section A – The Good Morrow

Structure:

- 1.3.1. Objectives (Common for all 3 poems)**
- 1.3.2A. Introduction**
- 1.3.3A. John Donne and Metaphysical Poetry**
- 1.3.4A. Text of “The Good Morrow”**
- 1.3.5A. Glossary and Annotations**
- 1.3.6A. Theme and Title**
- 1.3.7A. Critical Understanding of the poem**
- 1.3.8A. Structure and Style**
- 1.3.9A. Further Activity**
- 1.3.10A. Summing up**
- 1.3.11A. Comprehension Exercises**

1.3.1: Objectives

In the three sections that contain three poems in this Unit, you will be introduced to what is known as the Metaphysical School of Poetry. In continuation of what you have read about the Metaphysical Poets in your History of Literature, where you have been acquainted with all the three poets we have here, this Unit brings for you some of the most representative poems of the tradition. To begin with, it is necessary to state that the term ‘metaphysical’ was first used by John Dryden with reference to the poetry of John Donne. Later, Dr Johnson used the term to talk about a loosely connected group of poets, like Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, Marvell and others. It was rather a term of disparagement, since both Dryden and Johnson

could find little to admire in a poetry written in a vein that was very different from the neo classical tradition. They disliked the strong rhythm of spoken speech, the syllogistic argument of the structures, the intellectual dissource, the varied range of learned imagery in the poetry of Donne and his followers. It actually took the critical genius of T. S. Eliot in the 20th century to show that the Metaphysical poets actually possessed what he called an organic sensibility.

This aspect of organic sensibility will keep recurring in our analysis of all the three poems in this Unit. As you go along with this Unit, you need to be receptive to the unique manner in which these poets build up their arguments with logic, imagination and of course adroit use of images. The term 'Metaphysical' as you know, is a compound of two words or ideas – 'meta' meaning beyond, and 'physical' imperatively referring to the real, material world. It is therefore understandable that in Metaphysical Poetry, the drift of ideas embraces a range of contemporary branches of knowledge, and combines them in organic ways to develop poetry of a new kind. You will be surprised to see how emotions, both as in love poetry and in supplications to divinity, are packed in an argumentative manner. The Section Introductions will tell you further about each poem.

1.3.2A: Introduction

In this section we shall critically examine a poem, *The Good Morrow*, by one of the major poets of the English Renaissance; John Donne, who, like his contemporary Shakespeare, also worked upon the traditions of love poetry in his age to create a body of verse that, has its distinctive style and appeal. We shall, in the process, take a brief look at the Metaphysical school of poetry that Donne has been associated with. In Shakespeare's sonnets you have seen one kind of a new treatment of human feelings insofar as the object of emotion is concerned - whether it is for the fair young man or the dark lady, You have also seen the poet's employment of imagery and ideas that are quite new in the tradition of the Elizabethan sonnet. With the Metaphysical poets in general and with John Donne in particular, you will see this poetic style being taken to another new high altogether. This happens largely because of the use of what is called a

Metaphysical ‘conceit’ about which we will discuss at length in this Unit. As of now, it is important to remember that these Metaphysical poets actually employed all the learning at their disposal to write poetry. As a result, they completely break down our conventional ideas of the expression of emotions in poetry, as far as style is concerned. This makes the reading of Metaphysical Poetry both a challenge, and an interesting endeavour. ‘The Good Morrow’ for instance, is an example of what is called the ‘aubade’ which usually means a morning love song. While the title of the poem suggests as much, you are advised to read for yourself what Donne makes out of conventional expectations!

1.3.3A: John Donne and Metaphysical Poetry

❖ John Donne: The Man and his Works

John Donne (1572-1631) is, even today, one of the most widely-read English poets of the seventeenth century. He was a writer of both secular and religious literature. He was originally a Roman Catholic, but subsequently became an Anglican priest. Later he was appointed Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral in London, and became famous for his sermons, which along with other religious works were published in his lifetime.

However, our focus is on Donne’s poetry: particularly his amatory verse (or love poetry). Even so, it must be mentioned that his verse covered a variety of forms, styles and subjects: he wrote elegies, satires, epigrams, devotional sonnets and more. Most of his poetry was published after his death, though during his lifetime his contemporaries could read and admire his works in circulation, as was then the practice, in manuscript form.

❖ Donne and Metaphysical Poetry

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (i.e. during the English Renaissance and the period following it when the cultural-literary impact of the Renaissance was at its peak), prevailing social and religious conventions were being challenged in an intellectual atmosphere that favoured scientific and rational approaches. Donne’s verse may be seen as a striking literary form of such questioning, as he develops

poetic subjects such as love and religion in unconventional ways. You will be really surprised, on reading the poetry of Donne and his group, to see how fast the language of love evolved in English poetry. Your point of comparison will obviously be with the early Elizabethan tradition of writing love poetry.

A term often used to describe Donne's poetry is 'metaphysical'. As you understand, and as we have said earlier, the term literally means 'relating to things that cannot be conceived within the range of the physical, or the tangible and the material'. First used in this connection by John Dryden to criticise Donne for his excessive use of philosophy in poetry, the term later was used to categorise a certain 'school' or group of mainly seventeenth-century English poets, including Donne as well as George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, Henry Vaughan, Richard Crashaw and Abraham Cowley.

What such poets had in common was verse that typically was intellectual, treated love or religious experiences psychologically rather than emotionally, unlike the poetry of their (mainly) Elizabethan contemporaries/ predecessors. Even so, there is no lack of passion in the poems of the metaphysical school; but passion is combined with reason or wit. If that sounds paradoxical, these poets did have a fondness for employing paradox as a rhetorical device. Other characteristics would include variety and flexibility of metre and rhythm; use of direct and colloquial speech patterns; and most notably, the use of startling images or conceits. A metaphysical conceit, as it is commonly understood, uses elaborate comparisons to bring together very dissimilar objects. Above all, we can credit the Metaphysicals for introducing the element of love in poetry as a composite experience – meaning thereby, the amalgamation of the mind and the body in equal proportions, without either unnecessarily glorifying the one or shying away from the other. As mature readers, you will be expected to understand and appreciate the manifold nuances of heterosexual love as a concrete and composite experience of human life. Decidedly therefore, Metaphysical Poetry shows a mature treatment of human relations, compared to what we find in early Elizabethan poetry where, most often, the mistress is glorified and the lover is

a supplicant at the altar of love. Shakespeare of course, had already dismantled this set formula as you have seen in the previous Unit. The Metaphysicals, in that sense, were building upon the work of Shakespeare in his sonnets.

John Donne's "The Good Morrow" is a good example of verse exhibiting the features mentioned above, which made the poet's work distinctive. Here is the text of the complete poem, as found in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry, Third Edition* (1983), p 205. The poem was originally published in Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* in 1633. The words/phrases in bold are explained in the section that follows. As you begin reading the poem, see for yourself the starkness of the opening lines, this is something that is characteristic of the poetry of Donne. Far from the sweetness one would expect of a morning love poem, notice the jerk with which he begins, drawing out the beloved from a kind of stupor and questioning the very nature of their love experience thus far. Some key words in the text of the poem are in bold, for you to concentrate on their meanings and implications. The glossary and annotations in the following sub-section will help you understand their implications in a vivid manner. You need to focus on both the connotative and denotative potential of words to get the full impact of the poem, which in one sense, is also an argument for shunning the barely platonic love ideal and reveling in the composite fulsomeness of body and mind that go together to deliver a complete heterosexual love experience.

1.3.4A: Text of "The Good Morrow"

The Good Morrow

I wonder, **by my troth**, what thou and I
Did, till we loved? Were we not **weaned** till then?
But **sucked on country pleasures**, childish?
Or **snorted** we in the **Seven Sleepers'** den?
'Twas so; **but** this, all pleasures **fancies**be.

If ever any **beauty** I did see,
Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a **dream** of thee.

And now **good-morrow** to our **waking souls**,
Which watch not one another out of fear;
For love, all love of other sights controls,
And makes **one little room an everywhere**.
Let **sea-discoverers** to new worlds have gone,
Let **maps** to other, worlds on worlds have shown,
Let us possess one world, **each hath one, and is one**.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain **hearts** do in the faces **rest**;
Where can we find two better **hemispheres**,
Without **sharp north**, without **declining west**?
Whatever dies, was **not mixed equally**;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike, that none do **slacken**, none can die.

1.3.5A: Glossary and Annotations

Stanza 1

by my troth: literally, “in faith” or “to tell the truth”. This example of colloquial English, with which the poem begins, is a deliberately “unpoetic” technique, which can startle readers.

weaned: taken away from (something, here a state of childhood). A growing child is weaned when it no longer needs mother’s milk as nourishment. In this context therefore, the poet virtually questions if they have at all grown up/ matured enough to enjoy the fullness of the heterosexual love experience.

sucked on :tasted, or experienced. ‘Suck’ obviously closely parallels both in terms of meaning and sound, the child’s suckling of the mother, which is here construed as being symptomatic of the childishness of a grown up person.

country pleasures: inane delights or enjoyment/ uninitiated to the ways of a mature and composite love experience

snorted: snored or slept

Seven Sleepers’ den: an **allusion** to a Christian legend about a cave in Ephesus where seven young Christians, during oppression under Roman emperor Decius in the third century, lay asleep for almost two centuries. The idea is that the poem’s lovers, before finding each other, were just as deeply unaware of the world as the young sleepers in the legend. This is a classic example of a metaphysical conceit. With help from your counselor, you need to understand its complete implications.

but: except for

fancies: notions imaginary, rather than real

beauty: beautiful woman.

dream: a foreshadowing or early indicator

Stanza 2

good morrow: a salutation or greeting, see section on poem’s title

waking souls: a clear indication that people are properly awake or alive only when then find true love. The lovers here are “waking” or rising to a new and higher consciousness.

one little room an everywhere: the room where the lovers find themselves is as good as an “everywhere” or an entire world having all they need: i.e. each other. See for yourselves how Donne employs the concept of finite space (a room) to imply a completeness of experience. This is a good example of what is actually the meta/ beyond the physical in Metaphysical.

sea-discoverers...maps: a reference to the different discoveries and scientific theories that were changing the existing ideas about the world during the time of

the Renaissance. You need to understand how deftly the poet employs ideas from geography and contemporary polity in the context of poetry.

each hath one, and is one: the lovers are content in their own, self-contained world. Each of them “is” part of that world, and they both “possess” the world since they have each other. He begins to develop this idea of two hemispheres and then uniting to form one sphere in this stanza, and takes it to a culmination in the next, which is also the clinching final section of the poem.

Stanza 3

hearts...rest: the lovers gaze into each others’ eyes with such intensity that each seems

able to look into the depths of the other’s heart.

hemispheres: here the eyes are compared to half-globes, a comparison both apt and far-fetched; hence a conceit. If you keep in mind that this is a conversation taking place between lovers enrapt in physical intimacy, you will also realize how Donne develops the idea of human physiognomy resembling the completeness of the two hemispheres of the earth that go on to make one full sphere, or the globe. In that sense, isn’t it amazing how geography and science coalesce to suggestively form the language of erotica.

Sharp north... the bitingly cold north wind

Declining west : associated with sunset and fading of light

In “sharp north” and “declining west”, don’t you see an echo of Shakespeare’s “Shall I compare thee ...” where the poet is in the search for an apt metaphor from the cycle of seasons that can adequately portray the perfection of the fair young man? Now use that same idea in Donne, and you get the spirit of this line.

not mixed equally: an allusion to the belief that human illness and death resulted from an imbalance in the elements making up the body. Here Donne is drawing upon the medieval science of alchemy which held that any compound that was a perfect mix of its constituent elements becomes indestructible. This is again a

metaphysical strategy if you may, of using an analogy from a discipline of science to imply the idea that if the love experience is perfect, the union of the lovers can become indestructible.

slacken: weaken/ also the erotic sense of falling short in the act of love making

1.3.6A: Theme and Title

The main theme of the poem therefore is that people are awake, aware and properly alive only when they find true and meaningful love, both in terms of conscious complete consummation of the physical, and thereby the emotional/ mental. Donne literally argues for this compositeness of the love experience, without shying from the fact that physical satisfaction/ consummation is a pre-requisite for a proper emotional bonding. This will explain the concept of organicity that has often been talked of in the context of Metaphysical Poetry, by critics from Dryden to Eliot and beyond. In that sense, the title, which is a prelude to the idea as also the poem's leading metaphor, directs the reader to this understanding. On the other hand, the theme and title also take the aspect of erotica to a new height, the intellectual component never allowing the poem to lapse into any kind of obscenity. Cumulatively, the power of true, complete, and satisfactory love experience, as the poet goes on to assert, can make the lovers not just alive, but immortal. Note that while Shakespeare searches for this immortality in the power of his verse, Donne does it through a blend of the disciplines of Science and Philosophy.

Good Morrow, meaning good morning, is a salutation or a way of greeting someone. The title indicates that the poem in question concerns an early-morning meeting: between the poet-narrator and his beloved after a night of love, as we go on to learn. The text of the poem that follows, is a tone of realisation after such a night of wholesome amatory experience, and in that sense the poem is also one that talks about growing up to accept the maturity of human experience. To a mature understanding therefore, psychologically the poem signifies a new dawn. As we have said earlier, the form is that of an *aubade*, a dawn song (or poem). This indication

is strengthened by the mention of waking lovers as the first stanza continues, and then clinched by the beginning of the second stanza.

1.3.7A: Critical Understanding of “The Good Morrow”

The lover wakes up beside his lady in this poem, and marvels about their love. He wonders what they did all these years of their lives, until they were in love and had seen through its consummation! Were they obsessed with some trivial pleasures of life, rather childishly? Now that they are in mature love, the completeness of the experience makes them realize that any prior fooling around was simply an overture to this, a feeblar version of the tangible life that they are living now. All these years they were like the prisoners in the “Seven Sleepers’ den” (explained earlier), where their souls were imprisoned in a long slumber. If ever the lover had come across any beautiful woman, it was just the dream of his lady with whom he is waking up to real life now.

The lover feels that now that they are in love, they are awake and alive to the true sense of the term. So they should wish good morning to their awakened souls. Now they are waking and rising to a higher consciousness. The small room where the lovers find themselves locked, represents the entire world. The lovers are satisfied in their autonomous world. Each one of them “is” a chunk of this world, and they “possess” this domain since they possess each other. By talking about the sea-discoverers and maps, perhaps the lover is referring to the newer discoveries of the Renaissance period. But the lover and the lady are content with the autonomous and erotocentric space that they have created for themselves. As such they have nothing to do with the discoveries and new worlds. The composite nature of their soulful love makes itself-sufficient; and the lovebirds no longer need the rest of the world.

If we put it another way, the lover and the beloved are each one a hemi-sphere and when united in true love, they shape the world as an organic whole; the sphere being the symbol of perfection. Just as the two hemispheres are twins or mirror-images of each other, the lovers are complementary to each other, and their love

is so composed and stable that it would never perish. Through their eyes, they are able to peep into the hearts of each other. The lovers' eyes are paralleled to half-globes, an evaluation which is rather far-fetched. This metaphysical conceit adds charm to the entire expression. In mentioning the spherical conception of the earth, Donne is falling back upon classical knowledge. He also borrows from the medieval science of alchemy and uses the allusion to the acceptance that mortal diseases and death result from a discrepancy in the elements creating the human body. But since the lover and the lady are united in their soul and body, nothing can weaken them anymore. Love has made them immortal.

Donne's poem speaks of the alternation of his moods, the range of his experiences, his technical originality and of course about his poetic methods. All this makes 'The Good Morrow' an immortal love poem indeed.

1.3.8A: Structure and Style

As severally mentioned, the poem is written as an aubade or a morning poem supposed to evoke feelings of soft love. But understandably, it is also typically concerning lovers about to part, after a night of fulfillment. In fact this is a convention that Donne uses elsewhere (as in *The Sun Rising*), and here he toys with the same idea in a much more dynamic manner. Donne also gives a strikingly individualistic treatment to a conventional idea, that lovers sharing genuine love realize the true value of life. Individualism is noticeable also in the robust intimacy of the poet's language, where words like "sucked" and "snorted" can startle; in the way the poet makes free use of religious legends, popular beliefs and scientific theories in his declarations of love; and above all, in his use of the metaphysical conceit; as when he likens ignorant lovers to unweaned babies, or eyeballs to geographical globes. If you can comprehend the connotative (secondary) implications of these words, you will realize the potential of secularised literature that can bring together diverse disciplines to convey an organic idea. The details have been pointed in the Glossary for you.

Donne creates a distinctive stanzaic structure as well: three seven-line stanzas using three rhymes; where the first six lines are generally in iambic pentameter,

while the seventh is a foot longer, bringing each sectional movement to an emphatic and logical close.

1.3.9A: Further Activity

The speaker in Donne's poem is evidently a man. Identify the lines that, in your opinion, establish that the speaker is male. Now ask yourself, what if the speaker, or poet, were a woman? Would the sentiments in the poem have been differently stated, and if so, what might have been the differences?

From there you might consider looking for love poems written by women, or featuring a speaker who is a woman. Two women writers whose love poems feature female speakers are Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Make a list of a few such poems by them, and add more names to this list of women writing love poetry.

More importantly, also read some more poems by John Donne to understand the way Metaphysical Poetry unfolds its uniqueness to the reader. The following link can be handy for you:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-donne#tab-poems>

1.3.10A: Summing Up

Here are a few points concerning what this section has covered.

- John Donne belongs to the Metaphysical school of poetry, and is in fact one of its earliest proponents.
- Donne, no less than Shakespeare, experimented with the traditions of love poetry prevalent in his time.
- Donne's poem "The Good Morrow" is remarkable for its striking and individualistic treatment of theme and structure.
- "The Good Morrow" may be related to the aubade, or early-morning love poem/song. However, the poem stands out both in terms of theme and structure, for Donne's startlingly new and daring treatment of the idea of heterosexual love as a composite human experience.

1.3.11A: Comprehension Exercises

A. Long Answer Type Questions:

- a) Attempt a critical analysis of John Donne's 'The Good Morrow'.
- b) Examine the qualities that let "The Good Morrow" be categorised as a metaphysical poem.
- c) Consider 'The Good Morrow' as a poem that differs from the conventional love poetry of Donne's time.

B. Medium Length Answer Type Questions:

- a) Examine a few references by Donne to new discoveries/ideas of his time.
- b) Write a note on Donne's use of the metaphysical conceit.
- c) How does the title of Donne's poem indicate its theme?

C. Short Answer Type Questions:

- a) Explain with reference to the context:

Whatever dies, was not mixed equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die.

- b) Write a short note on the aubade
- c) Identify and define 2 different rhetorical figures in the poem, and explain them.
- d) Explain, "Whatever dies was not mixed equally."

Section B – Virtue

Structure:

1.3.1B. Introduction

1.3.2B. George Herbert, the Religious Metaphysical

1.3.3B. Text of “Virtue”

1.3.4B. Glossary and Annotations

1.3.5B. Theme and Title

1.3.6B. Critical Understanding of “Virtue”

1.3.7B. Structure and Style

1.3.8B. Further Activity

1.3.9B. Summing Up

1.3.10B. Comprehension Exercises

1.3.1B: Introduction

This section seeks to provide you with an idea about the life and works of the seventeenth-century devotional poet George Herbert. In this context it is important to relate him to what has been called the Metaphysical School of Poetry, and in this poem you will see a completely different aspect of Metaphysical Poetry – the devotional or religious angle. As we examine his celebrated poem “Virtue”, you will see the influence of deep philosophical thought that surrounds the religious strand of Metaphysical Poetry.

1.3.2B: George Herbert, the Religious Metaphysical

George Herbert (1593-1633) was a Christian priest and poet; not surprisingly, perhaps, almost all his verse is what may be called devotional or religious in nature. Despite that, he remains one of the most widely-read poets of the seventeenth century, along with his contemporary John Donne, whose poetry has been discussed in the earlier section. The two poets even share certain stylistic characteristics, though Donne, unlike Herbert, contributed significantly to secular as well as religious verse.

❖ Herbert's Works

Herbert's fame as a poet rests chiefly on the anthology *The Temple* (1633), published shortly after his death and containing all the verses that were to become popular. These include "Easter Wings," "The Windows," "The Collar," "The Pulley" and of course "Virtue," which is the poem that you will be studying in detail here.

Herbert's writing, as well as that of the other poets linked to the Metaphysical school, has much in common with the verse of John Donne. Sudden beginnings, a conversational tone and a direct form of address in a Herbert poem may remind a reader of Donne, as may the use of a logical building up of argument. Other qualities are distinctively Herbert's; his use of more commonplace, concrete images taken from nature; his frequent engaging of dialogue with God, his putting together of sayings that sound almost proverbial; and his distinctive, sometimes startling, poetic experiments. Herbert constantly used unusual stanzaic structures, such as found in "Easter Wings," where the lines on the page take the shape of the wings discussed in the poem. Sometimes, however, the same qualities that distinguish Herbert also come in the way of a reader's understanding: as when almost every idea is expressed by means of images, which might threaten to blur the focus on the original idea.

To help you gain a better understanding of the above-mentioned qualities of Herbert's verse, a close reading of his poem "Virtue" is provided. The text has been taken from *The Norton Anthology of Poetry, Third Edition* (1983), p 260. The words/phrases in bold are explained in the section that follows the poem.

1.3.3B: Text of "Virtue"

Virtue

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,
The **bridal** of the earth and sky:
The dew shall weep thy **fall** to-night;
For thou **must die**.

Sweet rose, whose **hue, angry and brave**,
Bids the rash gazer **wipe his eye**:
Thy root is ever **in its grave**,
And thou **must die**.

Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,
A box where **sweets compacted** lie;
My music shows ye have your **closes**,
And all **must die**.

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,
Like **seasoned** timber, never **gives**;
But though the whole **world turn to coal**,
Then chiefly lives.

1.3.4B: Glossary and Annotations

Stanza 1

Sweet: This adjective is used in each stanza, but the sense of this word changes with every use. To generalize, it may be said that in the first three stanzas, the sweetness of the day, rose and spring, respectively, is a quality related to the senses, and one that must fade or pass; whereas the sweetness in the last stanza is a spiritual quality, which will last. Incidentally, while addressing the first three “sweet” objects, the poet uses a figure of speech called apostrophe.

bridal: the word here is used as a noun, meaning union or marriage. The new day’s brightness makes visible everything on earth and in heaven, and in that sense brings the two together, as a marriage does. This is an example of a metaphysical conceit.

fall: the passing or dying of the day.

... **must die**: these words are repeated at the end of the first three stanzas, and act as a refrain linking the first three stanzas, and balancing them against the last, whose concluding words suggest a contrasting action; “chiefly lives”.

Stanza 2

hue: colour or shade

angry: suggests redness of blood as well as fury

brave: fearless; here, perhaps, also fearsome

wipe his eye: the response here is a sign of weakness or retreat. The red of the rose is such a fiery shade that it seems to dazzle the rash or careless gazer, bringing tears that need to be wiped.

in its grave: a root grows underground, and in that sense lies buried, or in its grave

Stanza 3

sweets compacted: perfumes concentrated; an **inversion** or figure of speech where the normal order of words is reversed.

closes: Plural of the noun ‘close’. In musical terms, a close is a concluding section of music, and this **analogy** or comparison leads to the realization that even spring must end or “die”.

Stanza 4

seasoned timber: wood that has been dried to make it harder and stronger. The phrase is part of a **simile** comparing the soul to timber.

gives: yields or surrenders.

turn to coal: a clear reference to the Christian religious belief that on the day of God’s Last Judgement, He will cause destruction by fire as a punishment for evil.

1.3.5B: Theme and Title

Herbert’s poetry communicates his deeply religious view of the world. He typically uses Christian themes and places a Christian world-view against the background

of the world at large. In the process, his poems sometimes emphasise the contrast between the religious and the secular sets of values, with his own preference clearly being for the religious.

“Virtue” may be seen as a poem concerning, in a sense, the futility of life’s attractions when compared to the bliss of life after death. More specifically, it is a Christian believer’s exploration of the beautiful but impermanent attractions of the world, and of the more satisfying and permanent pleasures of a Christian afterlife. This idea is communicated through a series of images.

The noun ‘virtue’ (in Herbert’s time the word was spelt ‘vertue’, which is a variant spelling you might find in some editions of the poem) is a quality of moral excellence. Related to the word **virtu** that has been mentioned in an earlier discussion on the Renaissance, ‘virtue’ originally indicated a combination of supposedly ‘manly’ qualities, such as courage and goodness. Herbert here uses the word in a more theological or religious sense, to refer to spiritual goodness.

Interestingly, the title does not seem to be applicable to much of the poem, till we realize that Herbert is actually attempting to define virtue by first explaining what it is not. This is a technique used to build up many arguments, and exhibited in a lot of Metaphysical poetry.

1.3.6B: Critical Understanding of “Virtue”

As you have already read and understood, John Donne had major and permanent influence on this younger Metaphysical poet, George Herbert. Herbert’s imagery, like Donne’s, works through the mind rather than the senses and his poems are logically structured.

George Herbert articulated his spiritual views and persuasions through poetry. In his poem *Virtue* he uses poetic diction, dominant images, and startling allegories for instituting the leitmotif - life is petite, transitory, but our souls will persist forever. This poem, ‘Virtue’, speaks of the beauty and virtue of creation which often overpowers us with wonder and admiration because it is an echo of the supremacy of the Creator. George Herbert underlines the mystical reality that life is beautiful.

However, notwithstanding its beauty, the creation will come to a flaming termination which will prompt us to look at the infinity of the universe.

“Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,” is a line that takes us silently to do a self-introspection and compare our lives to a perfect spring afternoon where everything is noble. The poet creates the magnificent association between a bright day and the virtuous soul. The day is something tranquil and brilliant; thus the poet associates it with the marriage between a man and a woman - “The bridal of the earth and sky”. Then our attention is shifted to the spiritual truth that even this all will go away with time. Herbert uses personification to guide us towards a more passionate situation by saying, “The dew shall weep thy fall to-night” , since the day must convert to night, which again is a metaphor for death. Then there is the appraisal of a lovely rose and a virtuous soul, the comparisons aptly made. The rose is “angry and brave”, and a noble bystander must rub his eyes in admiration and bewilderment. Anyway, Herbert pens that the root of the flower is in its grave and it will have to perish someday.

Lastly, Herbert carries us to the spell of spring which comprises both bountiful days and beautiful roses. Spring embodies time and everything comes in between. It is likened to “A box where sweets compacted lie”. The whole world might come to an end, but only a “sweet and virtuous soul, like a seasoned timber” is immortal.

Diction, Imagery, and Figurative Language are powerfully used in Herbert’s “Virtue”.

1.3.7B: Structure and Style

In ‘**Virtue**’ Herbert creates a taut and balanced lyrical poem of four quatrains, or four-line stanzaic units, with lines that rhyme alternately, ABAB. For each stanza, the first three lines are generally in iambic tetrameter, while the last line is in iambic dimeter. Each of the first three stanzas begins with an image of something “sweet” in nature, and develops it till the last line, which operates like a refrain or chorus that balances the sweetness against the unpleasant fact that it must fade or die. The first and last lines of each stanza, then, create a contrast and a tension. There is also another kind of tension within each image:

life cannot ignore the threat of death. This is perhaps best seen in the image of the rose, whose “root is ever in its grave”.

This pattern of point and counterpoint within each stanza occurs on a larger scale when the entire fourth stanza is placed in contrast to the earlier three; by presenting the image of something differently “sweet”: the immortal, virtuous human soul. The difference is indicated by the way the fourth stanza begins: the word “only” is a signifier of difference, apart from the fact that it breaks the earlier pattern of stanzas starting with “sweet”. There is something “sweet” here as well – the soul, but its position within the line suggests that its nature is different from those of the other three. Then again, the last word of the fourth stanza is “lives”; in contrast to the “die” that ends previous stanzas.

These and other contrasts characterise this poem and create an almost breathlessly poised sense of balance. There are some arrestingly rich images used here, created with apparent simplicity of language and an abundance of rhetorical figures (some of which are discussed in the glossary). These too, contribute to the tension in the poem: between the seemingly simple words and the not-so-simple concepts that they embody. It is not easy, for example, to explain the comparison between a day and a “bridal”, or between spring and a box filled with intense aromas.

1.3.8B: Further Activity

One of the noteworthy features of Herbert’s *Virtue* is that the structure so brilliantly serves to convey the sense. Herbert, in fact, has written a few poems which provide even better examples of this. You have been told about *Easter Wings* earlier. Herbert’s *The Altar* may also be mentioned here. In that poem the words are arranged in the very shape of an altar. Such works are examples of concrete poetry, which creates an impact upon the reader that is primarily visual, depending greatly on the arrangement of the words on the page. You might search the internet or literary dictionaries for other examples of concrete poetry in English. The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas is only one of many authors who have experimented with such poetry, using geometrical shapes and patterns.

1.3.9B: Summing Up

Here are a few points concerning what this section has covered.

You have learnt...

- that Herbert's poetry has Metaphysical characteristics, to which he adds some distinctive personal qualities
- that much of Herbert's verse appears to exhibit a simplicity which is actually deceptive
- that "Virtue" is an intricately patterned lyric which contrasts "sweet" but impermanent natural phenomena with the immortal and "virtuous" soul.
- that this basic contrast is sustained by a number of other contrasts in the poem.

1.3.10B: Comprehension Exercises

A. Long Answer Type Questions:

- Attempt a critical analysis of George Herbert's *Virtue*.
- Examine George Herbert's *Virtue* as a specimen of devotional poetry.
- What elements in *Virtue* can, in your opinion, be called 'metaphysical'?

B. Medium Length Answer Type Questions:

- Write a note on the title of Herbert's *Virtue* and explain how it contributes to a greater understanding of the poem.
- Identify the rhythm and metre of the poem, and show how Herbert uses structure to indicate/reinforce his theme.
- Consider how any two of the natural phenomena mentioned earlier in the poem are balanced against the moral quality of "virtue" in the last stanza.

C. Short Answer Type Questions:

- a) Explain, with reference to the context:
Only a sweet and virtuous soul,
Like seasoned timber, never gives;
- b) Identify three different figures of speech in the poem, and explain any two of them.
- c) Explain how Herbert has used the word “sweet” in different senses in the course of his poem.

Section C – To His Coy Mistress

Structure:

1.3.1C: Introduction

1.3.2C: Andrew Marvell and Metaphysical Poetry

1.3.3C: Text of “To his Coy Mistress”

1.3.4C: Glossary and Annotations

1.3.5C: Critical Understanding of Themes

1.3.6C: Structure and Style

1.3.7C: Summing Up

1.3.8C: Comprehension Exercises

1.3.9C: Suggested Reading (For all 3 Sections)

1.3.1C: Introduction

In this section we shall critically examine “To his Coy Mistress,” by Andrew Marvell, a major poet of the late Renaissance, who, like his predecessor John Donne, reworked the conventions and traditions of earlier love poetry, and is therefore also considered to belong to the Metaphysical School of poetry. You will find these salient features of Metaphysical poetry in Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress.” In fact it will not be out of context to state that Marvell actually begins where Donne ends! While Donne’s poem (Section A) presented a glorification of the composite love experience, in Marvell you will find the logical structuring of a syllogism (logical argument) taken to its hilt both in terms of form and content. What is more, Marvell’s lines at times even border on the cynical, as the speaker in the poem exhorts the beloved to partake of the bliss of heterosexual love. “To His Coy Mistress” is a significant illustration of the theme of *carpe diem* (seize upon the moment) also often understood as *gather ye rosebuds while ye may*! So, from the enigmatic triangular relationship of Time, Love, and Beauty in Shakespeare’s sonnets through the advocacy of consummate

love experience in Donne to the urge to seize the moment in Marvell, love poetry in English literature truly traverses a significant distance as it were.

1.3.2C: Andrew Marvell and Metaphysical Poetry

Andrew Marvell (1621-1678) was less known in his time as a poet and more as a prominent politician, civil servant and satirist. He was born the son of an Anglican priest. After graduating from Trinity College, Cambridge, he embraced a political career. He was elected an M. P. from Hull and served for quite a long period in the House of Commons. He lived through the English Civil Wars, the Interregnum (1649—1660, the period between the execution of Charles I and the restoration of monarchy under Charles II), and much of the Restoration. He wrote poems in Latin and English, and even controversial tracts like *An Account of Popery and Arbitrary Government*, 1678.

During the late Renaissance, the belief that man was at the centre of the universe and God's greatest creation was slowly fading. Political upheavals like the death of Queen Elizabeth, the Civil War and the regicide of King Charles I worked to shake man's belief in the self, and voyages to the new world brought in unknown

'a conceit is a comparison whose ingenuity is more striking than its justness' – Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets*

references. The Cartesian philosophy gave equal importance to the subjective and objective worlds. All this started an era of self-analysis. Man tried to explain his emotions in terms of the material world. This

gave rise to the **metaphysical wit**, a constant interaction between emotion and intellect, so that the emotion is conveyed in terms of the intellect, which found expression in the **metaphysical conceit**, a comparison of seemingly dissimilar things. There is a syllogistic structure at work in much of Metaphysical poetry, which introduces a rationale, an empirical line of enquiry to establish the nature of feeling.

1.3.3C: Text of “To His Coy Mistress”

To His Coy Mistress

HAD we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, Lady, were no crime
We would sit down and think which way
To walk and pass our long love’s day.
Thou by the **Indian Ganges’** side 5
Shouldst rubies find: I by the tide
Of **Humber** would complain. I would
Love you ten years before the **Flood**,
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the **conversion of the Jews** 10
My **vegetable love** should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow;
Anhundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast, 15
But **thirty thousand** to the rest;
But thirty thousand to the rest;
An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart.
For, Lady, you deserve this state,
Nor would I love at lower rate. 20

But at my back I always hear
Time’s **wingèd chariot** hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.
Thy beauty shall no more be found, 25
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song: then **worms** shall try

That long preserved virginity,
And your **quaint honour** turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust: 30
The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.

Now therefore, while the youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul **transpires** 35
At every pore with instant fires,
Now let us sport us while we may,
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour
Than languish in his **slow-chapt** power 40
Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into **one ball**,
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Thorough the iron gates of life:
Thus, though we **cannot make our sun** 45
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

1.3.4C: Glossary and Annotations

Section 1

Had we – By using the subjunctive form of verb the poet is putting the whole situation in an uncertain position, that which may or may not take place. If the lover and beloved had a lot of time at their disposal, the lover could wait indefinitely for the lady to shade her shyness or hesitation to agree to his proposal of love. If you notice the beginning of each section of this poem, you will find another significant aspect. “Had we” clearly means we do not have (in this case ample/ enough time and space at our disposal). The second section begins with “But”, which nullifies the “Had we”. The third section begins with “Now therefore ...”. So this tripartite structure clearly is a syllogistic one where the first proposition is cancelled out by

the second - the first a thesis and the second an anti-thesis. The third therefore is a synthesis – a realistic solution. You will hardly find such a logical argumentative pattern anywhere else.

coyness – shyness/ more specifically reluctant to partake of the physical pleasures of a consummate love relationship

sit down and think which way/ To walk and pass our long love's day – The poet is creating a sense of prolongation of time, spending it in finding and complaining, so that he is able to then urge the beloved to seize the time.

Indian Ganges; Humber – Rivers in India and England, of the eastern and western world, showing the extent of space between the lovers. The estuary of the Humber is actually close by Marvell's birthplace Hull. So the references also suggest that the poet is stuck to his familiar locality while the lady wanders by the far off Ganges. Notice also how, already in Marvell's time, India is associated with fabulous riches; the lady would find 'rubies'. Geographical explorations and circumnavigations thus find their way in poetry of the Metaphysicals.

Flood – In the *Book of Genesis*, when God unleashed the waters to destroy all humans of the corrupt earth, except the righteous Noah, God instructed Noah to build an ark in which he, his sons, and their wives, together with male and female of all living creatures, would be saved from the waters.

Conversion of the Jews - The widespread conversion of the Jews to Christianity is a future event predicted by many Christians, often as an end of time event. By referring to the Flood as the beginning of time, and the conversion of the Jews as the end of time, the narrator is bringing the whole of time into purview.

vegetable love should grow/ vaster than empires and more slow - This brilliant conceit states that his love will grow slowly and imperceptibly but steadily like plants. A finer intellectual analysis refers to Aristotle's doctrine of the three souls: rational, sensitive and vegetative. His love is of the lowest level, associated with the principle of generation and corruption. The bantering tone reaches a climax when it implies that his love will thereby increase in generation and corruption. The epithet 'vegetable' for love is also satiric in intent, this satire eventually reaches a climactic point in the second section of the poem.

hundred; two hundred; thirty thousand – A numerical assessment of an emotional reaction, i.e. praise for the beloved. In this process, the praise is further broken down, as each part of the beloved's body is praised. This is like an objectification of a subjective self.

Section 2

But – introduction of the second portion of the argument.

at my back I always hear – the narrator is haunted by a sense of time passing too quickly.

Winged chariot - Time's winged chariot is the traditional metaphor for the vehicle in which the sun, moon, night and time are represented as pursuing their course. Phaeton took the place of his father, the Sun, in a winged chariot and had a wild ride across the sky culminating in his death. Those of you who have read Tagore's *Shesher Kabita* will find an unmistakable echo of these lines from Marvell in Tagore.

Deserts of vast eternity – life as a wasteland

marble vault – the place where the dead body will be stored; coffin

echoing song – the song of love will not resound in the death chamber

Worms – insects that are instrumental in decomposing a corpse in the coffin

quaint honour – cherished pride and vanity that one is still a virgin

The grave's a fine and private place,/ But none, I think, do there embrace.
– The narrator is mocking the beloved's desire to while away time. It is an example of irony that pinches one to the core.

Notice how, Marvell's poem undercuts earlier presumptions about the immortality of love, beauty or poetry. The lady's beauty is transient. Her chastity or his desire for her are but evanescent. Marvell's lines contradict the assurance in many of the end couplets of Shakespearean sonnets, eg:

And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand

Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand (*Sonnet 60*)

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see

So long lives this and this gives life to thee (*sonnet 18*)

At this point, the speaker is still in a humorous vein. The humour however grows increasingly sardonic and the images in the second section become macabre. The ultimate destiny for the lady whether she yields to seduction or not, is slow decay. The reference to ‘ashes’ is from the English Burial service ; “ashes to ashes. The reference to ‘dust’ is derived from the *Book of Genesis*: “Dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return.” The section ends with a devastating sardonic couplet and moves to the final step of argument in section 3.

Section 3

The allusions in the final section do not suggest playfulness or a cavalier’s attitude at all. The section begins on a note of playful humour. In the understanding of the speaker, the lady’s reticence ‘coyness’ is only a pretence, for in reality she too is as eager for sexual fulfillment as her lover. Yet, it may be presumed that social and cultural mores hold her back, and it is this externality that Metaphysical Poetry challenges. Her willingness is evident from her looks and attitude. The imagery is striking. The comparison of the lovers to ‘am’rous birds of prey’ reminds us of Donne’s comparison of the lovers to the eagle and the dove in “The Canonisation.” Time’s “slow chapped power” is possibly a submerged reference to the Greek myth of the titans. Cronus, the son of Uranus, devoured all his children because he had been warned that his son would dethrone him. But his wife Rhea hid Zeus in an island and thus saved him. Zeus later seized power and defeated his father.

Now therefore – beginning of the third part of the argument

transpires - erupts, breaks out, emits, gives off

one ball - Some think the poet is using the symbols of alchemy to express the deep lying sexual chemistry implied in the second unusual image, that of a ball of sweetness to signify the union of male and female.

slow-chapt - Chewing or eating slowly.

Cannot make our sun/ Stand still -The last couplet suggests several sources, Biblical and classical. In *The Book of Joshua* in the Hebrew Bible, Joshua prayed

to God to bid the sun and moon stand still so that he could win a battle against the Amorites. God, who fought for the Israelites, acceded to Joshua's request and the sun stood still. In classical mythology Zeus bade the Sun stand still to lengthen his night of love with Alcmena. In this last reference, we see the appropriateness of the rhetorical figures of the poem. Marvell's speaker is saying to his mistress that they are human, mortal. They do not have the power of God or Joshua, to intervene and stop time. Nor do they possess the power of the old pagan deities. Instead, they must cause the time to pass quickly by doing what is pleasurable and so create the illusion that they are in control of time. The lines may also contain an ironic allusion to Donne's poem 'The Anniversary' where Donne claims that the sun which makes time may grow older but their love

"...no tomorrow hath nor yesterday
Running, it never runs from us away"

1.3.5C: Critical Understanding of Themes

The title informs us that the poem is an address to a reluctant, shy, bashful lady. The speaker importunes her to cease being coy. At first reading it may seem to be a poem of courtship, or more precisely of seduction. In three syllogistic steps the lover endeavours to persuade the lady to consent to an act of sexual union.

But as we read we realise that the poem is not only about **love** but also about **time**. Certain key words stand out in this context:

1. "time", 2. "long love's day", 3. the "slow" growth of "vast" empires, 4. "an hundred years", 5. "an age", 6. "Time's winged chariot", 7. "deserts of vast eternity", 8. "now", 9. "at once", 10. "our time"

The above references suggest the speaker's preoccupation with the passing of time, and the consequent brevity of life and youth, and the importance of experiencing the delights of young love in the proper season.

The desire to seize the day is the theme of '**carpe diem**'. The delicacy and fineness of tone in the classical idea of 'carpe diem' as in Ben Jonson's -

"Come my Celia, let us prove
While we may, the sports of love"

- has been inverted by Marvell when he moves from a light-hearted tone, to a serious, sombre tone, concentrating on death. The hedonism in the treatment of 'carpe diem' is yoked together grotesquely and biting with hyperbole. The speaker's love would extend from before the flood to the end of time. His love is compared to a vast vegetable which would grow as large and as slowly as empires, he would spend thousands of years celebrating her beauty and "an age at least" should be devoted to the celebration of each physical part, the last of which should reveal her heart. This section is summed up by the concluding compliment "you deserve this state/ Nor would I love at lower rate". Since these 20 lines postulate a series of extravagantly impossible situations, all grammatically connected to the opening lines, we can see that the speaker is no romantic dreamer. He is instead a realist who accepts the **brevity of life** and who points out the folly of unrealistic coyness through his extravagant conditional situations.

The inescapable fact of the pace of time comes with an acknowledgement of **death and decay** as in Browne's *Hydrotaphia*. The speaker's honesty and directness make the lady's coyness appear foolish and illogical. His impatience is held in check by the outward politeness and understatement of "The grave's a fine and private place/ But none I think do there embrace".

The poem is more than a witty attack on the lady's coyness. There is a kind of melancholy awareness of the brevity of youth and life. In this sense, much of what the speaker says takes on a new dimension: something more than physical gratification is involved. As the poem moves forward it becomes plain that the speaker is stressing the importance of living fully each moment in a kind of heroic defiance of time's power. And the apparently playful approach to love may be seen as a kind of witty or ironic defence in the face of human limitation. There is thus a second theme at work – the defiance of mortality.

The courtly love tradition is invoked in the opening part of the poem in the hyperboles. The lover is extravagant in his allotment of time to the praise of the lady—hundreds and thousands of years. He would, if he could, woo her from the beginning to the end of time. But by the time he has arrived at his conclusion, he has stripped the woman of all pretence of divinity and modesty. Her willing soul exudes ("transpires") urgent ("instant") passion. There is a direct allusion to

kinaesthetic (involving multiple sensory perceptions) ecstasy: “sport us”, “roll all our strength”, “tear our pleasures with rough strife/ through the iron gates of life” (the virginal body).

The influences of **erotic literature** and *vers de société* (verse dealing with topics provided by polite society in a light, witty style) may also be discerned. Erotic poetry is sensual love poetry. The sensual emphasis is evident in the speaker’s references to the mistress’ breasts and the “rest” of her charms, and the image of the lovers rolled up into one ball. The relation to **vers de société** is evident more in the tone than in the subject of the poem – the wit, gaiety, charm, polish, sophistication and ease of expression. This type of poetry exhibits certain fundamental attitudes towards sex, which reflect an essentially pagan view. Sexual intercourse is strictly dalliance (“sport”) and solely a means of deriving physical sensations. Marvell here expresses an attitude towards love which appears to be similar to the light hearted celebration of sensuality found in Cavalier poetry. (The Cavalier poets of mid seventeenth century were mainly men of noble birth, supporters of the Royalist cause and strongly influenced by the classical regularity and clarity of Ben Jonson’s poetry . They chose themes of sensual love, social life, honour etc and eschewed both the strong rhythm and irregularities of the Metaphysicals, writing verse which had a smooth finish and simpler meaning structure.) Marvell’s celebration of sensuality however, has multi –layered significations, which earmark it as very much a metaphysical poem.

The poem is metaphysical in its similarities to other seventeenth century poems that deal with the psychology of love and religion and employ grotesque, shocking and often obscure figures of speech to enforce their meaning. Such lines as “my vegetable love”, or the warning that worms shall violate her virginity and that, corpses do not make love, and the allusion to Time devouring his offspring, identify the poem as a seventeenth century revolt against the romantic and saccharine conventions of Petrarchan love poetry. The bold images and conceits, the varying tones and fluctuating moods, the use of logic and argument developed with subtlety and complexity are all typical metaphysical traits. So are the energy, the tempo, the humour and the erudition, seen in the use of classical and Biblical references, which impregnate the language with association and overtones.

1.3.6C: Structure and Style

The poem is a love lyric in the form of syllogistic structure. In a syllogistic structure two propositions combine to lead to a final conclusion. Here the first proposition is presented in the first 20 lines with a series of conditions of love (“had we but world...”; “if you please...”) and the conditional verb forms of “should” and “would”. The emphasis is placed on the qualification: ‘if things were somehow or other different’ or ‘if we were not trapped in the fleeting time’. The second proposition cancels out the first. The poet asserts that no one has infinite time at his disposal. Time flies, youth ends, and death comes. The poem contains nothing of the crudity implied in the word “proposition”. On the contrary, though impassioned, it is graceful, sophisticated, and even philosophical. The lover has urged an unsuccessful suit; finding his beloved reluctant, he makes use of an eloquent means of wooing that shows him to be no common lover. His wooing is couched in the form of an argument in three parts:

- i. if they had time he would not mind an indefinite postponement of her acceptance of his suit
- ii. but they do not, and once life is gone all their chances of love are gone
- iii. Therefore, they should love now when they are young and seize what pleasures they can in a world where time is fleeting. After all, they know nothing about future life and have only the grimmest observations of the effects of death. The last 14 lines are the conclusion, as the words ‘therefore’ and ‘thus’ show. The last couplet beginning ‘thus’ is the conclusion, the final point of the argument.

The **form of logical argument or syllogism** that Marvell adopts and the learned allusions and tone that pervade the poem can be explained by his background and immense learning in several languages. He was a Cambridge graduate with a scholastic education and thus steeped in classical literature and modes of thought. There is however nothing pedantic in his technique. Rather it is playful and urbane as are the allusions to Greek myth, courtly love and the Bible.

The poem is in iambic tetrameter couplets. The 4 stress lines suggest precision by a lecturing speaker, a precision in which key words get the emphasis of stress. Often each thought unit or syntactical pattern is completed within the two lines of a couplet. Thus, the succession of thoughts is kept simple and straightforward as the speaker concentrates on the simplicity and directness of his argument. The seeming flippancy of the speaker's approach and his accompanying seriousness are effectively merged in the last couplet: "Thus though...make him run". The adverb "thus" emphasises that this is to be the conclusion of the argument. The whole burden of the previous steps in the argument (living fully and vitally in the face of inevitable death) is telescoped wittily into the figure of the busy lovers forcing the sun (an image of time) into a brisk trot. Thus if they really cannot control time they can at least, with their brisk pace, make it race by and so seem to be controlled.

The poem uses a wide variety of rhetorical figures. It begins with and is in its entirety, an address to the lady, using the apostrophe. The poet's exaggeration of the time he would take to woo and of the distance between them is a hyperbole. There are several allusions, for example, to the Bible, to classical myths and such others. 'My vegetable love' is a metaphor, while '...the youthful hue .. like morning dew' is a simile. "...nor in the marble vault.." is metonymy, as marble vault stands for the graveyard. Personification is used for both Time (his slow-chapt pow'r) and sun (we will make him run). The figures of speech are not just ornaments. They are integral to the thought structure of the poem.

In a style resembling that of Donne, Marvell finds new ways of saying old things, and new perspectives on traditional situations. He presents a chain of propositions and deductions in a rigidly syllogistic form in what is only a love poem. Poetry and logic synthesize. Reason and sensibility fuse. Marvell also resembles Donne in the use of dramatic tone and speech and in the modulation of mood. In turn, he is expostulatory, passionate, and playful. He is always direct and conversational. The unexpected, whether in mood, tone, image or wit always startles us into a vivid realisation of the point he is trying to make. It is this dramatic forthrightness, this masculine way of using language, the sharp witty play of intellect and the cold-blooded rational wooing, that characterise the poem as a product of the metaphysical school of poetry.

1.3.7C: Summing Up

“To His Coy Mistress” therefore stands out as a strident instance of all that Metaphysical Poetry stood for. You will have noticed the unabashed manner in which the lover exhorts the beloved on the motif of *carpe diem*; the logical arrangement of thought that is used for this persuasion; and of course the use of varying levels of satire. Even the title of the poem is replete with all of these.

1.3.8C: Comprehension Exercises

A. Long Answer Type Questions:

1. Attempt a critical analysis of Marvell’s ‘To his Coy Mistress’.
2. Discuss ‘To his Coy Mistress’ as a metaphysical poem.
3. ‘To his Coy Mistress’ is an unconventional love poem. Substantiate.

B. Mid-length Answer Type Questions:

1. What are the references to the theme of time in “To his Coy Mistress”?
2. How does Marvell use the syllogistic structure in “To his Coy Mistress”?
3. What is a metaphysical conceit? Discuss two examples of metaphysical conceit from “To His Coy Mistress”.

C. Short Answer Type Questions:

1. Explain with reference to the context:
 - A) Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.
 - B) My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than Empires, and more slow.
 - C)I would
Love you ten years before the Flood:
And you should if you please refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.

2. What does 'Carpe Diem' mean? Can you find lines in the poem which directly refer to the idea?
3. In the last couplet what does Marvell offer as the logical conclusion to the arguments in the first two stanzas?
4. Comment on the significance of the image of "worms" in the poem.
5. Find out examples of i) simile ii) metaphor iii) alliteration iv) hyperbole from "To His Coy Mistress".

1.3.9C: Suggested Reading

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Unit 4 □ John Milton's *Paradise Lost* Book 1 – Invocation to the Muse

Structure:

- 1.4.1. Objectives**
- 1.4.2. Introduction to Epic Poetry**
- 1.4.3. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* Book I - Composition and Publication**
- 1.4.4. Understanding the Theme**
- 1.4.5. Epic Conventions and Invocation**
- 1.4.6. Text with Glossary and Annotations**
- 1.4.7. Critical Analysis**
- 1.4.8. Milton's Language**
- 1.4.9. Summing Up**
- 1.4.10. Comprehension Exercises**
- 1.4.11. Suggested Reading**

1.4.1: Objectives

In this Unit, you will be introduced to an entirely new form of poetry – the epic. Beginning with some brief introduction to the genre and its classifications, we will take you through the scope of Milton's *Paradise Lost* as an epic. You already have some acquaintance with the work in 5CC-EG-01 from the point of view of literary history, so our effort here will be more thematic in nature. Your understanding of this Unit will also help you to navigate through the next Unit, where we will take up the mock-epic, *The Rape of the Lock*, which is a parody of the epic mode. These two Units might seem somewhat challenging at first, but we assure you that they will deftly take you through one of the most important genres of English poetry. Of course, in this Unit, we have decided to familiarise you only with an important epic convention that Milton uses, that is, the Invocation to his Muse of poetry. So your syllabus for this Unit is only the first 26 lines of *Paradise Lost*, Book I. You

can readily find the full text as well on <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/26/pg26-images.html#chap01>

1.4.2: Introduction to Epic Poetry

From a conventional point of view, the epic is usually defined as a long poem that narrates the heroic deeds of great men having a great sense of honour. In the words of **Professor Tom Sienkewicz**, “An epic is a long narrative poem presenting characters of high position in a series of adventures which form an organic whole through their relation to a central figure of heroic proportions and through their development of episodes important to the history of a nation or a race.”

From this, you will at once hit upon certain distinctive features of epic poetry like the long narrative form, magnitude of characters and situations, importance in the history of a race or in the cultural milieu of a time and so on. M. H. Abrams enhances upon this definition to talk of a formal elevated style, a heroic or quasi-divine figure, and the ability to influence not just literary history but also the human race at large, as with *Paradise Lost*.

Epic poetry is usually classified into two types: primary/oral epic poetry and Secondary/ literary epic poetry. The former comprises heroic poetry composed for the purpose of performance. During the performance, a particular poem usually receives additions and alterations. Examples of such Primary Epics are *Gilgamesh* (a Sumerian work usually held to be the earliest extant primary epic dated between 3000 BC and 2000 BC), the *Iliad*, and the *Odyssey*. If you wish to know more about these, you may read up the SLM on *European Classical Literature*. Unlike primary epics, secondary or literary epic poetry is essentially in a written form, where you can attribute the work to a poet. A secondary epic is thus not something that is carried down as oral narrative as in the primary epic. Rather, it is a self-conscious composition, and the poet is aware of the intricacies of the literary composition. It employs a lofty style in imitation of the primary epics. Speaking in the context of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Johns-Putra is of the opinion that secondary epics follow the Homeric features: “Gods were inescapable, and funeral games, descents to Hades, catalogs of tribes and heroes, ornamented shields, night raids, *aristeiai*, and duels were hardly less so” (41). Opening the poems *in medias res* (‘in the midst of

things') is a convention that too is followed in the secondary epics (41). There are many secondary epic poems such as Virgil's *Aeneid*, Lucan's *Pharsalia*, Tasso's *Gerusalemme*, Aristo's *Orlando Furioso*, and of course Milton's *Paradise Lost*. For a more focussed understanding, we will briefly introduce Milton's work in the following lines.

Compared to Virgil's *Aeneid* (that famously sings of arms and the man), Milton's *Paradise Lost*, as you will soon see in the 'Invocation', is avowedly a Christian epic where the poet's stated purpose is to "justify the ways of God to men" (Bk I, L 26). In this 'conventional heroic epic,' originally published in 1667 in ten Books (twelve Books in the second revised edition published in 1674) Milton chose a biblical theme and adopted heroic conventions from Homer and Virgil. The theme revolves round conflicts, war, and heroism, in all of which adherence to/ disobedience of the Divine forms the connecting thread. The poem tells the story of Adam and Eve, how they were created, why they disobeyed God's instructions and their subsequent fall from the blissful Garden of Eden that God had designed for the first parents. It recreates the story of *Genesis*, enlarging it, and giving Satan (Lucifer) a privileged focus. In fact Milton's conception of the figure of Satan with certain aspects that are undeniably heroic (even though he stands in opposition to God) makes *Paradise Lost* a Christian epic with a different/ divergent literary flavour. It talks about his rebellion against God, his expulsion, his recuperation from the effects of defeat and how he, in the form of a serpent, foils God's design by tempting Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. Thus while the moral scales weigh heavily against Satan, as modern readers we are prone to seeing in the insistent questions regarding the unbridled supremacy of God that that cross his mind, some similarities with the ways in which we think of any form of absolute power. As Northrope Frye rightly says,

It is to Satan and his followers that Milton assigns the conventional and classical type of heroism. Satan, like Achilles, retires sulkily in heaven when a decision appears to be favouring another Son of God, and emerges in a torrent of wrath to wreak vengeance. Like Odysseus, he steers his way with great cunning between the Scylla- like Sin and the Charybdis-like Death; like the knights errant of romance, he goes out alone on a perilous quest to an unknown world. (qtd. in Johns-Putra 75)

Thus, *Paradise Lost* has the entire cosmos as the background and Milton embeds his story of God, archangels, and men amid this vast space. To suit the loftiness of the theme, he employs an elevated style. Milton adopts blank verse, which he describes as “English heroic verse without rhyme, as that of Homer in Greek and of Virgil in Latin; rhyme being no necessary adjunct or true ornament of poem or good verse,” (qtd. in Johns-Putra 73). Following epic conventions, he invokes the Muse to aid him in this lofty task, begins the story in *medias res*, and uses motifs such as descent into the underworld. As Johns-Putra rightly points,

Milton brings back into focus a range of epic motifs. ...[He] reintroduces the epic catalogue, the war council, and the heavenly scales. Thus, his list of fallen angels in hell echoes those of the Achaian ships in the *Iliad* and of the Italian chieftains in Book VII of the *Aeneid*; the devils’ war council at Pandemonium recalls those of both Agamemnon and Aeneas before the main attack, and God, like Zeus and Jupiter, indicates his judgment with a divine set of scales”. (73)

1.4.3: John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* Book I - Composition and Publication

Milton’s Magnum Opus *Paradise Lost*, the blank-verse epic poem, appeared in a quarto edition in 1667. Initially it consisted of 10 books but later on he published the final version which contained 12 books each headed by a prose ‘Argument’ which summarises the contents of each book.

Milton has used the Bible’s *Book of Genesis* as his main source. Other than the Bible, he has also used information from the Greco-Roman Mythology, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil’s *Aeneid* as his models. Dante, Tasso, Ariosto, Boiardo have also influenced Milton who is considered to have a command of Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, Spanish, and Italian. Later he is said to have added Old English to his linguistic repertoire. Milton had the propensity to assimilate what he considered to be permanent and beautiful in classical and continental literature. Classical myths, for him were allegories of moral truths. You can well understand how rich the protracted influence of the Renaissance has been on Milton.

Paradise Lost is timeless and universal in its appeal. It is accepted as an English Protestant epic, born of the political and religious upheavals of the 17th century. As you know by now, it was a time when the political history included the Civil War, regicide and rebellion. Milton was witness to the failure of the English revolution and the Republican enterprise against Charles I, which was followed by the Civil War. It resulted in the trial and execution of Charles I outside the Palace of Whitehall on 30th January 1649. This led to the subsequent creation of Republican Commonwealth and Cromwell's Protectorate. Yet the republican regime broke down and the ultimate triumph of tyranny was re-established when Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660. It is impossible to read *Paradise Lost*, notwithstanding its overt categorisation as a Christian epic, without identifying Milton's veiled references to these contemporary political happenings that were impacting English society of the time.

The Restoration of monarchy was for Milton, synonymous with ignorance, irrationality and idolatry. When Milton composed *Paradise Lost*, he was in dire financial straits, subject to slander, confined in a world of political, personal and intellectual isolation. It was an ageing and blind Milton who composed his most famous epic poem. As you will read in the 'Invocation', apart from being an epic convention it also carries covert references to the poet's own physical condition, to overcome which he seeks Divine help that alone can enable him to accomplish the mammoth task he has taken up.

1.4.4: Understanding the Theme

The opening invocation to the "Heav'nly Muse" in *Paradise Lost* Book I can be interpreted as an exposition to the themes embedded in Milton's epic. The exposition of the poem's "great argument" then foregrounds the theme as Milton leads his readers to follow the trail of a falling Satan:

With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition (ll. 46–7).

The readers are exposed to the horrors of hell where Satan is the grand "new possessor" (I. 252). The theme is closely related to the issues of morality and ethical choice. Milton offers two alternatives - whether to identify with Satan and face

similar consequences, or to condemn the entire act of rebellion and seduction of man “to that foul revolt” (I. 33). The narrator of the epic favours an idea of Satan as an evil agent responsible for the fall of man.

Notwithstanding the moral/ ethical angle of Milton’s perception of Satan, there is an undeniable ontological perspective of viewing the character as well, and it emerges not from external sources but from a thorough reading of *Paradise Lost* itself. In fact, it is known that Milton actually conceived of the story in the form of a tragedy on classical lines, but later switched to the epic mode in order to accommodate the diverse strands that make *Paradise Lost* magnanimous in scale. So a reader of *Paradise Lost* has to have a bifocal lens as it were – for a Christian epic Satan is a villain, but for a literary epic that stands in its own right, Satan is very much the anti-hero who cannot be cast aside simply on ethical grounds. In fact Satan does triumph as Milton’s great anti-hero, and draws sympathy from British Romantics like William Blake, who went to the extent of feeling that Milton actually belonged to the Devil’s party without himself knowing it as much. All this emerges from a reading of the full text of course.

For our present purpose however, we shall concentrate only on the “Invocation” of the epic Muse, and in that Milton’s primary purpose behind the writing of *Paradise Lost* is indeed didactic, even moralist. The poet’s own words,

I may assert Eternal Providence
And justify the ways of God to men (ll 25-6)

contains the sum and substance, and these lines may be regarded as being the most fundamental to the central theme of *Paradise Lost*. Milton reveals two paths which can be taken after disobedience: the path of moral degradation taken by Satan and the path of penitence and redemption shown by the saviour of mankind. Critics like C.S. Lewis denounce all the readers who are sympathetic to Satan. The theme of atheism is marked in this valorisation of Satan’s hatred of God. The admirers of Satan find in Milton’s epic a rebel against the Christian God. The readers are surprised by the glorification of sin in a work that proposes to vindicate the ways of God to men, as Stanley E. Fish, in *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (1967) has pointed out. According to Fish, Milton’s poem is aimed at surprising the unsuspecting Christian readers with an encounter with their own sense of sin and

Fall. The readers are initially made to sympathise with Satan on a face value. They are then offered counter-narratives to confront the cardinal sin of disobedience. The inevitability of damnation of Satan transforms Satan into a figure of primordial evil and pride. Although the readers are struck by the overriding personality of Satan, the epic formulates the central theme of divine justice through a glorification of the ways of God. The transformation of Satan into a tragic character is a part of this thematic design.

1.4.5: Epic Conventions and Invocation

Milton uses the literary conventions of Greek and Roman epics in *Paradise Lost*. Use of epical invocation to the Muses, grand eloquent language strewn with rhetorical language, epic similes, and the use of elevated style are generic marks used in this secondary epic by Milton. The presentation of a protagonist with heroic and epical potentiality can be seen in Milton's portrayal of Satan and in the portrayal of other fallen angels. The use of *media res* (in the middle of an action) can be seen in this epic. The conflict is of grand proportion involving supernatural figures drawn from Biblical sources in *Paradise Lost* Book 1.

One such convention is the use of apostrophe addressed to a God or a Muse to seek inspiration and assistance made by the poet in his composition, called the Invocation. It is an integral feature of traditional and literary epics. Emulating the blind bard Homer, all epic poets sought the blessings of their respective Gods and Muses to grant success to them in their Herculean efforts at creating a masterpiece. According to traditional epic conventions, a heroic poem is initiated by an invocation which is addressed to Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry and eloquence. In Milton's *Paradise Lost* Book I, the invocation can be divided asymmetrically into two parts. At first Milton formally declares the subject of his poem, that is, mankind's first act of disobedience towards God and the consequence that follows. The beginning and end of humanity is demarcated by the presence of Adam and subsequent restoration of mankind by Jesus. The next ten lines depict God's creativity in cosmic history and it is followed by the implication of those actions in a human context. In the *invocatio*, Milton appeals to the "heavenly Muse" who inspired Moses to help him. In this he differs from Homer and Virgil as well as the traditionally inspired

classical poets. Milton mentions Mount Oreb and Sinai, and appeals to the Holy Spirit to enlighten him regarding the beginning of the world since the Holy Spirit was an active force in the creation of the universe. Next the poet seeks to surpass the limits of his classical predecessors. He desires to rise above the Aonian Mount which is sacred to the Greek Muse. The invocation shows Milton's attempt to bring a different perspective to his divine literary task and at the same time to work for the qualitative aspect of his creation. This makes Milton's invocation more religiously inclined than his classical predecessors, just as it pitches *Paradise Lost* at a new high in the domain of epic poetry.

1.4.6: Text with Glossary and Annotations

Paradise Lost

Book I

Of **Man's first disobedience**, and the fruit
Of **that forbidden tree** whose **mortal taste**
Brought death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till **one greater Man**
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
Sing, **Heavenly Muse**, that, on the secret top
Of **Oreb**, or of **Sinai**, didst inspire
That shepherd who first taught **the chosen seed**
In the beginning how the heavens and earth
Rose out of Chaos: or, if **Sion hill**
Delight thee more, and **Siloa's brook** that flowed
Fast by the oracle of God, I thence
Invoke thy aid to **my adventurous song**,
That with **no middle flight** intends to soar
Above th' **Aonian mount**, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.

And chiefly thou, **O Spirit**, that dost prefer
 Before all temples th' upright heart and pure,
 Instruct me, **for thou know'st**; thou from the first
 Wast present, and, with mighty wings outspread,
Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast Abyss,
 And mad'st it **pregnant: what in me is dark**
Illumine, what is low raise and support;
 That, to the height of this great **argument**,
 I may **assert Eternal Providence**,
 And **justify** the ways of God to men.

Glossary and Annotations:

Man's first disobedience: A reference to the Biblical story of the first parents Adam and Eve transgressing God's injunction and tasting the fruit of the tree of knowledge. In *Paradise Lost*, Bk IV, Satan actually questions this injunction with the very valid question as to why would almighty God forbid his best creation, man, from the domain of knowledge. Here in the Invocation however, Milton uses this as the starting point of his grand epic. So you understand that *Paradise Lost* actually begins with the story of the creation of life itself.

that forbidden tree: The fruit of the tree of knowledge that stood right at the centre of the Garden of Eden, a blissful place that God had built as the abode of the first parents. The garden itself finds mention in Line 4 of the Invocation.

mortal taste: The Biblical story goes that by transgressing Divine injunction and eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge on the temptation of Satan (Eve first and then Adam), the first parents were punished by God with the curse of mortality. As a figure of speech, this is a transferred epithet.

one greater man: Milton is here referring to Christ, the son of God and hence a "greater man" who sacrificed his own life in an effort to redeem fallen humanity. So you understand that even while Milton was writing the Invocation, the scope included not just *Paradise Lost* (initially published in 1667) but also *Paradise Regained* (first published in 1671).

Heavenly Muse: Milton's debt to poets of classical epics is evident in this invocation of a muse. The muses, according to Greek mythology, were goddesses who inspired knowledge and literary creativity. Given that an epic is a poem of great dimensions, it was a practice that the epic poet needed divine help to compose an epic in the right frame and proportion. In that sense, Milton's invocation, as we have mentioned earlier, follows epic conventions. However, it is noteworthy that he is not invoking any of the muses that one finds in classical poetry; his Muse is distinctly a Christian one. We need to understand that since Milton's purpose is to compose a Christian epic, he invokes the Heavenly Muse that we can take as the Christianised version of a muse of classical poetry that was obviously pre-Christian.

Of Oreb, or of Sinai: Mount Oreb [Horeb (meaning 'desert' in Hebrew) according to the *Vulgate*] is basically another name for Mount Sinai where, according to the Old Testament, God appeared to Moses and gave him the Ten Commandments. This is also the place where according to the holy books, the Hebrews entered into a Covenant with God after escaping from the Pharaoh's bondage in Egypt. The story of the Burning Bush, of Moses striking the rock to draw out water in the midst of the desert – Oreb/ Sinai has very many significant aspects related to Christian faith. By placing his Heavenly Muse on the top of Oreb or Sinai, Milton is again reaffirming his commitment to the Christian cause. In all the episodes related to these mountains as narrated above, you will find there is an aspect of Divine intervention to aid petty mortals. It is this divine connection that Milton as the composer of the epic also seeks as inspiration to deliver what he has set out to. Geographically, the place would be somewhere in modern day Israel.

That shepherd...chosen seed: In the figure and vocation of the shepherd, Milton achieves a unique blend of scriptural and classical traditions. The reference obviously is to Moses to whom God made Himself evident when he was rearing sheep on Mount Horeb (Oreb), and later delivered the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. The image of sheep and shepherd also applies to Moses leading the Hebrews to the Promised Land.

Sion hill...Siloah's brook: It is generally held that Sion hill refers to Mount Zion that finds mention in the Bible, while Siloah's brook would be the stream by the waters of which Jesus famously restored eyesight to a blind man. The brook is

said to have run beneath Mount Zion, so the idea of inspiration as something that is often subterranean in the depths of the human mind is also implicit in Milton's lines. These are places that one can find in modern day Jerusalem, famed as the Promised Land.

my adventurous song...no middle flight: Milton is aware of the magnitude and proportions required to narrate what he has set out to. So he states that only a superlative flight of poetic ability can see him through this task. The use of the double negative in "no middle flight" suggests this necessity of raising oneself far above human limits in order to accomplish the composition of the epic poem.

Above th' Aonian mount...in prose or rhyme: This refers to Mount Helicon in Greece, the favoured place for classical poets as the abode of their muses. Since Milton's subject is avowedly greater and mightier than any that has preceded in the history of epic poetry, the trodden paths of earlier poets might not suffice as the abode of his chosen Muse.

O Spirit...for thou know'st: Notice the progression in Milton's choice of his Muse, and you will realize how he incorporates not just Christian theology and classical knowledge, but also the spirit of Renaissance Humanism. His "Spirit" understandably is the Holy Spirit, whose powers and functions derive from the Almighty. It is therefore the voice of God, the master of all Creation that he invokes. And for the manifestation of this spirit, he comes from Oreb/ Sinai, Sion hill/ Siloah's Brook to finally the upright and pure human heart which is the best creation of God. By doing so, Milton assimilates the creation of his own poetic self within the best manifestation of God's creativity.

Dove like...pregnant: Milton's lines here closely echo Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* (1643), where Browne writes, "This is that gentle heat that brooded on the waters, and in six days hatched the world" (73). There are also echoes of St Basil and other Latin patristic authors in these lines. In simple terms, Milton is recalling the Biblical story of the creation of the Universe by God in six days beginning with the miraculous advent of light on the first day. The source of this story is to be found in *Genesis*, Chapters 1 and 2. The relevance here is that since God created it all, he is the most apt Muse to invoke for an epic that intends to soar above all others of its genre.

what in me...support: Once you get the implication of the choice of the Muse, it is easy to understand that the epic poet completely supplicates himself to the wish of the Divine, in order to accomplish this great task. It is also possible to read the dark/illumine binary as a reference to Milton's own blindness, notwithstanding which he prays for Divine light/ wisdom to write what he has set out to. This idea of overcoming physical blindness with light of the soul/ mind is common in literature, you find it in poets from Shakespeare to Tagore.

argument: Proposition/ subject

assert Eternal Providence: establish/ bring out the will and ways of God, His beneficence and bounty in the form of life for the well being of humanity

justify: express/ vindicate/ elucidate so that human beings might never again stray from the chosen path

1.4.7: Critical Analysis

Having gone through the detailed glossary and annotations in the section above, you must have now realised the purpose behind the 'Invocation.' As a statement of his purpose behind writing *Paradise Lost*, Milton is doing several things here at the same time, some of which are listed below:

- ❖ Following classical epic conventions
- ❖ Making a blend of classical conventions, Christian theology, and Renaissance humanism
- ❖ Communicating to readers what to expect of his grand epic
- ❖ Giving a clue to the scale on which *Paradise Lost* is conceived, the use of language and metaphors, the grandeur of style

If you notice the syntactical arrangement of the 'Invocation', you will find that there are actually two long sentences that cover it all. The first, that extends till Line 16, contains a mention of the subject matter of the epic, establishes the classical-theological backgrounds and perspectives that Milton will chart, and stops at an ambitious proclamation that the epic will set new heights in the genre.

However, by the time we come to the third element, we are already seasoned with what has been called Milton's grand style, so the proclamation does not seem out of place. The second sentence that takes the 'Invocation' to its conclusion, is rich in biblical allusions and it places the epic poem in a post-Renaissance perspective. With these inputs, you should be able to attempt segment-wise critical analysis of the 'Invocation'. We will however, still focus briefly on Milton's language.

1.4.8: Milton's Language

To suit the sublimity of the subject Milton adopted the highly stylised ancient Latin language structure to elucidate his theme in *Paradise Lost*. Commenting on the Latinized use of Milton's English, Jonathan Richardson observes that Milton's Language is English, but it is Milton's English which is a mixture of Latin and Greek. Lee M. Johnson in the essay "Milton's epic style: the invocations in *Paradise Lost*," has observed the "Milton's secondary language is often far removed from common speech and does not so much talk as sing" and his "language and style seem unusual" (Danielson 67-68). Milton uses an ornate and artificial style and these artifices and mannerisms contribute to the epical grandeur of the work. There are in particular the Latinisms – the Latin idioms, syntax, word order and the use of words in their Latin senses. The effect is to produce an archaic Latin style in English in close imitation of Virgil. Milton's language is original and not idiosyncratic or even and perpetual distortion of current idiom. There is a juxtaposition of two types of language: Satan's language is complicated, rhetorical, complex and often self-contradictory; God's language has harmony, clarity, balance and theological abstraction. Milton's mastery over Latin gives more clarity and force to the theological discourse as against the more modern rhetorical language of Satan.

Like his predecessors, Milton adopts a more generalised style especially when he describes a particular place or even a person. In such descriptions he does not prompt the imagination by selected detail to realise an individual figure or scene; he concentrates rather than on the general impression itself. The reason is that the figure and scenes in these parts of the poem are themselves of representative rather than of singular interest; to individualise them would be to destroy the effect aimed

at. For example, in his description of Belial, Milton's style of generalisation gets revealed:

In Courte and Palaces he also Reigns
And in luxurious Cities, where the noise
Of riot ascends above their loftiest towers,
And injury and outrage: and when Night
Darkens the Streets, then wander forth the Sons
Of Belial, flown with insolence and wine. (Book I, 497-502)

Most of the key words here are general or abstract nouns. The picture presented here is distinct and forcible, and it is probable that the poet was recording his personal experiences of Restoration London. Through this kind of usage Milton attains an effect of immeasurable grandeur, diffuses a sense of the infinite through a finite form. The use of an adjective for a noun is a similar device, describing physical appearance by qualities, in phrases such as "the palpable obscure" or "the vast abrupt." There is one chief reason why Milton was able to avail himself of the grandeur of abstract words without his style becoming grandiose; he has a scholar's eyes of the substance, the concrete imagery and wealth of associated meanings stored in these words. Latinisms abound in the work. One is the joining of a concrete descriptive epithet to an abstract noun, as in "fleecy care." Such expressions in *Paradise Lost* as "Anglical and Human kind," or, "brutal kind" for beasts, do not fall into this category, since they lack the picturesque detail and a normal form of speech.

1.4.9: Summing Up

In this Unit, it has only been possible to give you a preliminary idea of *Paradise Lost* as a secondary epic in English, and a focus in particular on the 'Invocation' which is the first epic convention one encounters on approaching the text.. Please remember dear learner that this is not a substitute but only an aid that should prompt you to read the full text. While reading you are to focus special attention on Milton's grand style and how it differentiates the text from other poetry you have read so far in your syllabus. You are also to take note of the fact that Milton writes at two levels – first as a Christian epic, and then (equally importantly) as a

literary text as well. To comprehend this binocular vision, you are to differentiate between the ethical and ontological perspectives in your approach to *Paradise Lost*. This makes the figure of Satan as presented by Milton, one of the most complex creations in English literature.

1.4.10: Comprehension Exercises

A. Long Answer Type Questions:

1. How does the 'Invocation' to *Paradise Lost*, Book 1 provide a window to the entire epic?
2. Show how Milton fuses classical and theological elements with post-Renaissance humanist thought in the 'Invocation' to *Paradise Lost*, Book 1.

B. Medium Length Answer Type Questions:

1. Critically analyse Milton's use of language through a close textual reading of *Paradise Lost*, Book 1.
2. Whom does Milton choose as his Muse in the Invocation and what process of elimination does he follow in arriving at the choice?
3. Explain with reference to the context:
 - (a) I thence
Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song,
That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above th' Aonian mount
 - (b) What in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support

C. Short Answer Type Questions:

1. What was man's first act of disobedience? What was the result?
2. Identify and explain the figure of speech in "mortal taste".

3. Can you attempt to assign present day geographical locations of places that Milton mentions in the 'Invocation'?
4. What does Milton aim to 'justify' in *Paradise Lost*?

1.4.11: Suggested Reading

- Corns, Thomas N. Ed. *A Companion to Milton*. Blackwell, 2001, 2003.
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Module 2:
British Poetry from Pope to Coleridge

Unit 5 □ Alexander Pope: *The Rape of the Lock* (Cantos 1 – 3)

Structure:

- 2.5.1. Objectives
- 2.5.2. Introduction
- 2.5.3. Alexander Pope – A Bio-brief
- 2.5.4. Composition of *The Rape of the Lock*
- 2.5.5. The Mock Epic Poetic Mode
- 2.5.6. Preview to the Text
- 2.5.7. The Text of *The Rape of the Lock* – Cantos 1 – 3 (With Annotations)
- 2.5.8. Satire in *The Rape of the Lock*
- 2.5.9. Key issues
- 2.5.10. Summing Up
- 2.5.11. Comprehension Exercises
- 2.5.12. Suggested Reading

2.5.1: Objectives

In the previous Unit, you have been introduced to epic poetry by way of a brief idea of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book 1. You also know from your reading of History of English Literature that Milton signified what may be called the zenith of Puritanism in literature. In that sense, *Paradise Lost* (1667) upholds much of the values of Restoration England, which was a nation in a time of paradoxical cross currents of cultural transformation. The other end of this transformation is evident in Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, a classic piece of Augustan satire, first published in 1712 and then a revised version in 1714. In this Unit, you will learn about the mock epic, which is not a mockery of the epic mode but uses epic conventions to present far more trivial issues; hence the humorous and satiric intent is supreme.

2.5.2: Introduction

To talk of Augustan literature is to talk of Alexander Pope, whether as poet or as a literary critic. As pointed out earlier, this Unit will acquaint you with one of the abiding poetry texts of Augustan England, that captures in form and content the perfect ethos of the Age. From a trivial social quarrel between the social elites, Pope culls out a long poem that is mock-heroic or mock-epic in nature, forms a dispassionate critique of contemporary society, and yet charms the reader with wit, undeniable female beauty and of course the grace of the heroic couplet. As you read through this Unit, you should be able to apply in practice the Augustan poetic ethos that you have theoretically read about in earlier units. You must also be on the look-out for marks of poetic excellence with rhetorical devices, and the deft blend of a romantic strain amidst all the neo-classical satire.

2.5.3: Alexander Pope: A Bio-brief

Alexander Pope was born in 1688 to Catholic parents in London. For the record, he was the son of a linen draper! The contemporary law that banned Catholics from education on pain of perpetual imprisonment also hampered Pope's education. He mostly educated himself by reading the works of classical writers such as the satirists Horace and Juvenal, the epic poets Homer and Virgil, and the major English authors like Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare and John Dryden. He was also proficient in French, Italian, Latin, and Greek. Pope was closely associated with the London literary society including figures like William Wycherley, William Congreve and Joseph Addison. At an early age Pope was afflicted with Pott's disease (a form of tuberculosis that affects the bone) that deformed his body and stunted his growth, leaving him with a severe hunchback.

In 1709, Pope's *Pastorals* brought him instant fame. This was followed by *An Essay on Criticism*, published in May 1711. Pope was part of the satirical Scriblerus Club with Tory writers John Gay, Jonathan Swift, Thomas Parnell and John Arbuthnot. The aim of the club was to satirise ignorance and pedantry in the form of the fictional scholar Martinus Scriblerus. His poem

The Dunciad was a ruthless attack on inferior poets in London society. It pilloried a host of other hacks, scribblers and dunces including his rival poet Theobald and Colley Cibber.

Pope's magnum opus was *The Essay on Man*, a philosophical poem, written in heroic couplets and published between 1732 and 1734. The poem is an attempt to **'vindicate the ways of God to Man,'** a variation on Milton's attempt in *Paradise Lost* to 'justify the ways of God to Man'. Many of the ideas of the Enlightenment here coalesce with the ideas of Christianity.

2.5.4: Composition of *The Rape of the Lock*

From the very title of the poem, you can intuit that there is a mismatch of proportions strongly suggested. In 1712 a curious incident rocked the English Catholic community. Lord Petre (the Baron of the poem) mischievously cut off a lock of hair from Arabella Fermor (Belinda of the text), a young *belle* and a cousin of Pope's friends, the Blount sisters. The Catholic community (marginalised in England) was divided on the issue, and Pope's friend John Caryll requested the poet to write a poem that could generate laughter and dissolve the social tension. So the poet was actually commissioned to write the long poem, and he acknowledges the debt in the "Invocation", which itself is a parody of epic conventions if you contrast it with Milton's "Invocation" in *Paradise Lost*, Bk 1. Pope dedicated the poem to Arabella Fermor with the comment that "the character of Belinda, as it is now manag'd, resembles You in nothing but beauty." While Arabella seems to have been pleased initially with the idea, the ensuing publicity caused a degree of bitterness. The first (two-canto) version of the poem was published on 20th



Engraved by J. Kneass after a painting by Sir Peter Lilly

ARABELLA FERMOR,

*From a Picture by Sir Peter Lilly
the Collection of W. Fermor, Esq. Sumner, Oxfordshire.*

*From a Picture by Sir Peter Lilly
the Collection of W. Fermor, Esq. Sumner, Oxfordshire.*

May 1712 in *Lintot's Missellany*. In 1713, Pope expanded the poem to include the 'Machinery' of the sylphs and the game of ombre, thereby giving completeness to the mock-heroic mode that he used in writing this long poem. This revised edition in five cantos that was even accompanied by six engravings, was published in March 1714 and proved enormously popular. Never before had a social brawl produced such a comic yet sublime literature!

STOP, THINK THEN READ ON ...

From this brief publication history of *The Rape of the Lock*, you should be able to deliberate on:

- 1. The coordinates of relation between society and literature.**
- 2. The pervasive virility and triviality that characterised elite English society.**
- 3. Gender relations in Augustan England.**
- 4. The use of neo-classical literary forms to portray social trivia.**

2.5.5: The Mock-Epic Poetic Mode

As literary terms, 'mock-epic' or 'mock-heroic' might be new to you. You must also be wondering - why did Pope choose the style of the mock heroic for his text? In this regard, if you match the occasion behind the poem with Pope's own comment that the "use of pompous expression for low actions ... is the perfection of the mock epic.", you will get the essence of the literary type. The typical mock heroic chooses a trivial incident which is then described in epic terms with the use of epic features, metaphors and language. The discrepancy between the subject and style generates laughter and highlights the critical point that the text wants to make. In this case, by deliberately highlighting a minor social brawl in epic terms, Pope was simultaneously offering a subtle critique of Belinda's actions, making a critique of aristocracy, and advocating good nature and sense over rage and hysteria.

Activity for the Learner

Before you move on with this Unit, try and find, with help from your counselor, instances of the use of the mock-epic mode in earlier literature, starting from the Classical Age. You can also make a comparative chart between Epic and Mock-Epic practices. This will help you to understand the two literary modes for yourself. Notice how the mock-epic does not in essence, diminish the largesse of the epic scale of grandeur, but builds up its theme by contrast, as has been stated earlier. Your counselor might engage you in a discussion on what different forms the epic and mock-epic modes have taken in subsequent literature and why.

You might as well consider the fact that Pope's predecessor John Dryden also used the mock heroic in *Mac Flecknoe*. While the poets of the age held up the ancients as a subject of imitation, they raised contemporary social issues as the subject of their satire with the Horatian idea that poetry 'instructs while pleasing'. Edification and gratification, you know from your reading of classical literary criticism, were the twin purposes of literature in general. In that sense, in Pope's work, the debt to classical masters remains.

The polite society of urban London demanded a culture of 'peace' and 'moderation' and Pope's poem offered reconciliation rather than conflict. But you will notice in course of the poem the elaborate and intricate use of the heroic parallels – Belinda is Helen of Troy and the theft of the lock is akin to the rape of her body; the elaborate ritual of the toilette is compared to the dressing of epic heroes; the supernatural figures are transformed into sylphs. It is this intricacy that provides such an aesthetic merit to the text. If you look at the ending, the conflict is resolved in the epic apotheosis where the lock is transformed into a star that is then immortalised by the poem! Thus the mock heroic is aestheticised by Pope – it achieves three objectives:

- ❖ **draws attention to the triviality of the quarrel and argues for good sense**
- ❖ **satirises conflict**
- ❖ **makes a case for reconciliation and intricately generates both great beauty and laughter.**

All this is achieved at the base level, by the decision to employ the mock-heroic mode within the epic framework.

Notice for yourselves the stylistic features used by Pope. The epic tone merges with the aesthetic in a sublime hyperbole – “Belinda smil’d and the world was gay”. Readers of Bangla poetry could easily find a parallel to Sunil Gangopadhyay’s adoration of his femme muse:

“Nirar asukh holey Kolkata boro dukhe thakey”.

At the same time the triviality in Pope is brought out in the coexistence of the heroic and the feminine in Belinda’s toilette. “Puffs, powders, patches, bibles, billet doux”. The figure of speech of *bathos* (anticlimax) is recurrently used with irony and zeugma. You might also say that Pope is minutely inflating the female domestic space and feminising the mock heroic.

You will also have noticed the quality of wit and humour in this poem. In a mock heroic satire the basic mood of attack and disapproval needs to be softened to some extent and made more palatable; wit and humor serve this end by making the criticism entertaining, and even attractive. In the words of Swift, ‘As Wit is the noblest and most useful Gift of humane Nature, so Humour is the most agreeable, and where these two enter far into the Could you now make a list of specific literary techniques and constructions that lend themselves easily to satire because they can contain a measure both of wit and humor, and of the necessary irony or satiric association (Suggestions: exaggeration, distortion, understatement, innuendo, paronomasia, zeugma, ambiguity, simile, metaphor, oxymoron, parable, and allegory)? Does the contradiction between the heroic style and the trivial matter give you an idea of the satire and the humour that the poem seeks to convey? Your counselor will again help you to identify and understand these terms, as also explain their specific usages in the text of *The Rape of the Lock*.

2.5.6: Preview to the Text

Could you now make a list of specific literary techniques and constructions that lend themselves easily to satire because they can contain a measure both of wit and humor, and of the necessary irony or satiric association (Suggestions: exaggeration, distortion, understatement, innuendo, paronomasia, zeugma, ambiguity, simile, metaphor, oxymoron, parable, and allegory)? Does the contradiction between the heroic style and the trivial matter give you an idea of the satire and the humour that the poem seeks to convey? Your counselor will again help you to identify and understand these terms, as also explain their specific usages in the text of *The Rape of the Lock*.

Let us now take you through the first three cantos of the poem. The poem begins with an epic *sententia* or a statement of purpose.

“What dire offence from am’rous Causes springs,
What mighty Contests rise from trivial Things”.

Notice how the *sententia* highlights the mock heroic quality, the dire offence and the amorous causes, the mighty contest and the trivial things. Pope seems to be highlighting that this is the pattern that the poem will follow.

Dedicated to Pope’s friend John Caryll, the poem proceeds to suggest that the entire episode is based on a moment of *amour* (desire) that can be resolved through marriage. There is also however a continuous undercurrent of sexuality – you might have already noticed it in the title! Pope is also arguing that women should not possess ‘mighty Rage’ in their ‘soft bosoms’.

The poem then describes the tender moment of Belinda rising from her “downy Pillow” (soft pillow made of the finest cotton). The fact that she gets up so late in the morning and the rich array of objects that she is surrounded with, suggests a world of aristocratic excess. Read carefully the episode where Belinda is introduced. Pope describes her as a woman with great beauty whose ‘Eyes must eclipse the day’. It is through her beauty then that Pope introduces the heroic and the sublime quality in Belinda. Interestingly Belinda’s morning dream is that of “A Youth more glitt’ring

than a Birth-night Beau". The fact that Belinda is dreaming of the young handsome man is an indicator of the desire that she harbours within her. Yet she is willing only to flirt and not submit herself in marriage. The supernatural machinery is then described through the image of the miniscule sylphs. The sylphs are described as the 'light militia of the lower sky' and are former coquettes transformed after their death. They 'guard the purity of melting maids' and make them resist masculine advances. Pope later in Canto II describes them as objects of beauty, refracting sunlight through their tiny wings as they guard Belinda in military formation. You might wonder why Pope uses the machinery here. Firstly the sylphs add to the mock heroic quality – the supernatural is reduced to a minute level. They also add to the aesthetic quality of the text. But more importantly they create a hierarchy of coquettes across time through which Pope can direct his satire against female follies. Thus Belinda is not one single flirtatious woman; she is part of a tradition of women who are vain about their beauty and have flirted across history:

"Think not when Woman's transient Breath is fled.
That all her vanities at once are dead;
Succeeding vanities she still regards,
And tho' she plays no more, o'erlooks the cards".

These lines offer us a glimpse into Pope's satire against women as shallow and fascinated only with vanity and flattery. There is therefore a deep misogynistic satire embedded within the poem, although the very witty presentation might at first glance obfuscate the sting with the weapon of humour. The sylphs also deflect some of the satire from Belinda. The 'filigree' work of creating this magical world however makes *The Pope of the Lock* comic, yet sublime in beauty.

The next major episode is Belinda's dressing before the mirror. This is compared with the putting on the amour of an epic hero. Pope describes the moment with almost magical elevation with the 'silver vases laid in mystical order' and the process as 'the sacred Rites of Pride'. Belinda's accessories include India's gems, African combs, files of pins, Persian perfumes. Notice the delightful hyperbole describing the entire process:

“Now awful beauty puts on all its Arms,
The fair each moment rises in the Charms,
Repairs her smiles, awakn’s ev’ry grace,
And calls forth all the wonder of her Face.”

We shall later discuss the significance of the wealth of details that are described by Pope on Belinda’s dressing table.

Canto II continues to describe the attraction of Belinda’s beauty through the image of the diamond Cross:

“On her white Breast a sparkling Cross she wore,
Which Jews might kiss and infidels adore.”

This culminates in yet another hyperbole:

“If to her share some female errors fall
Look on her Face, and you’ll forget them all”

The Baron makes his entry at this point as Pope describes his admiration for the ‘bright locks’ of Belinda. He sets up an altar to make sacrifices. (once again an epic parallel). But the altar is made only with books of romances! The mock heroic dissolves the moment by describing the altar as made with ‘twelve vast romances, neatly gilt’! His prayers are to be granted soon.

Belinda makes her way to Hampton Court (the palace) across the Thames in a barge to engage in gossip over tea. The sylphs watch over her with great care and Pope’s imagination seems to go into overdrive as he creates their fantastic minute world with their brilliant names – ‘Zephyretta, Momentilla, Crispissa and their leader Ariel’.

Canto III begins with the aristocratic world of Hampton Court with its pervasive concern with gossip and a life of leisure.

“Snuff, or the Fan, supply each Pause or Chat
With singing, laughing, ogling and all that.”

This is followed by an elaborate game of cards (ombre) that mirrors the epic conflict with the cards resembling the epic heroes battling on the plains of Troy:

“And Particolor’d troops, a shining Train
Draw forth to Combat on the velvet Plain.”

Look at the way in which Pope uses the mock heroic mode to transform the violence of the battle into a polite game of cards, bringing to the foreground the life of leisure of the contemporary aristocracy. As Belinda wins this elaborate game, the ceremony of tea follows:

“From silver spouts, the grateful liquors glide
While China’s Earth receives the smoking Tyde.”

Meanwhile, the Baron is helped by Belinda’s maid Clarissa who hands him the ‘two’ edg’d weapon, the scissor. Pope plays out the suspense as twice Belinda looks back, but finally the Baron cuts off the lock in a moment of a mock heroic climax:

“The meeting Points the sacred Hair dissever
From the fair Head, for ever and for ever!”

The moment is followed by Belinda’s epic scream that is dissolved by an anticlimax:

“Not louder shrieks to pitying Heaven are cast,
When Husbands or when lap-dogs breathe their last”

The third canto ends on this note of the Baron’s triumph.

You might also want to read the conflict generated by this action in Cantos IV and V. Canto IV describes Belinda’s hysteric melancholia and rage as Pope describes the

“Force of Female lungs,
Sighs, sobs and Passions, and the War of tongues”.

What is interesting is the comic vision of social chaos that such a rage entails:

“Sooner let Earth, Air, Sea, to Chaos fall,
Men, Monkies, Lap-dog, Parrots perish all!”

Canto V becomes crucial in introducing the voice of female reason through the maid Clarissa who advocates good sense and submission to male desire in marriage rather than hostility. Look at this passage carefully.

“Since painted, or not painted, all shall fade,
 And she who scorns a Man, must die a Maid.
 What then remains, but well our Pow’r to use.
 And keep good Humour still what’vr we lose?
 And trust me Dear! Good Humour can prevail,
 When Airs, and Flights, and Screams and scolding fail
 Beauties in vain their pretty eyes may roll
 Charms strike the sight, but Men’t wins the soul.”

Belinda however discounts her advice and the social brawl begins, with Belinda defended by the pompous Sir Plume. As already mentioned, the poem ends with the epic denouement (the *deux-ex-machina*) through divine intervention by transforming the lock to a star.

2.5.7: Text of *The Rape of the Lock*

(With Annotations)

(Boldfaced Black Words Are Explained in the Notes)

Canto I

Stanza 1

What dire offence from am’rous causes springs,
What mighty contests rise from trivial things,
I sing—This verse to **CARYL, Muse!** is due:
 This, ev’n **Belinda** may vouchsafe to view:
 Slight is the subject, but not so the praise,
 If She inspire, and He approve my lays.
 Say what strange motive, Goddess!⁴ could compel
 A well-bred Lord t’ assault a gentle Belle?
 O say what stranger cause, yet unexplor’d,
 Could make a gentle Belle reject a Lord?

In tasks so bold, can little men engage,
 And in soft bosoms dwells such mighty Rage?
Sol thro' white **curtains** shot a **tim'rous** ray,
 And **oped** those eyes that **must eclipse the day**:
 Now **lap-dogs** give themselves the rousing shake,
 And sleepless lovers, just at twelve, awake:
 Thrice rung the bell, the slipper knock'd the ground,
 And the **press'd watch** return'd a silver sound.
 Belinda still her downy pillow prest,
 Her guardian **Sylph** prolong'd the balmy rest.
 'Twas He had summon'd to her silent bed
 The morning-dream that hover'd o'er her head;
 A Youth more glitt'ring than a **Birth-night** Beau,
 (That ev'n in slumber caus'd her cheek to glow)
 Seem'd to her ear his winning lips to lay,.....
 And thus in whispers said, or seem'd to say.

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Notes, Stanza 1

What . . . sing: I am writing (I sing) about a terrible offence resulting from an amorous cause. Clearly a mock-epic mode, but then, the greatest battles have always been fought over women as trophies!

Caryl, Muse: A friend of Pope, John Caryl, whom Pope addresses as the muse. An acquaintance of Caryl, Lord Petre, cut off a lock of hair of a young lady, Arabella Fermor. A quarrel erupted between the families. Caryl suggested that Pope write a poem to point up the silliness of the quarrel. Pope addresses Caryl as if he were a muse. Thus while Milton for instance invokes the Heavenly Muse to aid him in writing *Paradise Lost*, Pope's muse is a friend who actually commissioned him to write the poem to heal a tiff. Mock epic at its best.

Belinda: Arabella Fermor. Belinda is a poetic name associated with gentleness.

Goddess: Another reference to Caryl as the muse.

Sol: the sun

curtains: the curtains on Belinda's bed

tim'rous: timorous, meaning *shy*, *timid*

oped: opened

must eclipse the day: Belinda's eyes are so bright that they rival the brightness of the sun. Epic inflation on the one hand, and a genuine appreciation of beauty on the other. Repeatedly in this poem, you will find the neo-classic and the romantic aspects coalescing.

lap-dogs: dogs small enough to be held in the lap

press'd watch: a kind of clock. Pressing a button on it caused a bell to sound the current hour or quarter hour.

Sylph: fairy, sprite. The 1714 version of TROTL was unique in Pope's addition of the supernatural machinery which is essentially a feature of epic poetry. He derived this from the Rosicrucian doctrine as formulated by Le Comte de Gabalis in Germany in the 17th century. While we shall come to this in more detail in course of the poem, here the reference is to Belinda's guardian sylph Ariel, who controls all her motions, including even what she dreams!

Birth-night: evening celebration of a royal person's birthday

Stanza 2

Fairest of mortals, thou distinguish'd care

Of thousand bright Inhabitants of Air!

If e'er one vision touch'd thy infant thought,

Of all the Nurse and all the Priest have taught; 30

Of airy Elves by moonlight shadows seen,

The **silver token**, and the **circled green**,

Or virgins visited by Angel-pow'rs,

With golden crowns and wreaths of heav'nly flow'rs;

Hear and believe! thy own importance know,

Nor bound thy narrow views to things below.

Some secret truths, from learned pride conceal'd,

To Maids alone and Children are reveal'd:

What tho' no credit doubting Wits may give?

The Fair and Innocent shall still believe. 40

Know, then, unnumber'd Spirits round thee fly,

The light Militia of the lower sky:

These, tho' unseen, are ever on the wing,

Hang o'er the **Box**, and hover round the **Ring**.

Notes, Stanza 2

Fairest . . . Air: The youth in her dream (Line 23) addresses Belinda as the fairest mortal, saying she is watched over by a thousand sprites inhabiting the air.

silver token: coin left by a fairy as a gift for a favored mortal

Some . . . give: Certain secrets are revealed only to maidens like Belinda and to children, but not to highly educated people. Sceptics may doubt the truth of these secrets but Belinda and innocent children believe them. You can see in this the influence of nannies and bedtime stories.

Box, Ring: The spirits of the air hover around Belinda while she is in her theatre box or traveling in her carriage on a circular road (ring) in Hyde Park, a large park in the Westminster borough of London. So you see that in Pope's imagined world, a beauty like Belinda is never really 'alone', whether in private or public life.

Stanza 3

Think what an equipage thou hast in Air,

And view with scorn two Pages and a Chair.

As now your own, our beings were of old,

And once inclos'd in Woman's beauteous mould;

Thence, by a soft transition, we repair

From earthly Vehicles to these of air.

50

Think not, when Woman's transient breath is fled

That all her vanities at once are dead;

Succeeding vanities she still regards,

And tho' she plays no more, o'erlooks the cards.

Her joy in **gilded Chariots**, when alive,

And love of **Ombre**, after death survive.

For when the Fair in all their pride expire,

To their first Elements their Souls retire:

The **Sprites of fiery Termagants** in Flame

Mount up, and take a **Salamander's** name.

60

Soft yielding minds to Water glide away,

And sip, with Nymphs, their elemental Tea.

The graver Prude sinks downward to a Gnome,

In search of mischief still on Earth to roam.

The light Coquettes in Sylphs aloft repair,

And sport and flutter in the fields of Air.

Notes, Stanza 3

Think . . . Chair: You now have an army of sprites to look after you, not just two pages

As . . . air: The sprites were once women with beautiful forms. After death, they became spirits of the air. Notice how Pope uses the supernatural to formulate his cutting satire on feminine follies and vanities. Even the spirits have a hierarchy, just like Milton talks of angelology. The kind of nature one had when alive, and the kind of life one led on earth determines, according to Pope, the category of the supernatural into which a woman qualifies after death!

Think . . . dead: After a woman dies, she retains an interest in amusements. This is a supreme understatement of womanly vanity in terms that are almost Chaucerian, as in The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. Your counselor will point out the obvious similarities between the two poets.

gilded Chariots: splendid carriages to ride in

Ombre: a popular card game for three players in which only 40 of the 52 cards are dealt—the eights, nines, and tens are held back.

Sprites . . . Termagants: The spirits of quarrelsome, overbearing women.

Salamander: in myth, a lizard-like reptile that lived in fire; a spirit in the alchemy of Paracelsus (1493-1541), a Swiss physician

Soft yielding: Beginning here and continuing down to Line 66, the meaning is as follows: Other sprites live in water, keeping company with nymphs (minor goddess inhabiting the sea). Some sprites in the earth as gnomes (dwarflike creatures), and some of them live in the air.

Stanza 4

“Know further yet; whoever fair and chaste
Rejects mankind, is by some Sylph embrac’d:
For Spirits, freed from mortal laws, with ease
Assume what sexes and what shapes they please.

70

**What guards the purity of melting Maids,
In courtly balls, and midnight masquerades,
Safe from the treach’rous friend, the daring spark,
The glance by day, the whisper in the dark,
When kind occasion prompts their warm desires,
When music softens, and when dancing fires?
’Tis but their Sylph,** the wise Celestials know,
Tho’ Honour is the word with Men below.
Some nymphs there are, too conscious of their face,
For life predestin’d to the Gnomes’ embrace.
These swell their prospects and exalt their pride,
When offers are disdain’d, and love deny’d:
Then gay Ideas crowd the vacant brain,

80

While Peers, and Dukes, and all their sweeping train,
 And **Garters, Stars, and Coronets** appear,
 And in soft sounds, **Your Grace** salutes their ear.
 'Tis these that early taint the female soul,
 Instruct the eyes of young **Coquettes** to roll,
Teach Infant-cheeks a bidden blush to know,
 And little hearts to flutter at a Beau.

90

Notes, Stanza 4

What . . . Sylph: Sylphs (sprites) guard the purity of maidens from men who would take advantage of them.

daring spark: a bold gentleman; an aggressive beau

Some nymphs: From this phrase down to Line 90, the poem says that some sprites urge young ladies to be proud. In their vanity, these women refuse the offers of gentlemen.

Garters, Stars, and Coronets: the badges and other insignia of persons of high rank.

Your Grace: a member of the nobility. Although the phrase is in second-person point of view, it is to be read in third-person point of view as if it says, "His Grace."

Coquettes: flirtatious women

Teach . . . blush: Teach young ladies to wear rouge. The artificiality of Belinda's society is amply brought out by the fact that a blush, rather than being a natural response, can be made out at one's bidding!

Stanza 5

Oft, when the world imagine women stray,
 The Sylphs thro' mystic mazes guide their way,
 Thro' all the giddy circle they pursue,
 And old impertinence expel by new.

What tender maid but must a victim fall.
 To one man's treat, but for another's ball?
 When **Florio** speaks what virgin could withstand,
 If gentle **Damon** did not squeeze her hand?
 With varying vanities, from ev'ry part,
 They shift the moving Toyshop of their heart; 100
Where wigs with wigs, with sword-knots sword-knots strive,
Beaux banish beaux, and coaches coaches drive.
This erring mortals Levity may call;
Oh blind to truth! the Sylphs contrive it all.
Of these am I, who thy protection claim,
 A watchful sprite, and Ariel is my name.
 Late, as I **rang'd** the crystal wilds of air,
 In the clear Mirror of thy ruling Star
 I saw, alas! some dread event impend,
 Ere to the main this morning sun descend, 110
 But heav'n reveals not what, or how, or where:
 Warn'd by the Sylph, oh pious maid, beware!
 This to disclose is all thy guardian can:
 Beware of all, but most beware of Man!"

Notes, Stanza 5

Florio, Damon: Names commonly used in poetry in Pope's time the way we use Tom, Dick, and Harry—or John Doe—today. On the face of it, they do not refer to a specific person but to men in general. Of course Pope is talking about elegant fops who would spend their days at cards or coffee tables and in company of flirtatious women, carrying on each others' soft skills at persuasion without yielding!

Where . . . drive: The young gentlemen are vying for the attention of the young ladies.

sword-knots: A sword knot was a loop of fabric or leather attached to the handle of a sword. A swordsman placed the loop around his wrist as a support for maintaining his grip. Some sword knots were intended only as ornaments. Notice the diminution from the scale of epic battles insofar as weapons are concerned.

Beaux: plural of beau

This . . . all: Humans are wrong to think that young women are responsible for their frivolous and flirtatious behavior (levity). The truth is that sprites cause this behavior. There is supreme understatement in this. Logical, rational human beings can hardly comprehend the world of feminine follies and charms....that is Pope's frivolous idea.

Of these: Beginning with this phrase and continuing down to Line 114, Belinda's guardian sprite introduces himself as Ariel, then discloses that a dreadful event is about to happen. He does not know what will occur, or how or where, but warns Belinda to beware.

rang'd: ranged

Stanza 6

He said; when **Shock**, who thought she slept too long,

Leap'd up, and wak'd his mistress with his tongue.

'Twas then, Belinda, if report say true,

Thy eyes first open'd on a **Billet-doux**;

Wounds, Charms, and Ardors were no sooner read,

But all the Vision vanish'd from thy head.

120

And now, unveil'd, the **Toilet** stands display'd,

Each silver Vase in mystic order laid.

First, rob'd in white, the Nymph intent adores,

With head uncover'd, the Cosmetic pow'rs.

A heav'nly image in the glass appears,

To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears;

Th' inferior Priestess, at her altar's side,

Trembling begins the sacred rites of Pride.
 Unnumber'd treasures ope at once, and here
 The various off'rings of the world appear; 130
 From each she nicely culls with curious toil,
 And **decks the Goddess with the glitt'ring spoil.**
 This **casket** India's glowing gems unlocks,
 And all Arabia breathes from yonder box.
 The **Tortoise** here and **Elephant** unite,
 Transformed to combs, the speckled, and the white.
 Here files of pins extend their shining rows,
 Puffs, Powders, Patches, **Bibles**, Billet-doux.
Now awful Beauty puts on all its arms;
 The fair each moment rises in her charms, 140
 Repairs her smiles, awakens ev'ry grace,
 And calls forth all the wonders of her face;
 Sees by degrees a purer blush arise,
 And keener lightnings quicken in her eyes.
 The busy Sylphs surround their darling care,
 These set the head, and those divide the hair,
 Some fold the sleeve, whilst others plait the gown:
 And Betty's prais'd for labours not her own.

Notes, Stanza 6

Shock: Belinda's dog.

Billet-doux: love letter. From the French *billet* (*note, letter*) and *doux* (*sweet*). The French pronunciation is be yay DOO; the English pronunciation is BIL ay DOO.

Toilet: dressing table or dressing room. It is a curious life indeed where a woman wakes up nearly at mid-day to cast her eyes on a 'love' letter!

Th' inferior Priestess: Servant, maid. Betty by name.

decks . . . spoil: adorns Belinda with jewels and other ornaments. It is worth remembering that by this time England was emerging as a colonial power with economic interests in Asia and Africa. A careful perusal of the items of Belinda's toilet will reveal that it contains in miniature the best of England's colonial dominions.

casket: box, case.

Tortoise: The shell of a tortoise was used in making combs.

Elephant: Reference to ivory.

Bibles: Small Bibles were fashionable accessories on ladies' dressing tables. The epic parallel to warfare is nowhere better evident than in this line. All the items in Belinda's dressing box would also be items that could be found in a soldier's kit bag, when on duty in the battle field. Of course, the uses vary for a woman like Belinda and a soldier. Interestingly, pages of the Bible also found good use as curlers for women's hair do!

Now . . . arms: Here begins an epic convention, a warrior putting on his armor. In this case, of course, it is a woman putting on her clothes in preparation for vying in the battle of the sexes.

Canto II

Stanza 1

Not with more glories, in th' ethereal plain,

The Sun first rises o'er the purpled main,

Than, issuing forth, the rival of his beams

Launch'd on the bosom of the silver Thames.

Fair Nymphs, and well-drest Youths around her shone.

But ev'ry eye was fix'd on her alone.

On her white breast a sparkling Cross she wore,

Which Jews might kiss, and Infidels adore.

Her lively looks a sprightly mind disclose,

Quick as her eyes, and as unfix'd as those:

Favours to none, to all she smiles extends;

Oft she rejects, but never once offends.
 Bright as the sun, her eyes the gazers strike,
 And, like the sun, they shine on all alike.
 Yet graceful ease, and sweetness void of pride,
 Might hide her faults, if Belles had faults to hide:
 If to her share some female errors fall,
 Look on her face, and you'll forget 'em all.

Notes, Stanza 1

Not . . . plain: Here begins an epic convention, the great voyage. In this case, Belinda is traveling in a boat on the Thames River with youths and guardian sprites. They all look so glorious that they rival the sunshine. Pope's enthusiasm in describing the gorgeous beauty of Belinda (there is no denying that she is beautiful, charms or no charms) can find a parallel only in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, where we have Enobarbus' description of Cleopatra on the barge. You need to see the number of times that the sun becomes a metaphor/competitor for Belinda's beauty; and not the moon which is conventionally the parameter of a woman's beauty. Clearly, Pope's idea is that Belinda's beauty has the power to outrival the sun, which is the source of all light and life.

Which . . . kiss: An offensive line that is out of place in an otherwise delightful poem. But then, the dig on religion should not also escape notice.

Stanza 2

This Nymph, to the destruction of mankind,
 Nourish'd two Locks, which graceful hung behind. 20
 In equal curls, and well conspir'd to deck
 With shining ringlets the smooth iv'ry neck.
Love in these labyrinths his slaves detains,
 And mighty hearts are held in slender chains.
With hairy springes we the birds betray,
Slight lines of hair surprise the finny prey,

Fair tresses man's imperial race ensnare,

And beauty draws us with a single hair.

Th' advent'rous Baron the bright locks admir'd;

He saw, he wish'd, and to the prize aspir'd. 30

Resolv'd to win, he meditates the way,

By force to ravish, or by fraud betray;

For when success a Lover's toil attends,

Few ask, if fraud or force attain'd his ends.

Notes, Stanza 2

Love . . . detains: Young men fall in love with her glorious curls (labyrinths) of hair, becoming slaves to her beauty. Noticeably, love is trivialized here in being equated with what is really infatuation.

With . . . ensnare: Just as we catch game birds in snares and fish ("finny prey") in nets, Belinda catches men with her hair.

springes: traps, snares

finny: having fins

Stanza 3

For this, ere **Phoebus** rose, **he** had implor'd.

Propitious heav'n, and ev'ry pow'r ador'd,

But chiefly Love—to **Love an Altar built,**

Of twelve vast French Romances, neatly gilt.

There lay three garters, half a pair of gloves;

And all the trophies of his former loves; 40

With tender Billet-doux he lights the pyre,

And breathes three am'rous sighs to raise the fire.

Then prostrate falls, and begs with ardent eyes

Soon to obtain, and long possess the prize:

The pow'rs gave ear, and granted half his pray'r,

The rest, the winds dispers'd in empty air.

Notes, Stanza 3

Phoebus: Apollo, the sun god. *Phoebus* means *bright one*. In Greek mythology, Phoebus Apollo became the sun, driving his golden chariot across the sky. Thus, *Phoebus* became a synonym for *sun*.

he: the baron (mentioned in Line 29).

to . . . built: From here down to Line 46, the poem says the baron places mementoes of young ladies of his acquaintance on an altar. Then he burns them in a “funeral” fire (pyre) fueled with love letters; he is offering a sacrifice that the gods may grant his wish to obtain locks of Belinda’s hair.

Stanza 4

But now secure the painted vessel glides,
 The sun-beams trembling on the floating tides:
 While melting music steals upon the sky,
 And soften’d sounds along the waters die; 50
 Smooth flow the waves, the **Zephyrs** gently play,
 Belinda smil’d, and all the world was gay.
 All but the **Sylph**—with careful thoughts opprest,
 Th’ impending woe sat heavy on his breast.
He summons strait his Denizens of air;
The lucid squadrons round the sails repair:
 Soft o’er the **shrouds** aerial whispers breathe,
 That seem’d but Zephyrs to the train beneath.
 Some to the sun their insect-wings unfold,
 Waft on the breeze, or sink in clouds of gold; 60
 Transparent forms, too fine for mortal sight,
 Their fluid bodies half dissolv’d in light,
 Loose to the wind their airy garments flew,
 Thin glitt’ring textures of the filmy dew,

Dipt in the richest tincture of the skies,
 Where **light disports in ever-mingling dyes,**
While ev'ry beam new transient colours flings,
 Colours that change whene'er they wave their wings.
 Amid the circle, on the gilded mast,
 Superior by the head, was Ariel plac'd;
 His purple **pinions** op'ning to the sun,
 He rais'd his azure wand, and thus begun.

70

Notes, Stanza 4

Zephyrs: west winds or soft breezes.

Sylph: Ariel

He . . . repair: Ariel summons his helpers, and they gather around Belinda.

shrouds: ropes or wires attached to a mast and secured on the sides of a ship.
 They keep the mast steady.

light . . . flings: The light displays a variety of colors.

disports: plays; amuses itself

pinions: wings

Stanza 5

Ye Sylphs and **Sylphids**, to your chief give ear!
 Fays, Fairies, Genii, Elves, and Daemons, hear!
Ye know the spheres and various tasks assign'd
 By laws eternal to th' aerial kind.
 Some in the fields of purest Aether play,
 And bask and whiten in the blaze of day.
 Some guide the course of wand'ring orbs on high,
 Or roll the planets thro' the boundless sky.
 Some less refin'd, beneath the moon's pale light

80

Pursue the stars that shoot athwart the night,
 Or suck the mists in grosser air below,
 Or dip their pinions in the painted bow,
 Or brew fierce tempests on the wintry main,
 Or o'er the **glebe** distil the kindly rain.
 Others on earth o'er human race preside,
 Watch all their ways, and all their actions guide:
 Of these the chief the care of Nations own,
 And guard with Arms divine the British Throne.

90

Notes, Stanza 5

Sylphids: Female sylphs, female sprites

Ye know: From this phrase down to Line 90, Ariel describes the tasks assigned to the various kinds of sprites. The deliberate trivializing that Pope does with the use of the divine machinery reaches its nadir when we are told that these supernatural creatures are even entrusted with the protection of the British throne! This is indeed social satire at its best.

glebe: earth

Stanza 6

Our humbler province is to tend the Fair,
 Not a less pleasing, tho' less glorious care;
 To save the powder from too rude a gale,
 Nor let th' imprison'd-essences exhale;
 To draw fresh colours from the vernal flow'rs;
 To steal from rainbows e'er they drop in show'rs
 A brighter **wash**; to curl their waving hairs,
 Assist their blushes, and inspire their airs;
 Nay oft, in dreams, invention we bestow,
 To change a **Flounce**, or add a **Furbelow**.

100

This day, black Omens threat the brightest Fair,
 That e'er deserv'd a watchful spirit's care;
 Some dire disaster, or by force, or slight;
 But what, or where, the fates have wrapt in night.
 Whether the nymph shall break **Diana's law**,
 Or some frail China jar receive a flaw;
 Or stain her honour or her new brocade;
 Forget her pray'rs, or miss a masquerade;
 Or lose her heart, or necklace, at a ball;
 Or whether Heav'n has doom'd that Shock must fall. 110
 Haste, then, ye spirits! to your charge repair:
 The flutt'ring fan be **Zephyretta's** care;
 The drops to thee, **Brillante**, we consign;
 And, **Momentilla**, let the watch be thine;
 Do thou, **Crispissa**, tend her fav'rite Lock;
 Ariel himself shall be the guard of **Shock**.

Notes, Stanza 6

Our humbler province: From this phrase down to Line 100, Ariel tells his sprites that one of their jobs is to tend to the needs of fair ladies—to keep their powders and perfumes in place, to curl their hair, to put color in their cheeks, etc.

wash: skin lotion

Flounce: frill or ruffle

Furbelow: also a ruffle or any other ornament

Diana's law: the law of Diana (Greek name, *Artemis*), Apollo's twin sister and the virgin goddess of chastity. This law required young women to maintain their chastity. The convoluted scale of values is evident here as nowhere before, through a series of condensed sentences that equate a woman's chastity at par with her make up or even the breaking of a bone china crockery – all of which are preserved by the divine machinery alone.

Zephyretta: Sprite in charge of regulating the wind generated by a fan.

drops: earrings.

Brillante: Sprite in charge of earrings

Momentilla: Sprite in charge of watching the time

Crispissa: Sprite in charge of guarding Belinda's favorite lock of hair.

Shock: Belinda's dog.

Stanza 7

To fifty chosen Sylphs, of special note,
 We trust th' important charge, the Petticoat:
 Oft have we known that seven-fold fence to fail,
 Tho' stiff with hoops, and arm'd with ribs of whale; 120
 Form a strong line about the silver bound,
 And guard the wide circumference around.
 Whatever spirit, careless of his charge,
 His post neglects, or leaves the fair at large,
 Shall feel sharp vengeance soon o'ertake his sins,
 Be stopp'd in vials, or transfix'd with pins;
 Or plung'd in lakes of bitter washes lie,
 Or wedg'd whole ages in a bodkin's eye:
 Gums and **Pomatums** shall his flight restrain,
 While clogg'd he beats his silken wings in vain; 130
 Or Alum **styptics** with contracting pow'r
 Shrink his thin essence like a rivell'd flow'r:
 Or, as **Ixion** fix'd, the wretch shall feel
 The giddy motion of the whirling **Mill**,
 In fumes of burning Chocolate shall glow,
 And tremble at the sea that froths below!

He spoke; the spirits from the sails descend;
 Some, orb in orb, around the nymph extend;
 Some **thrid** the **mazy** ringlets of her hair;
 Some hang upon the pendants of her ear: 140
 With beating hearts the dire event they wait,
 Anxious, and trembling for the birth of Fate.

Notes, Stanza 7

Pomatums: ointments

styptics: preparations that stop bleeding

rivel'ed: shriveled, shrunken

Ixion: In Greek mythology, King of Lapithae, who dared to fall in love with Hera, queen of the gods and wife of Zeus. To punish him, Zeus had him tied in Hades to a wheel that revolved nonstop.

Mill: chocolate mill. Could also topically mean rumour mill.

thrid: threaded

mazy: like a maze

Canto III

Stanza 1

Close by those **meads**, for ever crown'd with flow'rs,
 Where Thames with pride surveys his rising tow'rs,
 There stands a **structure** of majestic frame,
 Which from the neighb'ring Hampton takes its name.
 Here Britain's statesmen oft the fall foredoom.
 Of foreign Tyrants and of Nymphs at home;
 Here thou, great **Anna!** **whom three** realms obey.
 Dost sometimes counsel take—and sometimes Tea.
 Hither the heroes and the nymphs resort,

To taste awhile the pleasures of a Court; 10
 In various talk th' instructive hours they past,
 Who gave the ball, or paid the visit last;
 One speaks the glory of the British Queen,
 And one describes a charming Indian screen;
 A third interprets motions, looks, and eyes;
At ev'ry word a reputation dies.
 Snuff, or the fan, supply each pause of chat,
 With singing, laughing, ogling, and _all that.

Notes, Stanza 1

meads: meadows

structure: the royal palace at Hampton Court

Anna . . . three: Anne (1665-1714), queen of England, Scotland, and Ireland from 1702 to 1714.

At . . . dies: There was much gossip at the court, the infinite range of which can well be gauged from the parameters that Pope here talks of. TROTL is among other things, explicitly a society poem in the Augustan neo-classical vein, and the casual indifference of the foppish gallantry as also the women of 'refined' tastes can well be evidenced here.

Stanza 2

Meanwhile, declining from the noon of day,
 The sun obliquely shoots his burning ray; 20
 The hungry Judges soon the sentence sign,
 And wretches hang that jury-men may dine;
 The merchant from th' Exchange returns in peace,
 And the long labours of the Toilet cease.
 Belinda now, whom thirst of fame invites,
 Burns to encounter **two advent'rous Knights**,

At **Ombre** singly to decide their doom;
 And swells her breast with conquests yet to come.
Straight the three bands prepare in arms to join,
Each band the number of the sacred nine. 30
 Soon as she spreads her hand, th' aerial guard
 Descend, and sit on each important card:
 First Ariel perch'd upon a **Matadore**,
 Then each, according to the rank they bore;
 For Sylphs, yet mindful of their ancient race,
 Are, as when women, wondrous fond of place.
 Behold, four Kings in majesty rever'd,
 With **hoary whiskers** and a forky beard;
 And four fair Queens whose hands sustain a flow'r,
 Th' expressive emblem of their softer pow'r; 40
 Four Knaves in garbs succinct, a trusty band,
 Caps on their heads, and **halberts** in their hand;
 And particolour'd troops, a shining train,
 Draw forth to combat on the velvet plain.

Notes, Stanza 2

two . . . Ombre: Ombre requires three players. Here, Belinda will vie with two gentlemen. Interestingly, she is the challenger here. These lines could be a revealing commentary on gender relations in contemporary elite social circles.

Straight . . . join: Here begins an epic convention, the battle.

Each . . . nine: In Greek mythology, the nine muses of Mount Olympus. The cards, dealt in groups, correspond in number to the nine muses in Greek mythology.

Matadore (also Matador): card of the highest value in ombre

hoary whiskers: gray mustaches

halberts (also *halberds* or *halbards*): A halbert was a weapon with a shaft five

to six feet long topped by a pike, or spearhead, and below the pike an axe blade.
A warrior could thrust with a halbert, as with a spear, or hack, as with a battle-axe.

Stanza 3

The skillful Nymph reviews her force with care:
Let Spades be trumps! she said, and trumps they were.
Now move to war her sable Matadores,
In show like leaders of the swarthy Moors.

Spadillo first, unconquerable Lord!

Led off two captive trumps, and swept the board. 50

As many more **Manillo** forc'd to yield,
And march'd a victor from the verdant field.
Him **Basto** follow'd, but his fate more hard
Gain'd but one trump and one **Plebeian** card.

With his broad sabre next, a chief in years,
The hoary Majesty of Spades appears,
Puts forth one manly leg, to sight reveal'd,
The rest, his many-colour'd robe conceal'd.
The rebel **Knave**, who dares his prince engage,

Proves the just victim of his royal rage. 60

Ev'n mighty Pam, that Kings and Queens o'erthrew
And mow'd down armies in the fights of **Lu**,
Sad chance of war! now destitute of aid,
Falls undistinguish'd by the victor spade!
Thus far both armies to Belinda yield;
Now to the Baron fate inclines the field.

His warlike Amazon her host invades,
Th' imperial consort of the crown of Spades.
The Club's black Tyrant first her victim dy'd,
Spite of his haughty **mien**, and barb'rous pride: 70

What boots the regal circle on his head,
 His giant limbs, in state unwieldy spread;
 That long behind he trails his pompous robe,
 And, of all monarchs, only grasps the **globe**?

Notes, Stanza 3

Spadillo: ace of spades

Manillo: two of spades, a card of high value

Basto: ace of clubs, card with third-highest value

Plebeian: card of little value

Knave: jack

Pam: jack of clubs **Lu**: Loo, a card game in which the jack of clubs had the highest value

mien: manner

What boots the regal circle: what good is the regal circle

globe: golden ball which, along with a scepter, was an emblem of royal power

Stanza 4

The Baron now his Diamonds pours apace;
 Th' embroider'd King who shows but half his face,
 And his refulgent Queen, with pow'rs combin'd
 Of broken troops an easy conquest find.
 Clubs, Diamonds, Hearts, in wild disorder seen,
 With throngs promiscuous strow the level green.
 Thus when dispers'd a routed army runs,
 Of Asia's troops, and Afric's sable sons,
 With like confusion different nations fly,
 Of various habit, and of various dye,
 The pierc'd battalions dis-united fall,

In heaps on heaps; one fate o'erwhelms them all.
 The Knave of Diamonds tries his wily arts,
 And wins (oh shameful chance!) the Queen of Hearts.
 At this, the blood the virgin's cheek forsook,
 A livid paleness spreads o'er all her look; 90
 She sees, and trembles at th' approaching ill,
 Just in the jaws of ruin, and Codille.
 And now (as oft in some distemper'd State)
 On one nice Trick depends the gen'ral fate.
 An Ace of Hearts steps forth: The King unseen
 Lurk'd in her hand, and mourn'd his captive Queen:
 He springs to Vengeance with an eager pace,
 And falls like thunder on the prostrate Ace.
 The nymph exulting fills with shouts the sky;
 The walls, the woods, and long canals reply. 100

Notes, Stanza 4

strow: archaic form of *strew*. This and the next line are strikingly redolent of Milton's description of the fallen angels in the lake of molten lava after their defeat in the battle against God in *Paradise Lost*, Bk 1. Also interesting are the images of colour that Pope uses to talk of the fallen cards – the insinuation is directly to England's colonial subjects. From this point of view TROTL could also be studied as a text that shows early traces of postcolonial thought in a metaphoric way. Your counselor will definitely tell you more on this.

Codille: A development in which the challenger failed to win the necessary cards. On the next play, Belinda wins the game. There are also traces of possible feminist historiographical study in the fluctuating fortunes of Belinda in the game of ombre. Here it is a male card that comes to the rescue of the female card, and thereby of Belinda too. The exultant shout she ensues forth however comes for a bit of spat from Pope, as his chastising remarks in the next stanza will show.

long canals: The canals on the grounds of Hampton Court

Stanza 5

Oh thoughtless mortals! ever blind to fate,
 Too soon dejected, and too soon elate.
 Sudden, these honours shall be snatch'd away,
 And curs'd for ever this victorious day.
 For lo! the board with cups and spoons is crown'd,
 The **berries crackle**, and the mill turns round;
 On shining **Altars of Japan** they raise
 The silver lamp; the fiery spirits blaze:
 From silver spouts the grateful liquors glide,
 While **China's earth receives the smoking tide:** 110
 At once they gratify their scent and taste,
 And frequent cups prolong the rich repast.
 Straight hover round the Fair her airy band;
 Some, as she sipp'd, the fuming liquor fann'd,
 Some o'er her lap their careful plumes display'd,
 Trembling, and conscious of the rich brocade.
 Coffee, (which makes the politician wise,
 And see thro' all things with his half-shut eyes)
 Sent up in vapours to the Baron's brain
 New Stratagems, the radiant Lock to gain. 120
 Ah cease, rash youth! desist ere't is too late,
 Fear the just Gods, and think of **Scylla's Fate!**
Chang'd to a bird, and sent to flit in air,
She dearly pays for Nisus' injur'd hair!

Notes, Stanza 5

berries crackle: The coffee beans crackle when roasted on the mill.

Altars of Japan: tables coated with varnish made from a substance of a Japanese tree of the cashew family.

China's . . . tide: The china coffee cups receive the steaming coffee.

Scylla's . . . hair: In Greek mythology, Scylla betrayed her father, Nisus, King of Megara, by cutting off a lock of his hair—a purple lock with magical powers that safeguarded him and his kingdom. Scylla did so because she was in love with her father's enemy, King Minos of Crete, who was attacking Megara. Nisus died and was changed into a sea eagle. Scylla later drowned and was changed into a sea bird that was chased by the eagle. Pope here evokes the classical parallel as a word of caution for the Baron who has been eyeing Belinda's lock of hair. In the process, Belinda is once again given added dimensions.

Stanza 6

But when to mischief mortals bend their will,
 How soon they find fit instruments of ill!
 Just then, Clarissa drew with tempting grace
 A two-edg'd **weapon** from her shining case:
 So Ladies in Romance assist their Knight,
 Present the spear, and arm him for the fight. 130
 He takes the gift with rev'rence, and extends
 The little engine on his fingers' ends;
 This just behind Belinda's neck he spread,
 As o'er the **fragrant steams** she bends her head.
 Swift to the Lock a thousand Sprites repair,
 A thousand wings, by turns, blow back the hair;
 And thrice they twitch'd the diamond in her ear;
 Thrice she look'd back, and thrice the foe drew near.
 Just in that instant, anxious Ariel sought
 The close recesses of the Virgin's thought; 140
 As on the **nosegay** in her breast reclin'd,
 He watch'd th' Ideas rising in her mind,
 Sudden he view'd, in spite of all her art,

An earthly Lover lurking at her heart.
 Amaz'd, confus'd, he found his pow'r expir'd,
 Resign'd to fate, and with a sigh retir'd.

Notes, Stanza 6

fragrant steams: steam from the hot coffee

weapon: scissors. Another instance of the use of hyperboles to achieve the effect of comic deflation. An ordinary pair of scissors becomes a weapon or a little engine, later a glittering forfex! The power of steel will be spoken of later. The obvious association is with the weapons of a deadly battle. Notice the reversal of roles. In the Toilet scene Belinda was arming for 'battle'; now she is about to be 'vanquished'. By locating an earthly lover lurking in her heart, Pope nonetheless gives human dimensions to Belinda – over and above all her artificiality.

nosegay: small bouquet of flowers

Stanza 7

The Peer now spreads the glitt'ring **Forfex** wide,
 T' inclose the Lock; now joins it, to divide.
 Ev'n then, before the fatal engine clos'd,
 A wretched Sylph too fondly interpos'd; 150
 Fate urg'd the shears, and cut the Sylph in twain,
 (But airy substance soon unites again)
 The meeting points the sacred hair dissever
 From the fair head, for ever, and for ever!
 Then flash'd the living lightning from her eyes,
 And screams of horror rend th' affrighted skies.
 Not louder shrieks to pitying heav'n are cast,
 When husbands, or when lapdogs breathe their last;
 Or when rich China vessels fall'n from high,
 In glitt'ring dust and painted fragments lie! 160
 Let wreaths of triumph now my temples twine

(The victor cry'd) the glorious Prize is mine!
 While fish in streams, or birds delight in air,
 Or in a coach and six the British Fair,
 As long as **Atalantis** shall be read,
 Or the small pillow grace a Lady's bed,
 While visits shall be paid on solemn days,
 When num'rous wax-lights in bright order blaze,
 While nymphs take treats, or assignations give,
 So long my honour, name, and praise shall live! 170
 What Time would spare, from **Steel receives** its date,
 And monuments, like men, submit to fate!
 Steel could the labour of the Gods destroy,
 And **strike to dust th' imperial tow'rs of Troy**;
 Steel could the works of mortal pride confound,
 And hew **triumphal arches** to the ground.
 What wonder then, fair nymph! thy hairs should feel,
 The conqu'ring force of unresisted steel?

Notes, Stanza 7

The Peer: the baron

Forfex: Latin for *scissors*

Atalantis: Reference to *The New Atlantis*, a popular gossip novel by Mary de la Riviere Manley (1663-1724). It alluded to real-life scandals.

Steel receives: From this phrase down to Line 178, the poem tells of the power of steel to endure, to destroy the work of gods and men, and, of course, to trim a lock of hair.

strike . . . Troy: In the Trojan War, the Greeks—using swords and spears of steel—slaughtered the Trojans and destroyed their city after gaining entry to the city inside a wooden horse.

triumphal arches: arches built to honor and memorialise great men and heroes.

2.5.8: Satire in *The Rape of the Lock*

While the poem is an exquisite work of beauty, Pope raises significant satirical points within it. You have already seen that satire occupied a significant space in eighteenth century poetry. So what are the components of this satire?

- **SATIRE ON WOMEN** The first major subject of satire is Belinda and through her the ‘little unguarded follies’ of women. While Belinda’s beauty is praised, her narcissistic obsession with her own self is subtly criticised. The way she treats her toilette as a ritual and the way in which she uses her beauty to flirt and attract the attention of several beaux at the same time is strongly ridiculed. Consider the lines that seem to suggest that women have little intelligence:

“Then gay ideas crowd the vacant Brain
While Peers and Dukes, and all their sweeping Train
And Granters, Stars and Coronets appear,
And in soft sounds, Your Grace salutes their ear.”

Belinda’s dressing table is described as a moral muddle where Bibles and *billet doux* coexist. The flirtations nature of Belinda is brilliantly expressed:

“Her lively looks a sprightly mind disclose,
Quick as her Eyes and a unfix’d as those
Favours to none, to all she smiles extends,
Off she rejects, but never once offends.”

Her heart is then categorised as a moving toyshop. Female sexuality and desire are seen as socially chaotic and therefore must be contained through Clarissa’s speech. Also note that Belinda is not alone – through the sylphs Pope suggests that all women are obsessed by looks, beauty and coquettishness. Working deep within this poem is the idea of the *femme fatale* – the fatal woman who circulates desire and causes social destruction. Many critics have thus argued that Pope is subtly satirising the battle of the sexes – the Baron and Belinda represent men and women in society vying in a struggle for power.

- **SATIRE ON ARISTOCRATIC SOCIETY:** Another major target of satire of Pope is the aristocratic society of the contemporary England. Through *Belinda* and *Hampton Court*, Pope presents society as characterized by idleness, gossip and a life of leisure, card-games and tea. That a trivial incident might provoke a social brawl is also an indictment. Consider Pope's description of courtly society:

“Either the heroes and the Nymphs resort,
To taste awhile the Pleasures of the Court
In various Talk th’ instructive hours they past
Who grace the Ball, or paid the visit last
One speaks the glory of the British queen
And one describes a charming Indian Screen
A third interprets Motions, looks and Eyes
At Ev’ry word a Reputation dies
Surf or the Fan, supply each Pause of Chat
With singing, laughing, ogling and all that”

Notice how this idle world is contrasted with the hard working world of the merchant who ‘from the Exchange returns in Peace’ and the unfortunate wretches who “hang so that Jury men may dine.”

The mock heroic becomes critical here – in elevating this idle world and activity to a heroic level, Pope seems to underscore its sterility. Given that Pope was the son of a linen draper, would he have viewed this idle world with scorn? Or do we locate a deep ambiguity here – he is critical of this world, but the brilliance of the language suggests he is half in love with it? Can you notice a similarity with Pope's treatment of *Belinda*?

2.5.9: Key Issues

➤ **Approaches to Colonialism**

While reading the poem you must have been fascinated with the sheer material quality of Pope's poem. Just consider the number of objects he describes - the ‘watch with

the Silver sound', the 'heavenly glass' and so on. These passages seem suggestive. Belinda's dressing table seems to be a veritable catalogue of the resources that colonial England seemed to have plundered from its various colonies:

“This Casket **India**'s glowing Gems unlocks
And all **Arabia** breathes from Yonder box
The **tortoise** here and the **Elephant** unite.”

Note also the elaborate ceremony of tea drinking – the tables are made of the 'shining Altars of Japan' (lacquered tables), the tea is poured from 'China's Earth' (Porcelain) and both tea and coffee were products of rampant colonialism. Through both these ceremonies, the extent of London as a hub of colonial riches is underscored.

If you carefully notice, beneath the brilliant edifice of the poem lies a subtle menace of violence. Is this violence merely about the violation of the 'black lock of hair' or the female body? Or is it an allusion to the violence of the colonial powers against the colonies? Take a close look at the fair Belinda as she steps out:

“On her white Breast, a sparkling Cross she wore
Which Jews might kiss and Infidels Adore”

Does Belinda's white breast signify the Western white (European) power with its Christian overtones overwhelming the colonies of Infidels?

In that case what is Pope's attitude to colonialism? Pope seems to validate the process, celebrating the wealth and power that it brings to England. What is interesting is Pope's celebration of Belinda's world as one of iridescent light while darkness is associated with chaos and gloom. Contrast Pope's attitude with that of Jonathan Swift who ruthlessly criticises the process of colonialism and violence in *Gulliver's Travels*. Stewart Crehan points out:

Perhaps, then, we should focus our attention on those elements in *The Rape of the Lock* that point forwards, rather than those that seem to shore up the social and aesthetic ideology of their historical moment. In showing us how, in the doubly-inverted order of mercantile-capitalist society, people are turned into objects and objects rule people; how metaphor is deconstructed into metonymy, and how female beauty, like any commodity or desirable piece of property, is invested with the reified and ultimately violent and destructive values of bourgeois society.

Laura Brown, while noting that Belinda's world is one "in which objects have taken over all the meaning," indicts Pope for not showing us the "real" Belinda: "Belinda's beauty can only be seen through the commodities that she wears; the question of whether there is a real beauty, or a real Belinda, behind those spoils remains unanswered."

There were dissenting voices like Jonathan Swift who in *Gullivers Travels* bitterly critiqued European colonialism as a savage display of the enormous greed. However, for the majority of the English writers, colonialism was a positive force that brought prosperity and virility to the nation. We have already seen that for Andrew Freeport in Addison's *The Spectator Papers* the sea is the "British common" and Defoe's novels offer a great justification of the colonial project morally reforming potential criminals. Thus Jack in *Colonel Jack* or Moll Flaunders, Defoe's eponymous heroines undergo complete transformations through the colonial project.^v

❖ THE STATUS OF WOMEN:

At the heart of the poem lies Pope's presentation of the status of women in eighteenth century society. Female education was severely restricted and female sexuality was scrutinised with significant anxiety. Pope's text seems to reiterate these anxieties, using the incident of Arabella Fermor as a point of entry. If you look carefully, Pope presents several versions of female subjectivity. Firstly there is the version of Thalestris in Canto IV – the Amazonian woman who provokes violence and aggression and causes social chaos.

"To Arms, to Arms! The Fierce Virago Cries
And swift as lightening to the Combate flies."

The second version is that of the hysterical feminine, marked by bouts of depression ("The nymphet in beauteous grief appears / Her eyes half languishing") or hysteria ("sighs, sobs and passions"). It is this version that Pope describes in the Cave of Spleen in Canto IV.

The third version that Belinda articulates is that of the coquettish feminine who is willing to circulate her desire and sexuality, but unwilling to surrender herself in marriage. The most serious satire of this poem seems to critique this position. It is

merely because of a moral concern of the woman locked in a fantasy of narcissism or is it a larger manifestation of the male anxiety over female power? Ultimately the poem must thus reduce the female subject to control and governance of male authority through the institution of marriage.

It is this position of passive womanhood that the poem seems to argue for and Clarissa's speech seem to be the voice of Pope. Clarissa reduces beauty to a transitory phase and argues about the validity Good Sense and Good Nature, the binaries of Amazonian or the hysterical womanhood.

“And trust me Dear! Good Humour can prevail,
When Airs, and Flights, and Screams and scolding fail
Beauties in vain their pretty eyes may roll
Charms strike the sight, but Men't wins the soul.”

It is thus Clarissa has been seen as a surrogate voice of the poet and her speech apparently delivers the moral of the poem. Any such simple hypothesis can however be problematic because Clarissa is a more complex character. After all, it is she who hands over the scissors to the Baron just before she cuts off Belinda's hair. Why do you think she does this? Is this the hostility between the prude and the coquette? Do we notice an undercurrent in Clarissa, a jealousy about Belinda's beauty or a hostility fed upon the difference in social class? These questions leave a rich ambiguity about the meaning of the poem.

This wider range of poetic possibilities can be glimpsed in Pope's "Epitaph. On Mrs. Corbet, Who Dyed of a Cancer in her Breast". This is a poem you can read when you are reading the text of *The Rape of the Lock*. Note how Pope describes the 'good' woman:

Here rests a Woman, good without pretence,
Blest with plain Reason, and with sober Sense:
No Conquests she, but o'er herself desir'd,
No Arts essay'd, but not to be admir'd.
Passion and Pride were to her soul unknown,
Convinc'd, that virtue only is our own.

So unaffected, so compos'd a mind,
 So firm yet soft, so strong yet so refin'd,

Elsewhere in the *Epistle to a Lady*, for example, we find two such epigrammatic paragraphs :

In Men, we various Ruling Passions find,
 In Women, two almost divide the kind;
 Those, only fix'd, they first or last obey,
 The Love of Pleasure, and the Love of Sway.

(ll. 207-10)

Again and again the conservative and critical attitude of the poet toward women who are obsessed with sexuality is reflected:

Men, some to Bus'ness, some to Pleasure take;
 But ev'ry Woman is at heart a Rake:
 Men, some to Quiet, some to public Strife;
 But ev'ry Lady would be Queen for Life.

In *The Rape of the Lock* then, the question of ideology is the representation of the competing ideologies of female subjectivity. It may be suggested that there are three competing ideologies held up parallelly here. The first that we would like to draw your attention to is that of **aggressive womanhood** – articulated by Thalestris in Canto V. In this scene as Thalestris declares

To Arms, to arms: the fierce virago cries
 And swift as lightning to the Combat flies

Pope creates a universe of chaos

'Heroes and Heroins' shouts confusedly rise
 And base and treble voices strike the shies

leading to a vision of doomsday

"Earth shakes her nodding Tower's the Ground gives way
 And the pale Ghosts start at the flash of day."

These passages are allied with the sense of the female hysteria that Pope has already evoked in the Cave of spleen”

Sooner let Earth, Air, Sea to Chaos fall
Men, Monkeys, Lap-dogs, Panots perish all.”

The mock-heroic here releases the laughter but the darkening images, the sense of frenzy and the anxiety about social chaos betrays the patriarchal anxiety against what the eighteenth called the hysterical feminine. Aggressive womanhood thus creates a vision of apocalyptic collapse that requires divine intervention through the *deux ex machina*. One of the points that may be raised here is the presence of the martial rhetoric that dominates the game of ombre. This is different because it is part of the culture of the game and tinged within the structure of flirtation – the battle for control in the game of courtship. The fourth and fifth cantos actually draw upon the social brawl that threatens to destabilise society.

An antithesis to this, is of course the patriarchal fantasy of **passive womanhood**. This is articulated in the speech of Clarissa”

How vain are all these glories, all our Pains
Unless good sense preserve what Beauty gains:
That men may say when we the front box grace,
Behold the first in virtue, as in Face
... And trust me Dear, good Human can prevail
When Airs and Flights, and Screams and Scolding fail.”

Notice how this speech directly refers back to the idea of ‘good sense and good Humour’ that Pope had articulated in the dedicatory epistle. Thus the lines move towards a vision of passive womanhood that accepts patriarchal mastery. It is this vision that Samuel Richardson was also to reinvent in the eighteenth century novel *Pamela*.

The justification of this plea for passive womanhood is played out through a series of commentaries about the vacuity of Belinda’s brain. The aesthetic merits of the poem are deceptively cruel here. They show attention to Belinda’s great beauty but lead to a damning critique of her lack of intelligence and her mortal profligacy. Thus Pope can claim immortal beauty for Belinda in a line like

“If to her share some female error fall
Look on her face and you’ll forget them all.”

or compare her eyes with Sol. But it fixes Belinda as an object of the male gaze and Pope critiques her mental vacuity:

“Then gay ideas crowd the vacant Brain”

This ‘moving toyshop of her heart’ is extended to all womankind through the sylphs who create a lineage of such moral muddled and empty headed giddy train of women engaging in flirtation. Thus this category of womanhood requires patriarchal supervision and control.

What we are suggesting here is that Pope is deeply implicating the poem into the woman question and offering versions of womanhood. In rejecting the subjectivity of aggressive womanhood as leading to social chaos, and by cleverly presenting female fickleness through the aesthetic he seeks to drive home a ‘moral message’ – a patriarchal fantasy of female subjection that was to haunt both the male and the female imagination in the mid eighteenth century until Mary Wollstonecraft raised questions about it. Nancy Armstrong in *Desire and Domestic Fiction* notes how the eighteenth century public sphere successfully banished the woman from the public domain into the domestic sphere and Pope’s poem was an integral agent in this process.

2.5.10: Summing Up

This Unit has definitely revealed to you in a nutshell why Alexander Pope remains the stalwart of 18th century literature. *The Rape of the Lock*, as you have seen, is truly a society poem that brings out almost all aspects of 18th century elite society. The garb of the mock epic, as repeatedly shown in this Unit, makes Pope satire less stinging in intent and more coated with humour. But to round off, you must keep in mind that the liberal doses of satire alone would not have given the text its abiding fame; nor is Pope’s critique of colonialism that anticipates post colonial thought the only strength of the long poem. It is the deft blend of these neo-classical traits with a streak of romanticism in the presentation of Belinda that gives the text a different flavour!

2.5.11: Comprehension Exercises

A. Long Answer Type Questions:

1. How does Pope use the mock heroic elements in *The Rape of the Lock*? How do they add to the beauty of the poem?
2. “Pope’s poem is a satire on eighteenth century aristocratic life.” Do you agree? Justify your response.
3. *The Rape of the Lock* subtly deals with the phenomenon of colonialism. Discuss.
4. Analyse *The Rape of the Lock* (Cantos 1 – 3) as a text that combines neoclassical and romantic elements.

B. Medium Length Answer Type Questions:

1. “Pope’s attitude towards women in *The Rape of the Lock* is deeply conservative”. Do you agree? Justify your response.
2. Comment on the role of the sylphs in *The Rape of the Lock*.
3. How does colonial knowledge figure in *The Rape of the Lock*?

C. Short Answer Type Questions:

1. What are the various rhetorical figures used in *The Rape of the Lock* to highlight the mock heroic quality?
2. What is the significance of Belinda’s dressing table in *The Rape of the Lock*?
3. Give an idea of the context in which *The Rape of the Lock* was composed.
4. What is the role of Clarissa in *The Rape of the Lock*?

2.5.12: Suggested Reading Text

Students may read the entire annotated text using Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock* ed. Harriet Raghunathan. New Delhi: Worldview, 2001. Apart from detailed annotations, this volume also contains a number of important essays that deal with the critical approaches to the text.

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Unit 6 □ William Blake – The Lamb and The Tyger

Structure:

2.6.1. Objectives

2.6.2. Introduction

2.6.3. ‘The Lamb’ from *Songs of Innocence*

2.6.3.A. Text

2.6.3.B. Annotations

2.6.3.C. Substance and Development of Thought

2.6.3.D. Critical Commentary

2.6.3.E. Themes

2.6.4. ‘The Tyger’ from *Songs of Experience*

2.6.4.A. Text

2.6.4.B. Annotations

2.6.4.C. Substance and Development of Thought

2.6.4.D. Critical Commentary

2.6.4.E. Themes

2.6.5. Summing Up

2.6.6. Comprehension Exercises

2.6.7. Suggested Reading

2.6.1: Objectives

In this Unit, which is the initiation to Romantic poetry, you will come across two of the most anthologised poems of William Blake, who is considered the most illustrious among poets who are commonly known as precursors of the Romantic movement. Commonly held to be companion poems from the *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, “The Lamb” and “The Tyger” exemplify best the contrary states of the human soul, the amalgam of the meek and the bold, both inherent in man’s nature. So in this Unit, we will learn about Blake’s treatment of and assimilation of such

contrary states of the mind within his poetic oeuvre. Contextually, we will also try to come to an understanding of Blake's views on God, Christianity and the Church.

2.6.2: Introduction

In this section, we will introduce you to William Blake's religious views and philosophy, both of which are important in understanding the texts that we are dealing with in this Unit. Blake was born to a family of English Dissenters as a result of which his views of religion were largely unorthodox. But that should not lead you to draw an inference that he was a non-believer or an atheist. Since childhood, The Bible had a great impression on his mind. Since the age of seven, Blake claimed to have visions of angels, spirits and God Himself. His *Poetical Sketches* reflect the influence of the Psalms. Blake had an individualistic viewpoint on God which defied the Biblical Creator. Blake was a devout Christian, rebelling against all forms of organised religion in general and the Church of England in particular. One should keep in mind that Blake was a torchbearer of individual freedom and free expression. Orthodox religion, on the contrary, chained and limited individual freedom by imposing codes of behaviour as the 'eternal correct'. An institutionalised religion demanded uncontested, unquestioning authority of its followers. In order to achieve this, the Church oftentimes 'mislead' people by generating the consent of the believers through various means like weaving the image of God as a strict wrathful father who punished His children for their sins. The Church formulated concepts of 'sin' and 'guilt' and 'penance' to trap people and make them obediently follow codes imposed by religion which is against the natural desires and spirit of life.

As a consequence of his radical religious thought, Blake rejected institutionalised religion and was considered an iconoclast and an anarchist. He was convinced that the Church of England had drifted away from its spiritual mission of guiding its followers to the true spirit of Christianity. Instead of binding its flock through love and compassion, charity and fraternity, the Church laid a malign web of moral laws to trap 'god-fearing' followers with baits of 'shame', 'guilt', 'sin',

fear of punishment, ‘penance’ and so on. The Church exerted control over the society at large by structuring the thought process of the followers and enslaving them to regimented social laws and rules and calling for a life of self-denial. Not only had the Church failed in instilling spiritual growth of its flock, but acted as an unjust agent to perpetuate social slavery in alliance with other forces of repression and exploitation (like monarchy and a capitalist economy). Thus in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake vents out his indignation at the orthodox church-

“Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion.”

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake further says-

“As the caterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys”

The Church not only enforces the burden of the ‘Original Sin’ and so called ‘natural laws’ on its ‘god-fearing’ flock but also through its religious texts and teachings deprive people of a life of natural desires and free love.

In the same prophetic Book, Blake not only contradicts but challenges the basic tenets of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ as is conventionally believed. He advocated, that ‘good’ is being passive and obeying reason unconditionally while ‘evil’ is the ‘*active springing from energy*’ of a thinking mind.

“Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate, are necessary to human existence. From these contraries spring what conventional religion calls Good and Evil. Good is the passive that obeys reason; Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is heaven. Evil is hell.”

❖ Blake’s God

Blake’s spiritual philosophy was greatly influenced by Emanuel Swedenborg, the Swedish theologian-mystic who believed in the idea of God in man. The 1959 ‘Introduction’ to *The Penguin Poets: William Blake*, edited by J. Bronowski states that “Blake’s form of Christianity was heretical, for it identified Christ the Son with all spiritual goodness and made God the Father a symbol of terror and

tyranny.” Blake rejected God the Father as represented in *The Old Testament* for He appears to be severe and vengeful. Sinners could appease His wrath by offering sacrifice. Blake discarded this notion of God as a transcendent ruler enthroned in heaven as he felt that such a view legitimised a hierarchical power structure in the society of men, where a powerful minority imposed ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ on a disenfranchised majority.

However, Blake was not a godless man. His faith was more deep-rooted than that of a god-fearing churchgoer. A follower of Swedenborg, he had Christ in his heart, in his wake and in his sleep. Blake’s Christ was not a Messiah or a Saviour, neither a moralising preacher nor a philosopher but He was more profound. For Blake, Christ is imagination, the muse present in all sensitive hearts. He is the ‘embodiment of the poetic’ above all reason, all logic, even above all morality. He is not just the Son of God, but the Son of Man who had come to the Earth in the human form. Christ symbolises the unity between divinity and humanity. Christ is the voice, the conscience within, with whom we are in a dialogue forever. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake says, “Men forgot that all deities reside in the human breast”. Therefore, in *Songs of Innocence*, it is Christ who is forever present with children and within their hearts, for as Wordsworth says:

“Heaven lies about us in our infancy.”

With these lines, William Blake makes a solemn declaration as it were, of the credo of Romantic Poetry that finds its full flowering in the celebration of childhood in the poetry of William Wordsworth.

2.6.3: “The Lamb” from *Songs of Innocence*

“The Lamb,” a short lyric of twenty lines, was published by Blake in 1789 in the volume *Songs of Innocence*. Blake uses the simple cadences of children’s verse and familiar Biblical symbols in this poem. However, as a reading of the poem will show, this simplicity is only apparent; for the deeper philosophical questions that

the dismay of the child speaker leads us to, brings into context all that we have just discussed in the preceding sections.

2.6.3A: The Lamb

Little Lamb who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
Gave thee life & bid thee feed.

By the stream & o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing wooly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice!

Little Lamb who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb I'll tell thee!
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek and he is mild,
He became a little child:

**I a child and thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.**

Little Lamb God bless thee
Little Lamb God bless thee.

2.6.3B: Annotations

Clothing of delight (l.5): refers to the soft fleece on the lamb's skin.

For he calls himself a Lamb (l.14): refers to Jesus Christ, who because of the qualities of gentleness and meekness in him was called the lamb.

He is meek and he is mild (l.15) Blake seems to be echoing a popular hymn, 'Gentle Jesus meek and mild'.

He became a little child (l.16): one implication may be that Christ is at once God and

Man as he took physical birth on earth. A second implication may be that Christ possesses the naïve simplicity and pristine innocence of a child.

2.6.3C: Substance and Development of Thought

The poem contains a total of twenty lines – the first ten foregrounding a series of questions and the next ten answering those questions. The speaker, evidently a child, raises the most overpowering question: Who is the maker who bids the lamb graze by the stream and over the green meadow? Of course, the questions are answered by the child himself, without ever waiting for any kind of aid to be provided by his elders or by anybody else. His observations clearly debar the possibility of any intrusion of the world of experience into the idyllic setting of the poem.

Lines 1-10 Seeing a lamb grazing on a green meadow a child asks if he knows who his maker is. He also asks if the lamb knows who bade him feed over the meadow by the stream, and who gave him the soft fleece on his skin, and the tender voice that makes the entire valley reverberate with happiness.

Lines 11-20 The next ten lines offer answers to these questions. The questions are answered by the child himself, without any kind of help from any adult. The child's observations clearly rule out the possibility of any intrusion of the world of experience into the idyllic setting of the poem. The poem is a tribute to a conviction prompted solely by innocence. The child goes on saying that the Creator, i.e. God

(or Jesus Christ, the Son of God) is Himself called by the name of the lamb for His infinite mildness. He concludes that because of their mildness and innocence, he himself and the lamb are called by the name of God. He places God, himself and the lamb in a single and inseparable thread of Creation, each creature a breathing signature of God's infinite gentleness. His innocent and altruistic zeal finally leads him to pronounce divine blessings on the mild creature.

2.6.3D: Critical Commentary

The short poem, echoing the 23rd *Psalm*, represents a wonderful manifestation of the glory of childhood innocence, which unfalteringly answers confounding queries with artless and immediate responses. Not a single question raised by the child remains unanswered, and this clearly demonstrates the child's innate conviction of divine benevolence. A typically Romantic note of pantheism, which would later become a credo with Wordsworth, seems to be pervasive in almost all the lines of the poem. It is this pantheistic spirit that enables the speaker to have a glimpse of divinity in himself and the lamb. The final prayer for Divine bliss upon the lamb is perhaps the strongest blow over the *rational* world of the Neo-Classicals, which preferred to allow space for nothing except *reason* till the closing decades of the eighteenth century. The melodious language and the association of tenderness, delight and softness, with the lamb create an impression of gentleness which connects this idyllic world and its inhabitants to the qualities of the meek and mild creator mentioned in the second stanza.

2.6.3E: Themes

❖ Symbolism

A remarkable feature of the poem is that it is symbolic in spirit, without using too many symbols in the body of the text itself. Innocence, as a leitmotif, runs through the text. The sense is created and maintained by the use of two dominant symbols, the child, and the meek and mild lamb. The description of the landscape creates an idyllic setting evocative of an earthly Paradise reflecting the state of the uncorrupted soul. Words like "clothing of delight" to describe the lamb's fleece reinforce the

sense of unchallenged joy. The lamb is associated with the qualities of softness and brightness. His clothing and his tender voice are actually the manifestations of a benevolent creator. In the second section of the poem (i.e. lines 11-20) the poet makes full use of the Biblical associations of the child and the lamb, when he establishes through his mouthpiece, the child, an inseparable communion between divinity and the created world. Here, the allusion to the birth of Jesus, the Son of God, as the son of Man, becomes significant for the desired expansion of the theme. The poem comes full circle when the child finally declares that he himself as a child and the lamb as a meek and mild creature carry within themselves the signs of divinity. Blake successfully communicates an idea of metaphysical merit in spite of an apparently straightforward narration.

❖ **The poem as a Romantic lyric**

The poem's central theme of pantheism and its rejection of mundane reason, anticipates some of the key features of nineteenth century British Romanticism. The language used by Blake is childlike and musical, in stark contrast to the formal hexameter couplet, which was an obsession with the Augustans. The vast green meadow, the flowing stream, and finally, the child and the lamb, carrying in them signs of the divine, represent a world of idyllic innocence. This is no ordinary vision of childhood, but an adult's fond recollection of a state of pristine joy. This fascination with childhood presages one of the features of later Romantic poetry. By introducing a sense of the serene and the endless, Blake also breaks away from the eighteenth century tradition of city-centric literature. Above all, in 'The Lamb' the child's instinctive identification with God and his creation clearly marks a triumph of subjectivism, which involves a free play of the imagination and intuition. The symbolical use of the lamb and the child to represent a state of the soul also anticipates a characteristic trait of the Romantic lyric – investing the physical with metaphysical significance.

2.6.4: “The Tyger” from *Songs of Experience*

‘The Tyger’ was published by Blake in 1794 in the volume *Songs of Experience*. The poem is a true representative of this volume which depicts the fierce forces

that are unleashed as innocence is challenged by experience. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake had proclaimed that “The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction.” The tiger in this poem seems to be exactly such a force which evokes terror but also purges the evils of our civilization. As in ‘The Lamb’, here too the persona of the speaker is central, not just in constructing the image of the tiger as an awe inspiring figure, but also in the rhetorical questions that are posed. In ‘The Tyger’ as well, the movement of thought from the creation to the Creator is evocative of Blake’s deep philosophical understanding of theology.

2.6.4A: The Tyger

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? and what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

2.6.4B: Annotations

Symmetry (l.4): Shape, rather than the usual meaning of regularity. The sense of proportion, which, though a neoclassical quality almost, is here used by Blake more to imply content than form. Hence, the symmetry of the tiger as a created being becomes a recurrent idea, one that inspires a wide array of thoughts that are voiced in a series of rhetorical questions.

Deeps (l.5): Seas

What the hand, dare seize the fire? (l.8): In Greek mythology, Prometheus, one of the Titans, stole fire from the Gods and brought it to mankind.

Sinews (l.10): Tendon / muscle.

When the stars ... with their tears (l. 17-18): This might allude to the fierce fight between God and the rebel angels led by Lucifer. God struck them with thunder, and hurled them headlong down to the depths of Hell from Paradise. Their fall resembled the movement of meteors or shooting stars.

2.6.4C: Substance and Development of Thought

Having read 'The Lamb', you will find an interesting contrast in this poem. While the former poem delights in God's creation of a creature of meekness and mildness, 'The Tyger' expresses a sense of awe at the terrific stature of the Creator who possesses the power to create such a fearsome creature as the tiger. The simple

faith of 'The Lamb' is replaced by unanswered questions in 'The Tyger'. They are mostly rhetorical questions, the answers being implied in the questions themselves. This makes it clear to us that the speaker in 'The Tyger' is not a naïve child, but a mature human being belonging to the world of experience.

You may be surprised by the spelling 'Tyger' in the title. Blake here deliberately uses a quasi-archaic spelling to generate an initial sense of surprise among his readers. This sense culminates in the awed question at the end of the poem where the speaker muses how the Creator of the meek and gentle lamb also created the taut energy and ferocious power of the tiger.

Stanza I -The tiger, a fearsome animal lurking in the nocturnal forest, emerges in all its awe-inspiring lustre, as an incendiary energy which destroys the darkness. Blake begins his description by drawing attention to the burning eye of the tiger as that implies the fierce energy needed to break the shackles of experience. The amazed speaker wonders what superhuman creator could design such ferocious beauty, signified by the words "fearful symmetry".

Stanza II-The poet depicts a Promethean creator who has seized the fire of some distant skies in the making of the beast. It seems to have originated from the daring aspiration of some Icarus-like figure.

Stanza III-The sense of surprise deepens as the speaker contemplates on the power of the shoulders that could twist the muscle of the tiger's heart. You gradually begin to get a picture of the powerful, awe-inspiring beauty of the tiger, while its pulsating heart seems to invoke fear.

Stanza IV-Blake invokes images of the industrial world, as the tiger seems to be hammered out in a supernatural smithy whose presiding spirit grapples with terror. But don't forget that the chain, the anvil and the hammer are also tools of the sculptor, so the tiger remains an ambiguous symbol, representing both destructive and creative energies.

Stanza V-The terrific grasp of the Creator reminds the speaker of the fierce struggle between God and the angels led by Lucifer, which ended by making the rebels feel God's sharp vengeance and beg for mercy.

Stanza VI-The speaker concludes with awe at the wonderful capacity of God, who is simultaneously the Creator of the meek and mild lamb, and the terrible and alarming tiger. These two opposite aspects of the Creator Himself indicate two contrasted sides of creation at large: one that leads to innocent and delightful involvement; and the other that makes one retreat in apprehension. Clearly, such profundity of thought is not to be sought in a child; the whole poem is rather an expression of a mind that belongs to the world of maturity and experience. Notice in particular the impact created by the change of only one word from the first stanza to the last – he replaces ‘Could’ in Stanza 1 with ‘Dare’ in Stanza 6. You will definitely understand that this change denotes conclusivity in the poet’s mind as far as the awe-inspiring creative potential of the Creator is concerned. While ‘could’ implies a sense of dismay, ‘dare’ established beyond doubt the poet’s acceptance of the infinite limits of Divine creativity. As we have said earlier, the crux of the poem is its constant transference of thought from the creation to the Creator – in that sense, even the title of the poem is a veiled symbol!

2.6.4D: Critical Commentary

In ‘The Tyger’, Blake moves away from Biblical symbols and forges an original symbol of power and strength that is ambiguous in its nature. The tiger is at once the destroyer and the harbinger of light, burning through the dark night of experience. He represents the wrath of God but also the hope that through destruction a new dawn will arrive, no matter how terrible its birth. The allusions to Prometheus and Icarus in the second stanza hold him up to be a figure of hope and aspiration. The trochaic rhythm creates an effect of hammer strokes which is in stark contrast to the lilting rhythm of ‘The Lamb’. Read together the two poems to reinforce Blake’s concept of the existence of contraries as a necessary condition for the maturity of the human heart.

2.6.4E: Themes

❖ Symbolism

‘The Tyger’ is rich in symbols and allusions, and this in itself marks a curious contrast to its counterpart ‘The Lamb’ from *Songs of Innocence* which celebrates

innocence through a single symbolic fabric of mildness equated to divinity. This poem makes us halt at almost every line by employing intricate symbols or metaphorical phrases, which definitely demand a mature mind for their proper explication. For example, both the tiger and its Creator symbolise power and fierceness, the first mundane and the second metaphysical and almost beyond human imagination. The forests of the night, which may symbolise the dark aspects of the human mind, or the dark regions of experience where evil dwells, are rightly chosen as the tiger's domain; the serene and green meadow the lamb grazes upon is not a place appropriate for such a fearsome animal. The reference to the immortal hands and eyes of the Creator, i.e. God, reinforces the sense of surprise already generated by the spelling of the animal's name in the title. We wonder at the unimaginable stature of the Creator, who dared to frame the fearful symmetry of the tiger. The first two lines of the second stanza may be taken as an instance of allusion, for they immediately bring to our minds an echo of Prometheus' act of stealing fire from heaven. This at once tells us that Blake's tiger is an ambivalent being which embodies the sublime power of the Almighty. As in T.S. Eliot's 'Gerontion', it is God's judgment, rather than his compassion that is represented through the symbol of the tiger. The series of material symbols like *hammer*, *chain*, *anvil*, *furnace*, *dread grasp* and the like, make us aware of the material world, poles asunder from the idyllic charms of the world of innocence celebrated in 'The Lamb'. They also convey the spiritual message that both the worlds of innocence and experience are the domains of a single Supreme Creator: their apparent contrariety being nothing except reflections of His contrasted dimensions of meekness and fierceness.

In the fifth stanza, we come across a significant allusion to the mythical war between God and the rebel angels led by Lucifer, which ended in the expulsion of the rebels from heaven. The defeated angels fell eternally from Paradise to the abysmal depths of burning hell like shooting stars. The tiger, symbolising God's wrath, seems to have been born to vanquish evil in just such a crisis of human civilisation. The final unanswered question denotes the inscrutable nature of God. This rhetorical question is the very basic query of the poem itself, which is answered by reaffirming that mildness and fierceness in spite of their apparent contrariety are

two inseparable dimensions of the Creator Himself. There is no denying the share of each one of them in the world created and controlled by a single and insurmountable Power, i.e. God

❖ Contrast with ‘The Lamb’

The two poems together form the contrasting parts of a single pattern. They exemplify Blake’s design in the combined volume, which was to portray the contrary states of the human soul. ‘The Lamb’ is couched in lyrical strains. Its gentle cadence of sibilant sounds and the soft lilting rhyme, its image of a serene pastoral landscape, all belong to the world of secure childhood. ‘The Tyger’, on the other hand uses a trochaic rhythm. Its lines end in emphatic syllables, which create the impression of hammer-strokes. It tells of elemental powers and its canvas is not the secluded valley, but the vast cosmos. The symbols of the former poem are drawn from the Bible, while in the latter the poet devises his own symbols. As we read the poem, we realise that Blake was also the writer of prophetic works. The lyric voice of the first poem gives way to the awed, unanswered questions of the second, as faith is replaced by a tortured seeking for answers which are never explicit.

2.6.5. Summing Up

Dear learners, in this Unit we have therefore assimilated knowledge on:

- ✓ the poet’s concept of God, Christianity and the Church and how his views were radical and contradictory to popular concept of faith and divinity
- ✓ the two poems, ‘The Lamb’ and ‘The Tyger’ and how their form, diction, meter and symbols are different in keeping with the theme
- ✓ Why the two poems are termed companion poems

2.6.6 Comprehension Exercises

A. Long Answer Type Questions:

1. Attempt a critical appreciation of the poem ‘The Lamb’ by William Blake.
2. How does the poet glorify innocence in the poem ‘The Lamb’?

3. Would you consider 'The Lamb' to be a successful Romantic lyric? Substantiate your answer.
4. Attempt a critical appreciation of the poem 'The Tyger' from *Songs of Experience*.
5. How do the poems 'The Tyger' and 'The Lamb' express two opposite sides of the human soul? Answer with textual references.

B. Mid Length Answer Type Questions:

1. Give in your own words the central idea of the poem 'The Lamb'.
2. Write a note on the use of symbols in the poem 'The Lamb'.
3. Give in your own words the central idea of the poem 'The Tyger'.
4. Write a note on the use of symbols in 'The Tyger'.

C. Short Answer Type Questions:

1. What does the child tell the lamb about the Creator?
2. Explain the following lines with reference to the context:

*"He is meek and he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child and thou a lamb,
We are called by his name."*

3. What is the significance of the spelling of the animal's name in the title of the poem 'The Tyger'?
4. Write a short note on the mythological figures with whom the creator of the tiger is identified in the poem 'The Tyger'.
5. Explain with reference to the context the following lines:
When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
6. What does Blake mean when he writes, "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?"
7. Write a short note on Blake's views on God and religion.
8. Discuss Blake's presentation of Urizen.

2.6.7: Suggested Reading

Ferber, Michael. *The Poetry of William Blake*. Penguin, 1991.

Glen, Heather. *Vision and Disenchantment: Blake's Songs and Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads*. CUP, 1983.

Keynes, Geoffrey (Ed.). *Blake: Complete Writings*. OUP, 1996.

Larrisy, Edward. *William Blake*. Basil Blackwell, 1985. Rereading Literature Series, Ed. Terry Eagleton.

Paley, Morton D. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Songs of Innocence and of Experience: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Prentice Hall, 1969.

Unit 7 □ William Wordsworth: Tintern Abbey

Structure:

- 2.7.1. Objectives
- 2.7.2. Introduction
- 2.7.3. Text of “Tintern Abbey”
- 2.7.4. Annotations and Word Meanings
- 2.7.5. Substance and Critical Summary
- 2.7.6. Analysis of Major Themes
- 2.7.7. Summing Up
- 2.7.8. Comprehension Exercises
- 2.7.9. Suggested Reading

2.7.1: Objectives

You know from your reading of the History of English Literature that the beginnings of the Romantic Period are by and large dated with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. This is not to say that an era begins only from a particular year, your reading of the poetry of Alexander Pope in the high tide of Augustan satire and William Blake in the previous section will have shown that the romantic vein in English literature was gradually making itself felt. Be that as it may, for purposes of academic convenience, such timelines are often kept in mind. You will read more about *Lyrical Ballads* and its famous “Preface” by Wordsworth in your next course.

What is important for us is to keep in mind that the present poem, which has a long title – “Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey” was the last one in this joint volume of poetry written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth (1770-1850). After going through the present Unit, you should be able to understand for yourselves why this poem is looked upon as a signal piece insofar as the Romantic Movement is concerned. You will find here a depiction of landscape, informed with a moral and philosophical vision,

an analysis of the process of the growth of the human mind, and of course the close contacts that underlie all interactions between us as human beings and the nature that surrounds us. The view of Nature that Wordsworth presents in his poetry is subjective - half created and half perceived- as he claims in “Tintern Abbey.” Between this creation and perception, you will come to an understanding of the pantheistic creed that characterises Wordsworth’s appreciation of nature. By the way, do remember that when we read Wordsworth, it is customary to write of ‘Nature’ with a capitalised ‘N’. Our objective in this Unit is to present Wordsworth not just as a time-warped poet of nature, but to understand what is today commonly known as ecological concerns.

2.7.2: Introduction

Popularly known as “Tintern Abbey”, the poem entitled “Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, 13 July 1798” is one of the most significant poems of William Wordsworth. It is a poem which will be of great value in your understanding of Wordsworth’s views on Nature, literary Romanticism and its characteristic views on the role of the poet and poetry, and the philosophical and spiritual life of man. The poem was composed in the month of July, 1798. By placing it at the very end of the *Lyrical Ballads*, it was as if Wordsworth viewed the poem as the culmination of all that he wanted to convey throughout the volume.

Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’ displays autobiographical elements. Significantly, the history of the poem’s composition is narrated by Wordsworth himself in his letter to Miss Fenwick where he famously writes:

No poem of mine was composed under circumstances more pleasant for me to remember than this. I began it upon leaving Tintern, after crossing the Wye, and concluded it just as I was entering Bristol in the evening, after a ramble of four or five days (10th- 13th July) with my sister. Not a line of it was altered, and not any part of it written down till I reached Bristol.

‘Tintern Abbey’ comprises five uneven stanzas written in blank verse. It begins in the manner of a conventional ‘loco-descriptive’ poem popular in the eighteenth century, beginning with the description of a particular locale. But as you read the poem you will become aware that it is more a meditation on the relation between man and nature than a simple word picture of a scenic spot.

2.7.3: Text of “Jintera Abbey”

The poem is divided into five sections. The detailed title announces the time frame, which as you now know, has immense implications in the life of the poet. Thereafter, it settles to establish the dominant mood of tranquil repose in a secluded, ‘inland’ river landscape. It sets out the key symbolic markers of cliffs and river, and the sensations of eye and ear that will reverberate throughout the thoughts and feelings of the text. Wordsworth’s diction draws the reader out of any easy expectations of Neo-classical picturesque and mildly hints at the metaphysical discourse to follow. The second and third sections advance this movement by extolling Nature in its manifold effects for humanity, its many references to the feelings, and its sublime capacity to work on the imagination and the memory. This follows Wordsworth’s recollection of Nature’s healing influence experienced during his unpleasant urban interlude when reflections on his early Wye visit helped to sustain him through anguished periods of fever and fret. Notice first the situatedness of the title:

- ***Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798***

Text

*FIVE years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur.—Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,*

*That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view* 10
*These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves
'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines* 15
*Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!
With some uncertain notice, as might seem
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,* 20
*Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire
The Hermit sits alone.
These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:* 25
*But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;* 30
*And passing even into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration:—feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,
As have no slight or trivial influence*

*On that best portion of a good man's life,
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts
Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,* 35

*Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,*

*Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame 40
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep*

In body, and become a living soul:

*While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.
If this Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! how oft—*

*In darkness and amid the many shapes
Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world, 55*

*Have hung upon the beatings of my heart—
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!*

*And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought, 60
With many recognitions dim and faint,
And somewhat of a sad perplexity,*

*The picture of the mind revives again:
While here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts* 65
*That in this moment there is life and food
For future years. And so I dare to hope,
Though changed, no doubt, from what I was when first
I came among these hills; when like a roe*
I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides 70
*Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
Wherever nature led: more like a man
Flying from something that he dreads, than one
Who sought the thing he loved. For nature then
(The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,* 75
*And their glad animal movements all gone by)
To me was all in all.—I cannot paint
What then I was. The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,* 80
*Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite; a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, nor any interest
Unborrowed from the eye.—That time is past,* 85
*And all its aching joys are now no more,
And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this
Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur, other gifts*

*Have followed; for such loss, I would believe,
 Abundant recompence. For I have learned* 90
*To look on nature, not as in the hour
 Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
 The still, sad music of humanity,
 Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
 To chasten and subdue. And I have felt* 95
*A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
 Of something far more deeply interfused,
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
 And the round ocean and the living air,* 100
*And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
 A motion and a spirit, that impels
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
 And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
 A lover of the meadows and the woods,* 105

*And mountains; and of all that we behold
 From this green earth; of all the mighty world
 Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
 And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
 In nature and the language of the sense,* 110
*The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
 The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
 Of all my moral being.*
Nor perchance,
If I were not thus taught, should I the more 115
Suffer my genial spirits to decay:

*For thou art with me here upon the banks
Of this fair river; thou my dearest Friend,
My dear, dear Friend; and in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read 120
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while
May I behold in thee what I was once,
My dear, dear Sister! and this prayer I make,
Knowing that Nature never did betray 125
The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,
Through all the years of this our life, to lead
From joy to joy: for she can so inform
The mind that is within us, so impress
With quietness and beauty, and so feed 130
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb 135

Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold
Is full of blessings. Therefore let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
And let the misty mountain-winds be free
To blow against thee: and, in after years, 140
When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
Into a sober pleasure; when thy mind
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,*

Thy memory be as a dwelling-place
For all sweet sounds and harmonies; oh! Then, 145
If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,
Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,
And these my exhortations! Nor, perchance—
If I should be where I no more can hear
Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams
Of past existence—wilt thou then forget
That on the banks of this delightful stream
We stood together; and that I, so long
A worshipper of Nature, hither came 155
Unwearied in that service: rather say
With warmer love—oh! with far deeper zeal
Of holier love. Nor wilt thou then forget,
That after many wanderings, many years
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,
And this green pastoral landscape, were to me
More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake!

2.7.4: Annotations and Word Meanings

....thoughts of more deep seclusion (l.7): intensely private reflections

Repose (l.9): rest

Sycamore (l.10): maple tree; in Biblical usage it also refers to a species of fig tree

..orchard tufts (l.11): clusters of fruit trees cultivated within an enclosed space

...groves and copses (l.14): a small wood or group of trees; copses are those clusters which are cut periodically.

Hedge-rows (l.15): a border of wild shrubs and trees used to demarcate ownership. Here it also signifies human intervention in nature. The hedges indicate private

ownership, yet in their indeterminate nature they also symbolise a place where such demarcations are relaxed and merged with the universal realm of nature.

Sportive (l.16): playful

Notice (l.19): The word is used here as a noun meaning intimation

Vagrant (l.20): tramp, or a homeless person who lives by begging. Nature is seen as the last shelter of the outcasts of society. This is also a reminder of the socio- economic problems of a society in transition.

Hermit (l.21): a person who has withdrawn from the world

..tranquil restoration (l.31): restoring peace of mind

Trivial (l.33): insignificant

..aspect more sublime(l.38):

Burthen (l.39): burden

Unintelligible (l.41): impossible to understand

Serene (l.42): calm

Corporeal (l.44): bodily, physical

...fretful stir (l.54): restless activities

Sylvan wye (l.58): The phrase indicates the wooded regions through which the river Wye flows.

..half – extinguished thought (l.60): partly forgotten thoughts

Roe (l.69): young deer

...sounding cataract (l.78): refers to the waterfalls and the sound made by them

...gloomy wood (l. 80): dark woods

Recompense (l.90):

.....chasten and subdue (l.95): to discipline and overwhelm

Interfused (l.98): permeated with, interspersed

Impels (l.102): compels ***Anchor (l. 111):*** mooring ***Perchance (l.114):*** Perhaps
Genial (l.116): cordial

...*for thou art with me (l.117)*: The poet is directly addressing his sister, Dorothy Wordsworth.

...*dreary intercourse (l.134)*: soul-destroying, monotonous relationships of the mundane world

Exhortation(l.149): encouragement, persuasion

Zeal (l.157): passion

2.7.5: Substance and Critical Summary

The poem traces the growth of the poet's relationship with nature. The sensations provided by the natural landscape are internalised, reflected upon and processed into a higher realisation of the moral, spiritual and restorative experience which is the backbone of Wordsworth's creed. The theme of recollection runs through the poem and you find how the overlapping of past, present and future aid the poet's enunciation of a philosophy of the mind of man and his relationship with Nature.

Stanza I The poem begins with Wordsworth's declaration of the fact that after a gap of five years he has been able to visit the banks of the Wye and the adjoining landscape. Once again he is overjoyed to hear the murmuring flow of water in the river Wye as he discreetly beholds the serene landscape consisting of sharp and towering wooded hills uniting with the clear sky. The scene encourages a deep feeling of solitude seclusion and introspection. The green cottage garden, orchard tufts loaded with unripe fruits clad in one green hue, the pastoral farms, the smoke which might be coming from the dwelling of some vagabond or the cave of a hermit only enhance his happiness and deep seclusion. The unbroken green of the countryside denote a happy co-existence of man and nature, cultivation and wilderness.

Critical Commentary on the Stanza

A significant motif in the poem is that of memory and personal growth. With the declaration of a lapse of five years standing between his last visit and the present one, Wordsworth offers the reader a foreshadowing of the theme of the poem:

a comparison between the past and the present realms of experiences involving his response to the locale and how it leads to an appreciation of the growth and maturation of the bond between himself and nature.

The poem is inspired, as we have earlier noted, by a specific landscape and the experience associated with the landscape. Wye is a beautiful mountain river flowing through Wales and England. The abbey is located on its banks. Wordsworth is believed to have paid at least two visits to the same scenery of Wye and the adjoining ruins of the abbey possibly built in the 13th Century. However, as you move along the poem, you will realise that the nature that Wordsworth worships and the effect that his experience of natural beauty has on the growth of his own mind is not restricted within this specific time and place. The poem gradually moves from the particular to the universal.

The description that the poem begins with is famously called ‘return to nature’. The ‘steep and lofty cliffs’, ‘waters, rolling from their mountain-springs’, ‘dark sycamore’, are each introduced by ‘again’ or ‘once again’ and alert the reader to the fact that Wordsworth’s poem will deal with the present experience in the light of what once had been. By drawing attention to the continuity in nature he also depicts how the passage of ‘five long winters’ has changed the mind of the poet who is the onlooker. The description is obviously connected with the poet’s reflective mood as he emphasises how the serenity of the scene gives rise to profound thoughts.

Points to Ponder for Learner

- *List the words in the stanza which express a sense of peace and calm.*
- *In which line does Wordsworth link the landscape with his own thoughts?*

Stanza Two

In this stanza you will find how the poet asserts that in the period that has elapsed between his first visit and the present one, the serene landscape and its natural beauty, though physically absent during these five years, have never been absent to him. He gained enormous amount of pleasure and happiness out of the recollection of the landscape. The natural beauty has seeped into his soul so powerfully that it

has restored him to tranquillity amid the squalor and weariness of urban life and has prompted him to be kind and generous. Seeing the landscape with the mind's eye has uplifted him to the height of spiritual ecstasy producing a 'blessed mood' of calmness which dissolved the negativities of life. It inspired in him an exalted state of higher spiritual consciousness which enabled him to understand the harmony in greater nature and cosmos, and in all inanimate things which are touched by the same power.

Critical Commentary

This section probably enables you to comprehend that nature in Wordsworth is no mere background or a simple setting in time and place. The landscape, though empirically absent after his first visit, does not appear to have any less motivating and captivating spell on the poet. This idea contests the basic spheres of rationalist and scientific studies involving presence and absence of things. The Wordsworthian view of nature is more philosophical. Nature inspires a meditative mood and is capable of pushing aside the alienation and disregard that man faces in the urban life. Wordsworth is seen indirectly contesting contemporary notions of development and 18th Century principles of scientific truth and Enlightenment. It is nature (and not urban development which signifies a regular disengagement and departure from nature) that is capable of harmonising the world so vexed with insensitive compartmentalisation of man.

The thematic growth noticeable in the stanza involves the view that from a nature that inspires 'seclusion' by scenic beauty and pastoral diversion the poem is leading to deeper philosophical levels of the bond shared between man and nature. The gift of nature is transformed from purely sensuous pleasure that is "felt in the blood" to an abstract and reflective mood which is his "purer mind" and culminates in a moral and philosophical insight, which restores the poet's unity of being leading to a mystical insight into the nature of the "life of things". This is an insight into the immanence of a unifying Being in the whole of creation. In the entire stanza you will notice how Wordsworth emphasises the suspension of all physical activity in favour of a deeply contemplative mood in which the impressions of the material world are processed deep within the mind.

Points to Ponder

- **How does landscape appear to a blind man? What is the poet trying to convey?**
- **What is the significance of the expression “become a living soul”?**

Stanza Three

The stanza is in one way a reiteration of the experiences involving the effect of Wye and the adjoining landscape during their physical absence. On the other hand, the poet refuses to view his belief as a mere figment of imagination. He ascertains that in the midst of joyless and tiring urban existence his spirit has regularly turned to Wye and has received the bountiful calmness that he so desperately needed.

Critical Commentary

Reiterating what he mentioned in the previous section Wordsworth is again challenging the empiricist and rationalist views which would view his claims as invalid and fanciful. His reiteration of the recreational, reenergizing, revitalizing potency of nature leads us to the next sections where he is to compare the stages of his own psychological and spiritual maturation in the context of the landscape’s psychological omnipresence. The stanza is an early indication of the concept of the “spots of time” which Wordsworth speaks of in *The Prelude*, which have a shaping influence on the poet’s psyche. The temporal shift that occurs in both the second and the third stanzas projects the visual portrait of the artist’s/ man’s growth in the realm of nature.

Stanza Four

Standing before the majestic, yet serenely simple, beauty of the landscape Wordsworth feels the revival of the mental picture of the landscape that he consciously and unconsciously carried within him. He anticipates that the present experience of the landscape is going to gift him more sustenance for future years. He is assured of the presence of deeper and graver powers of nature. Not only shall this nature present him with abundant resources of happiness for the present occasion, but also food (metaphysically thoughtful and spiritually purgative) for the future. He presents a

comparison between his present self and his previous self in the context of the two visits paid to the banks of Wye. His psyche and spirit has altered a great deal. He is no longer the youth who in the pursuit of beauty and freedom could only satisfy the sensuous needs of his body and mind by drinking to the lees the beauteous aspects of nature. During his earlier visit, nature seemed to him a magician casting a spell, intoxicating his mind with sights and sounds which would present before him a diversion from the mundane din and bustle of urban existence. Earlier, he was intoxicated by the sounding cataract which would haunt him, he was awed by the deep, gloomy woods, and was charmed by the liberation he could enjoy in the locale filled with rocks and mountains. At that point in time, nature appeared to him as a mere means for the coarser delights of the senses.

Wordsworth, returning to his present sensibility and understanding of the ways in which Nature has contributed to his growth, declares the stage of ecstasy and insane sensuous agitation to be over. However, he is in no mood to mourn the loss. He is rather overjoyed to notice that such loss is compensated by a sense of the sublime which has been gifted to him by the affective power of nature. He now looks at nature with the eye of the adult, not fuelled by boyish agitations of sensuous delight but conditioned by a deeper insightful consideration of the sorrows and hardships of fellow human beings. Now nature appears to him as no diversion but the source of thought in man. Nature now is a mysterious system, the greater cosmos which holds together the living and the non-living objects and aspects, and all the binaries of the world. Nature is the source of pleasure still, but it is now the chief supplier of spiritual wisdom and thought which permeates every aspect of creation. He is still the drinker of the intoxication that nature's beauteous sights and sounds offer, but in addition to that he is now made wiser. Contemplating such sights and sounds now lead him towards the purest thoughts involving humanity and morality. The stanza ends with an eloquent tribute to the outward forms of nature which act as a gateway to the world of mystical vision which unites human consciousness with the elements and the cosmos.

Critical Commentary

The stanza brilliantly captures the stages of Wordsworth's spiritual growth. Moreover, this stanza is significant in helping you to analyse the theme of nature in the

poem. These lines are remarkably significant in tracing the development of the poet's response towards the same landscape. There are three distinct phases in the development of this attitude. The first involves the thoughtless but intense joys of his "boyish days" while responding to natural phenomenon which Wordsworth enjoyed during his first visit. The simile used to describe the stage is that of a roe, a young animal which at once combines the impression of innocence with immaturity. It is an instinctive stage marked by appetite and its satisfaction. This phase is dismissed by the phrase "that time is past". Wordsworth describes its "dizzy raptures" as the thoughtless response of an immature mind. The second phase involves the nature that he bore within himself unconsciously. In the third and final phase Wordsworth recognizes in nature the innate potency to generate greater thoughts, revitalize imagination, and inspire a cognitive development in man. This final recognition only occurs by understanding consciously the silent development of his internal nature, a development which is conditioned by the collaboration of the external and coarser pleasures derived from "all the mighty world/ of eye and ear" and the superior potency of nature which in its physical absence during the five years has developed the spirit of the poet. Wordsworth clearly notices the associations of nature external and internal, with perceptions and forms without and within the poet's mind.

Wordsworth indirectly mentions that while nature is an externally visible and empirically valid combination of beauteous sights and sounds, it is never a fixed and specified locale without altering abilities. To Wordsworth, nature is a reality as well as a phenomenon. Every phenomenon of nature that exists is mediated through the consciousness of the perceiving mind. And with the growth of the mind and differences in terms of contexts, the phenomenon too alters and develops. To the young Wordsworth nature had seemed to be only an enjoyable diversion full of intoxication and pleasure. But this phenomenon is silently developed and modified when the actual sights and sounds were physically absent for five years and yet continued to grow within the viewer's mind. The poet who revisits the banks of the river Wye is, therefore, acutely conscious of the "remoter charm" of the place "by thought supplied". The sublime aspect of nature is thus a by-product of the mind that it has nurtured. The same process

is highlighted and reiterated in the third phase of Wordsworth's attitude towards nature, as now fully aware of the processes of development of nature and the human mind, he is able to unite man and nature, to find in nature the music and expression of man's existence.

Wordsworth's lines thus turn out to be a celebration of humanity in nature, a celebration of man's activity conditioned by nature's influence, enabling both man and nature to grow. Wordsworth rejects the Neo-Classical view of a passive nature which was merely a setting or a background. He does not do so by rejecting the 'rationality' which the 18th Century celebrated and glorified. He probably nurtures an alternative field of logic which adds a new and more condensed dimension to humanity, ecology, psychology, and spirituality.

Wordsworth, as you probably realise by now, no longer celebrates the abundance of natural beauties of the banks of the Wye. Rather, he transcends the boundaries of the particular and presents a view of nature which is both subjectively present in the imagination and objectively present in time and space. From a mere projection of the specific physical details of the banks of the Wye, the poem now offers to include all sights of nature. The poem moves from the actual cataract and rocks to

'light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.'

Nature proceeds from the realm of the physical to the universal. It develops from a site, through a mental sight, to the source of all sights and impressions — external and internal

Points to Ponder for the Learner

- How does the poet describe his youthful response to nature?
- What is the difference between the poet's past and present

Stanza Five

No longer drugged by the coarser pleasures derived from nature, but, standing empowered by the sublime effect of nature on his mind and soul, Wordsworth now declares that even if nature might not arouse the same passionate response it once had, he is overjoyed by the feeling that he is accompanied by his sister in whose eyes he recaptures his past self and his past impressions of the same landscape and wider nature. This leads the poet to announce that his sister should never forget that nature never betrays the heart that loves her and submits before the magnitude of its captivating and healing force. Nature, forever, leads man to joys in such a way that his mind is never affected by the cheerlessness of urban life, the lip-service of hypocritical men, the crudities and harshness of people and social customs. If in future years she is afflicted by misery or loneliness, her mind will yield the memories of natural beauty which will restore her tired spirit. Even when her brother is no longer with her, she should always remember that it is because of her presence beside him that he could enjoy the sights and sounds of the banks of the Wye more vigorously by seeing a reflection of his earlier self in her eyes. The poem ends with a prayer for his sister and an assertion of his continuing love for nature which is now “holier” than ever before.

Critical Commentary

The final stanza of Wordsworth’s poem is in one way a reiteration of the captivating and revitalizing, redeeming, transcending, trans-substantiating potency of nature. However, more significantly, the stanza stands as a progression. It offers the sublime heights of Wordsworth’s ideas related to nature and in many ways his critique of man’s unnatural social existence. Wordsworth stands as a firm believer of the fact that Nature has not merely curative potencies; it is the sole guide and friend to humanity. It is a mother that nourishes the child in man, fills its mind with spontaneous overflow of calmness and gentle graciousness. It restores and replenishes the broken spirit of man. It heals the external body as well as the maladies of the internal self. Wordsworth critiques the so called elitism of the urban world where development has only given more fuel to the hypocrisies of the world. The spontaneity of the natural world stands in opposition to the mechanical status of human life in urban setting. Nature here is no longer a backdrop but an animated presence reaching out to man.

Significantly enough, the poem, after revealing the inter-connectedness of man and nature in the pursuit of mutual growth in the previous stanza now declares another philosophy of inter-subjectivity. The poet's sister in the present context offers the poet a glimpse of his previous self. T.S. Eliot's 'Burnt Norton' in *The Four Quartets* begins with the famous lines:

'Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past'.

Reading these lines you will realise that past, present and future is brought within an overarching vision. The poet experiences the present in the light of the past while looking into the future with the benefit of present convictions. In 'My Heart Leaps Up', which is also known as 'The Rainbow', Wordsworth famously declared that 'Child is the father of man'. This epigrammatic expression is sometimes interpreted in a line which holds the view that the adult is the by-product of the behaviours and habits that it had as a child. In the wild eyes of his sister Wordsworth sees his own past, while realising that such a state cannot be permanent. Yet he is reassured by the conviction that her future selfhood will be sanctified by its association just as his own is. This is a domain of inter-connectedness of not merely the times past, present, and future, or merely the specific landscape in its physicality and the universal nature in all its metaphysical, spiritual dimensions. It is quite significantly the spontaneous association and union of individuals. It is a phenomenon of inter-subjectivity, a phenomenon which reflects how nature turns out to be the sole guide and vehicle in uniting different human beings and their experiences in the context of a submission before nature in opposition to the gaps and cracks in human relations in the social existence of man. This is a celebration of nature, and more importantly a glorification of man in nature rather than the man in society.

Points to Ponder:

- How does nature heal the wounds inflicted by society?
- How does Wordsworth describe his enduring relationship with nature?

2.7.6: Analysis of Major Themes

❖ ‘Tintern Abbey’ as a Romantic Poem:

Wordsworth is noted as the most significant exponent of Romantic poetics which displayed a sharp break from the Neo-Classical tendencies of versification, insistence on poetic diction, and a mathematically studied craftsmanship in the realm of poetic creation. This revolt is often associated with a ‘return to nature’ a phrase which may be interpreted in more than one way. On the one hand it suggests a glorification of the ‘natural’ as opposed to the ‘artificial’, on the other hand it is also a new way of looking at the spiritual impact of nature rather than its purely picturesque aspect. The Romantic sublime captures a sense of the wonder and awe inspired by nature’s aspects which reaches beyond the material prospect and creates a phenomenon that is transcendent. The poet became the interpreter of the language of the metaphysical realm as revealed in the book of nature. *Lyrical Ballads* announced the primacy of this new way of looking at nature, not through the naked eyes, but through the lens of the imagination and reflection.

The volume also unveiled a new kind of aesthetics which sought to employ the vocabulary of ordinary speech to poetic expression, thereby extending the search for the ‘natural’ to the realm of artistic expression as well. Wordsworth’s Romanticism is associated with the glorification of spontaneity associated with the natural world and the innate nature of man. But this spontaneity is heavily mediated by reflection and meditation. In its very lyrical style, ‘Tintern Abbey’ displays a subjective exploration of nature by viewing it as the expression and extension of human subjectivity. Nature here is not objectively displayed. Rather the poem explores nature by projecting upon it a subjective, metaphysical vision of the link between man and nature. The poem justifies M.H. Abrams’ view that the Romantic lyric is basically meditative in nature. It begins with a specified locale but soon digresses to a more abstract philosophical cogitation before returning to the specificity place with a deeper understanding of its importance to the inner life of the poet.

The landscape of the banks of Wye is most evocatively displayed and serves as the backdrop of the poem. This display offers a switch in the context of contemporary scenes available in English poetry of the period. The lines:

‘steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky...’
or those such as,
‘plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves
‘Mid groves and copses.’

provide a pastoral landscape in place of largely urban images of contemporary Neo- Classical literature. However, nature, as displayed in the quoted lines, does not merely appear as a mere background, for Wordsworth always views nature as a phenomenon more internally and spiritually located with man as the chief proprietor of thoughts and impressions. It comes alive through the thoughts and feelings of man. This indeed is the ultimate expression of the ‘egotistical sublime’ which is Wordsworth’s unique contribution to Romantic aesthetics.

Nature in Wordsworth is also a locale of spontaneity. In his ‘Preface’ to the *Lyrical Ballads* he famously stated that poetry has its source in the ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ and finally matures and voices itself as ‘emotions recollected in tranquillity’. Significantly enough, nature for him represents a serene realm in which the natural, unspoilt, impulses of the heart can be recalled. It rejuvenates man by offering an escape from the hypocrisies of social existence and revealing the sublime aspect of creation. This synergy is displayed by Wordsworth’s philosophy of man-nature interdependence for mutual growth, in his critique of vain urbanity, in his insistence on a vocabulary of words which are regularly used in the daily course of human conversation, and an utter rejection of Neo-Classical craftsmanship in ‘Tintern Abbey’.

❖ Autobiographical Elements in ‘Tintern Abbey’:

‘Tintern Abbey’ in many ways presages *The Prelude* which Wordsworth subtitled ‘the Growth of a Poet’s Mind’. The poem which is based on the context of his individual journeys through the banks of Wye, is also a record of his intellectual

journey from a life of instincts to one of meditative thoughts and wisdom. The actual circumstance of the composition of this poem, the walking trip and the mention of his own sister is to be found in references to it in his letter written to Miss Fenwick.

Critics such as Nicholas Roe have pointed out that the passage of time emphasised in the beginning of the poem draw the attention of the reader to the date of his first visit, which was significant both in terms of political and personal experiences. In 1793 Wordsworth was recently returned from France and was still dealing with his disappointment with the gory path the French Revolution had taken. England had just declared war on Republican France. The English countryside may then have provided him with a refuge from the turmoil raging outside. The entire poem can be read as a personal evaluation of his own experiences in connection with the pastoral world around Tintern abbey and the wider nature beyond it which was such a contrast to the war of ideologies in the world outside.

Principally, however, his poem must be read as a reflection of the Romantic principles in the evaluation of nature and man's connectedness to the same. The poem is a philosophical revelation and in many ways is prescribing paths that shall enable humanity to view in nature a guide, a sublime reflection of humanity, an expression of man's own being, consciousness, and conscience. There is no doubt in stating that Wordsworth's poem is based on a personal experience and association involving nature, and in more ways than one the poem narrates in the manner of spiritual autobiography the poet's maturation. However, the poem, in stating that his past is contained in his sister's present, in stating that nature never betrays the heart that loves it, in finding in nature the expression of purest humanity reflects more than a mere personal account or an autobiographical documentation.

❖ Wordsworth's Views on Nature in 'Tintern Abbey':

In Romantic poetry nature is never a mere background but an expression of humanity and a reservoir of joys attainable. The climactic lines of "Tintern Abbey" in which Wordsworth asserts his enduring relationship with nature reveals

how nebulous a concept nature can be. Based on the report of the senses, the human consciousness constructs its own view of nature: the sensuous pleasures of boyhood, the solace of the tortured mind, the guide and the teacher who directs the actions and moral nature of man, nature reveals its many faces at different stages of a man's life. If a man is able to comprehend nature as no mere external attribute or presence, but one that resonates with a great power, then it has the potency to liberate man from the petty concerns of daily life by presenting before him a spectacle of sublime aspect which penetrates deep into man's psyche. Wordsworth's ideas seem to echo the 'Associationist' ideas of David Hartley. It is poised on three states of development, sensation, reflection and visionary insight.

Sensations derived from the objects of the senses lead to reflection and culminate in complex insight. Once that is achieved the matured man shall look upon nature as:

A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

Wordsworth's pantheistic glorification of nature stands as a foil to his critique of the hypocrisy of the world of social customs and bondage for it is Nature which stays loyal and benevolent to the heart that loves it. It educates man in delightful and philosophical manners. As he says in 'The Tables Turned':

Let Nature be your teacher.
.....
One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

Wordsworth probably recognizes that Nature is the mother who reveals herself in all the beauties of man's creation and must, therefore, be worshiped. In 'The Sparrow's Nest' he writes:

She gave me eyes, she gave me ears;
And humble care, and delicate fears;
A heart, the fountain of sweet tears;
And love, and thought, and joy.

The same sentiment is expressed by him in 'Tintern Abbey',
for to Wordsworth Nature is,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

❖ Form and Vocabulary in 'Tintern Abbey':

In the 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth reacted sharply against the preconditioning of metre and rhyme in poetry in the Neo-Classical tradition of Pope and others. He favoured spontaneity over such restrictive views of poetic creation. As you have already learnt, Wordsworth prioritised a simple conversational tone and the vocabulary of daily human interaction and thought it to be the sole medium of narrating his experiences and evaluation of man and nature. A natural expression was preferred over the highly scholarly techniques of Neo-Classical poetry. Wordsworth proclaims in the 'Preface' that the poet is a "Man speaking to Men". His chosen subject matter is culled from incidents of everyday life over which a colouring of the imagination has been added. Wordsworth chose to 'to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature'. In doing so, the poet employed a selection of language really used by men. The poet is a teacher in Wordsworth. And since his primary aim is to teach he must reveal the sublime available in the mundane. Such a revelation is best done when the teacher uses lucid language and a simple conversational tone. Justifying the use of such simple language he writes:

such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings,
is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that
which is frequently substituted for it by Poets, who think that they are
conferring honour upon themselves and their art, in proportion as they

separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation.

‘Tintern Abbey’ is written in blank verse which is unrhymed and is closest to the cadence of regular prose used in ordinary conversation in the human world. This in a way is a celebration of the ‘naked dignity of man’ in theme and style. The form in Wordsworth is not decorative. It is immensely significant in reflecting the mood and ethos of the poem. The celebration of rusticity along with spontaneity of thought and expression is central to Wordsworth’s romantic vision. He uses blank verse and a vocabulary which is only deceptively simple since it touches and theorises on the most sublime spiritual questions that man encounters. The use of iambic pentameter allows the poem to be lucidly simple and slight variations of the metrical arrangements in lines such as ‘Here, under this dark sycamore, and view’ only make the poem more spontaneously alive.

The poet’s insistence on spontaneity does not harm the closely knit argumentative structure that the poem establishes, for in the poem lies a well devised stanza-wise development of the main argument of the poem. The first stanza develops the mood of return to nature with the themes of spiritual growth, memory, and so on. The second stanza and the third stanza reiterate the growth of nature’s influence within man in order to eradicate traces of melancholy. The fourth shows the stages of man’s development in relation to nature. Finally, the fifth prescribes submission of man before Nature for the development of his own consciousness and moral being.

2.7.7: Summing Up

‘Tintern Abbey’, we might say, is *The Prelude* in its miniature form. *The Prelude*, a very long autobiographical poem in blank verse, gives the readers a vivid and attractive account of the “Growth of a Poet’s Mind”. Wordsworth points out how his mature attitude towards man and Nature is the last of the three stages through which he has passed while growing up. You will find that the first two stages are chronicled in the first two books of *The Prelude*; the

third is described in book VIII.

As we have seen in this Unit, ‘Tintern Abbey’ is unquestionably one of the finest poems in English language and certainly the best and most important of Wordsworth’s contributions to the *Lyrical Ballads*. You will be surprised to know that Sri Aurobindo had poems like *Tintern Abbey* in mind when he wrote in the concluding paragraph of Chapter XVII of *The Future Poetry* (Pondicherry, 1991,p.118): “But still one of the seer-poets he (Wordsworth) is, a seer of the calm spirit in Nature, the poet of man’s large identity with her and serene liberating communion: it is on this side that he is admirable and unique.”

Our reading of ‘Tintern Abbey’ in this Unit has brought home the following:

- The evolutionary stages in Wordsworth’s appreciation of Nature
- The perception of Nature as a living entity, one that can serve to mediate between human beings and Divinity
- The passage of thoughts in the poet’s mind that can link perception to reflection
- The abiding value of communion with Nature

2.7.8. Comprehension Exercises

A. Long Answer Type Questions:

1. Discuss the Romantic elements in “Tintern Abbey” with suitable illustrations from the text.
2. In what ways is “Tintern Abbey” a celebration of Nature? Discuss Wordsworth’s views on Nature in answering the question.
3. Discuss “Tintern Abbey” as an expression of Wordsworth’s philosophy.

B. Medium Length Answer Type Questions:

1. Bring out the autobiographical elements in “Tintern Abbey.”
2. Comment on the language and style of “Tintern Abbey.”

C. Short Answer Type Questions:

1. Discuss the poet's feelings about nature during his first visit of the "Tintern Abbey" landscape.
2. What impact of nature was observable on the mind of the poet during the five years of the physical absence of the landscape?
3. Explain with suitable reference to the context the following lines:

Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her;

2.7.9: Suggested Reading

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Sengupta, Debjani and Shernaz Cama (Eds). *Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge*. Worldview Pub., 2003.

Unit 8 □ Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Christabel – Part I

Structure:

- 2.8.1. Objectives
- 2.8.2. Introduction
- 2.8.3. Text of “Christabel” Part 1
- 2.8.4. Annotations
- 2.8.5. Central Idea
- 2.8.6. Substance and Critical Summary
- 2.8.7. Themes
- 2.8.8. Summing Up
- 2.8.9. Comprehension Exercises
- 2.8.10. Suggested Reading

2.8.1: Objectives

It is only proper that your introduction to William Wordsworth be followed by your acquaintance with Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), his co-contributor in the *Lyrical Ballads*. While the present poem was not included in the collection, it is important because it gives an understanding of the other end of the spectrum of Romantic Poetry – treatment of the supernatural. You have on your syllabus only Part 1 of the poem, but that will give you an ample idea of the ways in which Coleridge uses the supernatural to secure a degree of psychological conditioning necessary to execute his theme. Our objective in this Unit is therefore to explore how the aspect of supernatural is brought into play by Coleridge, and to what effect it impacts our moral-psychological frames.

2.8.2: Introduction

“Christabel,” which is usually looked upon as one of the finest supernatural poems by S. T. Coleridge, brings back to one’s mind echoes of the tales of wonder involving

supernatural agencies, popularised by the German Romantics during the eighteenth century. Originally meant to be in five parts, he could not finish more than two, though he struggled with it for years. The poem thus remains a fragment. The first part of *Christabel* was written in 1797 at Nether Stowey, Somerset, while the second part was composed in 1800 at Keswick, Cumberland, after the poet's return from Germany. Factors like personal indolence, domestic discord, disagreements with intimate friends like Lamb and Lloyd, and above all, lack of poetic enthusiasm might have impeded him from completing the poem, though he tried again and again to give it a complete shape. Over the years, there were many references by the poet, to his struggles with finishing the poem, though he claimed: "The reason for my not finishing 'Christabel' is not that I don't know how to do it – for I have, as I always had, the whole plan entire from beginning till the end in my mind, but I fear I cannot carry on with equal success of execution of the idea, an extremely subtle and difficult one". Wordsworth however, was rather sceptical of this claim. The truth is that Coleridge seems to have felt a strange revulsion in carrying on with the poem. The first part of "Christabel" was intended for inclusion in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), but it was finally debarred from inclusion since this part was not technically complete by that time. Though it was subsequently decided that both parts would be included in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800, the plan was never translated into reality. For, the style of the second part of "Christabel" appeared so 'discordant' from that of Wordsworth that he thought it could not be printed by the side of his own poems 'with any propriety.' Coleridge however, thought that his poem failed to receive accommodation chiefly because of its inordinate length. The poem thus lay unpublished, though the manuscript was circulated and read by many in the Romantic circle. In 1816, John Murray, on the recommendation of Lord Byron, published it under the title *Christabel and Other Poems*, the accompanying pieces being another Coleridge masterpiece "Kubla Khan" and "The Pains of Sleep."

For an understanding of the music of the poem, you would do good to keep in mind what Coleridge himself pointed out as a metrical principle in the poem – "... counting in each lines the accents, not the syllables."

2.8.3: TEXT

‘CHRISTABEL’

*'Tis the middle of night by the castle clock,
And the owls have awakened the crowing cock;
Tu—whit! Tu—whoo!*

*And hark, again! the crowing cock,
How drowsily it crew.*

*Sir Leoline, the Baron rich,
Hath a toothless mastiff bitch;*

*From her kennel beneath the rock S
he maketh answer to the clock,*

10

*Four for the quarters, and twelve for the hour;
Ever and aye, by shine and shower,*

*Sixteen short howls, not over loud;
Some say, she sees my lady's shroud.*

*Is the night chilly and dark?
The night is chilly, but not dark.*

*The thin gray cloud is spread on high,
It covers but not hides the sky.*

*The moon is behind, and at the full;
And yet she looks both small and dull.*

20

*The night is chill, the cloud is gray: '
Tis a month before the month of May,*

And the Spring comes slowly up this way.

*The lovely lady, Christabel,
Whom her father loves so well,*

*What makes her in the wood so late,
A furlong from the castle gate?*

*She had dreams all yesternight
Of her own betrothèd knight;
And she in the midnight wood will pray
For the weal of her lover that's far away.
She stole along, she nothing spoke,
The sighs she heaved were soft and low,
And naught was green upon the oak
But moss and rarest misletoe:
She kneels beneath the huge oak tree,
And in silence prayeth she.*

*The lady sprang up suddenly,
The lovely lady Christabel!*

40

*It moaned as near, as near can be,
But what it is she cannot tell.—
On the other side it seems to be,
Of the huge, broad-breasted, old oak tree.
The night is chill; the forest bare;
Is it the wind that moaneth bleak?
There is not wind enough in the air
To move away the ringlet curl
From the lovely lady's cheek—
There is not wind enough to twirl*

*The one red leaf, the last of its clan,
That dances as often as dance it can,
Hanging so light, and hanging so high,
On the topmost twig that looks up at the sky.
Hush, beating heart of Christabel!
Jesu, Maria, shield her well!
She folded her arms beneath her cloak,*

50

And stole to the other side of the oak.

What sees she there?

*There she sees a damsel bright,
Drest in a silken robe of white,*

60

*That shadowy in the moonlight shone:
The neck that made that white robe wan,
Her stately neck, and arms were bare;
Her blue-veined feet unsandl'd were,
And wildly glittered here and there*

The gems entangled in her hair.

*I guess, 'twas frightful there to see
A lady so richly clad as she—
Beautiful exceedingly!*

Mary mother, save me now!

(Said Christabel) And who art thou?

*The lady strange made answer meet,
And her voice was faint and sweet:—
Have pity on my sore distress,*

I scarce can speak for weariness:

*Stretch forth thy hand, and have no fear!
Said Christabel, How camest thou here?*

*And the lady, whose voice was faint and sweet,
Did thus pursue her answer meet:—*

My sire is of a noble line,

And my name is Geraldine:

80

*Five warriors seized me yesternorn,
Me, even me, a maid forlorn:*

*They choked my cries with force and fright,
And tied me on a palfrey white.*

*The palfrey was as fleet as wind,
And they rode furiously behind.*

They spurred amain, their steeds were white:

*And once we crossed the shade of night.
As sure as Heaven shall rescue me,*

I have no thought what men they be; 90

*Nor do I know how long it is
(For I have lain entranced I wis)
Since one, the tallest of the five,*

*Took me from the palfrey's back,
A weary woman, scarce alive.*

Some muttered words his comrades spoke:

He placed me underneath this oak;

*He swore they would return with haste;
Whither they went I cannot tell—*

I thought I heard, some minutes past, 100

Sounds as of a castle bell.

*Stretch forth thy hand (thus ended she).
And help a wretched maid to flee.*

*Then Christabel stretched forth her hand,
And comforted fair Geraldine:*

*O well, bright dame! may you command
The service of Sir Leoline;*

And gladly our stout chivalry 110

*Will he send forth and friends withal
To guide and guard you safe and free
Home to your noble father's hall.*

She rose: and forth with steps they passed

*That strove to be, and were not, fast.
Her gracious stars the lady blest,
And thus spake on sweet Christabel:
All our household are at rest,
The hall as silent as the cell;
Sir Leoline is weak in health,
And may not well awakened be,
But we will move as if in stealth,
And I beseech your courtesy,
This night, to share your couch with me.
They crossed the moat, and Christabel
Took the key that fitted well;
A little door she opened straight,
All in the middle of the gate;
The gate that was ironed within and without,
Where an army in battle array had marched out.
The lady sank, belike through pain,
And Christabel with might and main
Lifted her up, a weary weight,
Over the threshold of the gate:
Then the lady rose again,
And moved, as she were not in pain.
So free from danger, free from fear;
They crossed the court: right glad they were.
And Christabel devoutly cried
To the lady by her side,
Praise we the Virgin all divine
Who hath rescued thee from thy distress!*

*Alas, alas! said Geraldine,
I cannot speak for weariness.
So free from danger, free from fear,
They crossed the court: right glad they were.
Outside her kennel, the mastiff old
Lay fast asleep, in moonshine cold.
The mastiff old did not awake,
Yet she an angry moan did make!
And what can ail the mastiff bitch?
Never till now she uttered yell
Beneath the eye of Christabel.
Perhaps it is the owlet's scritch:
For what can ail the mastiff bitch?
They passed the hall, that echoes still,
Pass as lightly as you will!
The brands were flat, the brands were dying,
Amid their own white ashes lying;
But when the lady passed, there came
A tongue of light, a fit of flame;
And Christabel saw the lady's eye,
And nothing else saw she thereby,
Save the boss of the shield of Sir Leoline tall,
Which hung in a murky old niche in the wall.
O softly tread, said Christabel,
My father seldom sleepeth well.
Sweet Christabel her feet doth bare,
And jealous of the listening air
They steal their way from stair to stair;*

*Now in glimmer, and now in gloom,
And now they pass the Baron's room, 170
As still as death, with stifled breath!
And now have reached her chamber door;
And now doth Geraldine press down
The rushes of the chamber floor.
The moon shines dim in the open air,
And not a moonbeam enters here.
But they without its light can see
The chamber carved so curiously,
Carved with figures strange and sweet,
All made out of the carver's brain, 180
For a lady's chamber meet:
The lamp with twofold silver chain
Is fastened to an angel's feet.
The silver lamp burns dead and dim;
But Christabel the lamp will trim.
She trimmed the lamp, and made it bright,
And left it swinging to and fro,
While Geraldine, in wretched plight,
Sank down upon the floor below.
O weary lady, Geraldine, 190
I pray you, drink this cordial wine!
It is a wine of virtuous powers;
My mother made it of wild flowers.
And will your mother pity me,
Who am a maiden most forlorn?
Christabel answered—Woe is me!*

She died the hour that I was born.

*I have heard the grey-haired friar tell
How on her death-bed she did say,
That she should hear the castle-bell
Strike twelve upon my wedding-day.
O mother dear! that thou wert here!
I would, said Geraldine, she were!*

200

*But soon with altered voice, said she—
'Off, wandering mother! Peak and pine!
I have power to bid thee flee.'*

Alas! what ails poor Geraldine?

*Why stares she with unsettled eye?
Can she the bodiless dead espy?*

*And why with hollow voice cries she,
'Off, woman, off! this hour is mine—
Though thou her guardian spirit be,
Off, woman, off! 'tis given to me.'*

*Then Christabel knelt by the lady's side,
And raised to heaven her eyes so blue—
Alas! said she, this ghastly ride—*

*Dear lady! it hath wildered you!
The lady wiped her moist cold brow,
And faintly said, ' 'tis over now!'*

*Again the wild-flower wine she drank:
Her fair large eyes 'gan glitter bright,
And from the floor whereon she sank,
The lofty lady stood upright:*

*She was most beautiful to see,
Like a lady of a far countrée.
And thus the lofty lady spake—*

*'All they who live in the upper sky,
Do love you, holy Christabel!*

*And you love them, and for their sake
And for the good which me befel,
Even I in my degree will try,*

*Fair maiden, to requite you well.
But now unrobe yourself; for
I Must pray, ere yet in bed I lie.'*

*Quoth Christabel, So let it be!
And as the lady bade, did she.
Her gentle limbs did she undress,*

*And lay down in her loveliness.
But through her brain of weal and woe
So many thoughts moved to and fro*

*That vain it were her lids to close;
So half-way from the bed she rose,
And on her elbow did recline*

To look at the lady Geraldine.

*Beneath the lamp the lady bowed,
And slowly rolled her eyes around;
Then drawing in her breath aloud,
Like one that shuddered, she unbound
The cincture from beneath her breast:*

Her silken robe, and inner vest,

250

*Dropt to her feet, and full in view,
Behold! her bosom and half her side—
A sight to dream of, not to tell!*

O shield her! shield sweet Christabel!

Yet Geraldine nor speaks nor stirs;

Ah! what a stricken look was hers!
Deep from within she seems half-way
To lift some weight with sick assay,
And eyes the maid and seeks delay;
Then suddenly, as one defied, 260
Collects herself in scorn and pride,
And lay down by the Maiden's side!—
And in her arms the maid she took,
Ah wel-a-day!
And with low voice and doleful look
These words did say:
'In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell,
Which is lord of thy utterance, Christabel!
Thou knowest to-night, and wilt know to-morrow,
This mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow; 270
But vainly thou warrest,
For this is alone in
Thy power to declare,
That in the dim forest
Thou heard'st a low moaning,
And found'st a bright lady, surpassingly fair;
And didst bring her home with thee in love and in charity,
To shield her and shelter her from the damp air.'

THE CONCLUSION TO PART THE FIRST

It was a lovely sight to see 280
The lady Christabel, when she
Was praying at the old oak tree.
Amid the jagged shadows

*Of mossy leafless boughs,
Kneeling in the moonlight,
To make her gentle vows;
Her slender palms together prest,
Heaving sometimes on her breast;
Her face resigned to bliss or bale—
Her face, oh call it fair not pale,
And both blue eyes more bright than clear,
Each about to have a tear.*

290

*With open eyes (ah woe is me!)
Asleep, and dreaming fearfully,
Fearfully dreaming, yet, I wis,
Dreaming that alone, which is—
O sorrow and shame! Can this be she,
The lady, who knelt at the old oak tree?
And lo! the worker of these harms,*

*That holds the maiden in her arms,
Seems to slumber still and mild,*

300

*As a mother with her child.
A star hath set, a star hath risen,
O Geraldine! since arms of thine
Have been the lovely lady's prison.
O Geraldine! one hour was thine—*

*Thou'st had thy will! By tairn and rill,
The night-birds all that hour were still.
But now they are jubilant anew,*

*From cliff and tower, tu—whoo! tu—whoo!
Tu—whoo! tu—whoo! from wood and fell!
And see! the lady Christabel*

310

Gathers herself from out her trance;

*Her limbs relax, her countenance
Grows sad and soft; the smooth thin lids
Close o'er her eyes; and tears she sheds—
Large tears that leave the lashes bright!
And oft the while she seems to smile
As infants at a sudden light!*

*Yea, she doth smile, and she doth weep,
Like a youthful hermitess,* 320

*Beauteous in a wilderness,
Who, praying always, prays in sleep.
And, if she move unquietly,
Perchance, 'tis but the blood so free
Comes back and tingles in her feet.
No doubt, she hath a vision sweet.
What if her guardian spirit 'twere,
What if she knew her mother near?
But this she knows, in joys and woes,
That saints will aid if men will call:* 330

For the blue sky bends over all.

2.8.4: Annotations

Drowsily (l. 5): sleepily.

Ever and aye (l.11): always; offering no exception.

Shroud (l.13): a piece of cloth used to cover a dead body before burial. Here it implies spirit or ghost.

Weal (l.30): wellbeing. **Damsel (l. 58):** maiden. **Clad (l.67):** dressed.

Meet (l. 71): proper.

Sire (l.79): father (archaic).

Palfrey (l. 84): horse.

Swore (l. 98): promised.

Moat (l.123): a defensive ditch full of water around a castle.

Belike (l. 129): possibly, as if.

Might and main (l.130): entire physical strength.

Gloom (l. 169): here it implies darkness.

Cordial (l. 191): refreshing.

Woe (l.195): sorrow.

Peak and pine (l. 205): waste and wither away.

Lofty (l. 223): tall.

Countree (l.225): country (archaic)

Unrobe (l.233): undress. **Doleful (l.265):** gloomy. **Utterance (l. 268):** speech.
Shield (l. 278): protect.

Jagged (l. 282): irregular in shape.

Tairn (l. 306): a small mountain lake.

Rill (l.306): a small stream or rivulet (poetic).

Countenance (l. 313): face.

2.8.5: Central Idea

The basic question we need to ask ourselves is if there is at all a any one central idea in the poem. For one thing, “Christabel,” an unfinished poem, has defied explanations. On the surface, you might think that the poem is meant simply to arouse a flesh-creeping supernatural sensation in the reader. In fact, the poem did evoke strong, but mixed reactions on this account. Moreover, by introducing the undressing scene of Geraldine, which was followed by her physical proximity with Christabel, Coleridge also invited charges of obscenity. An impartial reading of the text would however, make us perceive that the poem definitely contains a subtler allegory. Here Geraldine stands as a symbol of evil, whose deceptive appearance bemuses the virtuous Christabel, destroying her uncompromised innocence. But, is it in the power of evil to despoil innocence unless it is aided by the latter itself?

In the poem Geraldine repeatedly sinks down and appears to shrink back, but it is Christabel herself, who leads her into the sanctity of her bedchamber. Remember also that Christabel leaves the security of her father's home to steal out to the wood, in order to pray for her beloved. She herself transgresses the boundaries which moor her to a protected world of innocence. Could Coleridge be suggesting that the knowledge which Geraldine brings with her is a part of the process of maturity? Maybe, the answer will always be elusive.

Why was Christabel, the virtuous and innocent maiden, so easily susceptible to Geraldine? Why did she have to go through the shame and horror associated with Geraldine's touch? Did her pure innocence make her defenceless against the corruption of Geraldine? Or was the latter a kind of alter ego which asserted itself at a psychological moment. In other words, did Geraldine's spell bring her quite paradoxically to a more complete understanding of life? Seen thus, the poem is not simply a fantastic melodrama bordering on obscenity, but has deeper psychological implications.

2.8.6: Substance and Critical Commentary

Lines 1-5: The poem opens against the background of a medieval castle. It is midnight by the castle clock, and the screeching of the owls has suddenly awakened the cock whose untimely crowing seems but a drowsy, somewhat weird call. There seems to be a premonition of something unnatural that is to follow.

Lines 6-21: Coleridge alludes to common superstitions with his reference to the strange habit of the old mastiff bitch. We learn that the owner of the castle is a rich baron, named Sir Leoline. The howling of the mastiff bitch in response to the sound of the clock, suggest to some that she can espy the spirit of the baron's deceased wife, who seems to hover like a guardian angel.

The description of the night in the following lines reinforces the sense of some impending disaster. It is a night in April, but spring is yet to arrive. The dim moonlight, the hide and seek of light and darkness invests the night with a sense of mystery.

Critical commentary

Coleridge fully utilises the eerie effects of the “accidents of light and shade” in his opening stanzas. The setting reminds us of gothic tales of horror which are often filled with transgressions of all kinds.

Lines 23-57: We are now introduced to Christabel, the central character of the poem. She is a lovely lady, and as an only daughter well deserves the love of her father, Sir Leoline. But, she stealthily steps out into the woods as she had been disturbed the previous night by bad dreams about her betrothed knight. That is why she goes into the night to pray for his wellbeing. She is the very picture of silence and piety as she kneels in prayer below the oak tree. Suddenly, however, the stillness of the night is broken by a moan which startles Christabel. Since there is not enough air even to lift a single curl of her hair, or move the last dry leaf in the tree, she is filled with a sudden fear which makes her heart race. Yet she folds her arms beneath her cloak in determination, and moves to the other side of the oak to discover the source of the moaning. The poet invokes the holy spirit of “Jesu Maria” to protect her.

Lines 58-122: On the other side of the tree Christabel discovers, with surprise and fear, a bright lady, who is richly dressed. She has a pale, stately beauty, but there is also an air of wild disarray about her which suggests some terrible experience. To Christabel’s query she responds in a faint yet sweet voice that she comes of a noble family and that her name is Geraldine. The previous day she was abducted by a group of warriors, who left her alone in the woods swearing that they would return soon. She holds her hand out and appeals to Christabel to help her flee.

Christabel, herself a lady of piety, immediately extends hospitality to the lady on her father’s behalf. As the old Sir Leoline is weak in health, Christabel thinks it fit not to awaken him. She decides to shelter Geraldine for the night in her own bedchamber. They cross the ditch and arrive at the castle gate.

Critical Commentary

The name Christabel, meaning a follower of Christ, suggests holiness and faith. It may also suggest a redemptive figure whose suffering releases others.

Even as she steps out of the castle gate, she has a spontaneous faith which seems to inspire her actions. Geraldine, on the other hand, seems to be drawn from a long tradition of vampire tales, or the Greek Lamia, an unfulfilled soul in search of revenge. Her eager reaching out for Christabel's touch suggests a need for a reciprocal gesture from the girl. But, we may never be sure whether her intention is only to corrupt the girl, or, to redeem herself.

As Christabel's silent prayer is disrupted by an eerie sensation of a second presence, Coleridge uses short, breathless questions to build up a sinister atmosphere. Geraldine's tale of abduction is unconvincing, but, it reinforces the idea of the hidden perils of the night. It has the desired effect of appealing to Christabel's sympathy. The line- "And once we crossed the shades of night"- gives an early indication of Geraldine's true nature, as it seems to hint that she is a spirit who has broken away from the dark shades in search of a virtuous soul who will rescue her.

Lines 123-165: Before she enters the castle, Geraldine sinks down at the iron gate, apparently because of weariness. Christabel lifts her up using all her strength, and carries her in. She instinctively prays to the Virgin Mary, and requests Geraldine to join her prayers. The latter however, discards the request pleading weariness.

Outside her kennel, the old mastiff lies asleep. She does not awake as the two ladies pass by her, but growls in her sleep. This seems unusual, because until then, the mastiff bitch has never uttered the shortest of yells in Christabel's presence.

The half-extinguished hearth inside the castle which suddenly flames up at the entry of Geraldine, also arrests our attention. Bemused, Christabel, glances at Geraldine's eyes, but sees in them nothing other than the reflection of Sir Leoline's shield hung on the wall.

Lines 166-189: The ladies now move upstairs silently ("jealous of the listening air") in the shadowy lights of the castle. They pass the baron's room, and finally reach Christabel's bedchamber. Though the moonbeams do not enter the room, its

interiors are dimly visible in the dying flame of a silver lamp. It is richly decorated to suit the lady who lives in it, and the lamp is fastened with a twofold silver chain to the feet of the image of an angel. Christabel brightens the light, while Geraldine, in wretched plight, sinks down upon the floor once again.

Lines 190-203: Perceiving the distress of Geraldine, Christabel offers her a refreshing drink, which her mother made of wild flowers. Geraldine feigns eagerness to beg the hospitality of Christabel's mother. At this Christabel answers that her mother died the moment she was born, with the wish to come back on the day of her daughter's marriage. Christabel sincerely wishes if her mother were present then, and Geraldine seems to echo her.

Critical Commentary

Geraldine's fainting at the iron gate, the growling mastiff bitch and the leaping flame of the dying hearth, are all the stuff of prevailing superstitions which Coleridge uses to warn us of the true nature of the strange woman who is brought into the castle by Christabel. But, even Sir Leoline's shield, symbol of the family's honour, is relegated to a corner and becomes a mere reflection in Geraldine's eye, as Christabel takes her to the bedchamber. Coleridge continues with his play on light and shade in the description of the room, where Geraldine is revived by Christabel. Could the poet be suggesting that in her willingness to entertain the stranger, Christabel too becomes complicit in the latter's design? Or is she the ministering angel who rescues a fallen soul with her pristine innocence? The answer is for the reader to decide.

Lines 204-225 Geraldine seems to have a terrible fit, as in an altogether altered tone, she curses Christabel's mother and bids her wither away. Possibly she senses the protective spirit of the mother, as she claims in an unnatural voice that the hour is hers.

Thinking that the long ride of the previous day has acted upon Geraldine's balance, Christabel tries to soothe her and offers her again the cordial drink made by her mother. Geraldine accepts the drink and slowly gathers up her spirit. She looks exceedingly beautiful as she stands upright again. She seems not to be a usual lady, but a lady, who has come from an unknown and distant region.

Lines 226-244: Geraldine thanks Christabel for her charity and promises to return it as per her capacity. But before that she requests Christabel to undress and to go to bed. She proposes to join her after uttering her prayers. Christabel agrees, but though she undresses and goes to bed, she finds it impossible to close her eyes. For, her mind hardly attains respite from constant worries about her lover. She thus rises from the bed, and reclining on her elbow, fixes her looks at Geraldine.

Critical Commentary

Coleridge uses all the usual symptoms of hysteria to describe Geraldine's fit. Such fits were not uncommon at the time and were usually held to be caused by demonic possession. There seems to be a tussle between her and the dead mother which drains Geraldine till she is revived by Christabel herself. The reference to her "unsettled eye" also continues a series of such references which draw your attention to the tormented state of her soul. As Geraldine stands in all her beauty, the poet seems to be hinting at the deceptive appearance of evil. Even Christabel, already restless, cannot look away from her, thus revealing the compelling fascination of evil. The protective presence of her mother's soul cannot shield her daughter from the predatory evil of Geraldine.

Lines 245-278: Geraldine bows her head beneath the lamp, and slowly rolls her eyes around. She then draws her breath aloud, and in an uncontrollable fit of fear or hatred, she suddenly takes off the cincture from beneath her breast so that her silken robe and inner vest drop down to her feet. Her bosom and half her side are now full in view, and as the poet himself declares, it is a sight only to dream of, not to describe. She then reaches towards the bed and lies down by Christabel, taking the latter in her arms. Then, in a low voice she tells Christabel that the touch of her bosom casts a spell on her, and it will henceforth command over her power of speech. From this moment onward, Christabel will perpetually bear the mark of Geraldine's shame and sorrow. She, henceforth, would be able only to narrate under what circumstances she extended hospitality to Geraldine; but the events that followed would ever remain beyond her capacity to narrate.

Critical Commentary

In these lines Coleridge exploits the full effect of an unarticulated terror. The unspeakable sight binds Christabel to Geraldine in a silent compact which casts its spell over the young girl. You may be filled with curiosity to know what she has seen, but there is no answer. The poet seems to be hinting at a vision which is so terrible that words prove inadequate. By refusing to specify what Christabel sees, Coleridge incites our imagination to visualise our own individual fears, and so recreate within us what she may have felt. This is how a supernatural poem becomes a means of a deeper probing of the psyche in which every reader becomes a participant.

The Conclusion to Part the First

Lines 279-301: Christabel, even as she lies staring blankly, is changed forever by what she has seen. She is no longer the pure innocent who had knelt before the oak tree. Geraldine, on the other hand, seems to have purged herself of her demons as she slept peacefully, like a mother with her child.

Lines 302-310: A star has set, making way for a new star to rise in the firmament of Christabel's fate. Geraldine clearly exploited the advantage of one hour to cast her spell upon Christabel, and throughout that fateful hour, the night birds were unusually silent by the mountain lake and the floating rivulet. But now they are jubilant again to welcome a fresh dawn, and their song gets spread everywhere, from cliff to tower, and from the woods to the level lands.

Lines 311-331: Finally, Christabel's trance is over. Her limbs relax, and the tears which had been held back, overflow her closed eyes. She wavers between tears and smiles, as even in her sleep she continues to pray, like a young hermitess. Sometimes she moves restlessly, but this may well be caused by the quick circulation of her youthful blood, which causes pricking sensation in her feet. Possibly at times, she beholds a sweet vision of her guardian spirit, i.e. her deceased mother, to make her happy again. However, Christabel has, to her final consolation, the reassuring knowledge that saints ever extend their support if men sincerely pray to them, and that the blue sky, i.e. heaven ever showers benediction over all in both joys and woes.

Critical Commentary

The key line of this part is “A star hath set, a star hath risen,” It suggests a fundamental change in Christabel, who was held captive in Geraldine’s embrace. Yet, with all the strength of her faith, Christabel seems to emerge from the nightmare, changed, but strong in her belief that the saints will protect her. The full psychological implication of the poem begins to crystallise here.

This part may also be read as symbolising Christabel’s voluntary acceptance of suffering which will ultimately purge evil of its potency, as we see Geraldine sleeping like a child. Christabel’s trance may remind us of the sufferings of the saints and it finally gives way to a reaffirmation of faith in the concluding lines.

2.8.7: Themes

❖ Medievalism

Romantic medievalism was an answer to classicism and the rule of reason, associated with Neo-classical literature. It employed features like ruins and castles, and stories of supernatural merit, to explore realms of experience far removed from the strictly rational. Coleridge, convinced that ‘distance lends enchantment to the view’, often set his poems in strange and alien lands in order to appeal to the imagination, and coax the readers to accept what would be incredible in the cold light of rationality. “Christabel” represents a curious study of Coleridge’s subtle and exquisite use of medieval elements, which leave a deep and lingering impression in the minds of the readers.

It opens against the backdrop of a medieval castle, with dark stairs, and dimly lit rooms; Christabel’s bedchamber, furnished with “figures strange and sweet”, and a lamp tied to an angel’s feet, reminds us of the wonderfully ornate gothic buildings. The woods outside the castle, where Christabel goes at midnight to pray, represents a space where unknown threats lurk, beyond the ordered world of the castle. The moat which runs round the castle marks a defining line between the two worlds which is transgressed by Christabel.

One of the major themes of the poem is sorcery; for, Geraldine may be easily looked upon as a sorceress, who comes to cast an evil spell upon the innocent lady Christabel. This reminds us of the cult of witchery and superstition, which was common among the people of the Middle Ages. References to the spirit of Christabel's dead mother and the peculiar habit of the mastiff bitch of making exactly sixteen short howls to the midnight clock are aptly used to reinforce a typically medieval atmosphere superstitious fear, which attains full expansion in the overall horror of the scene, where the undressed Geraldine takes Christabel in her arms and casts her hypnotic spell over her.

Coleridge also uses two typically medieval concepts in the poem: piety, and chivalry.

Christabel is characterised as a pious lady with an unwavering faith which is free from doubts. Secondly, upon hearing Geraldine's tale, she extends her hospitality in the true tradition of medieval chivalry. There are also innumerable references to tournaments, adventures and trophies of battles in the poem, which successfully sustain a typically Medieval ambience.

Apart from witchery, the poem also refers to the medieval problems of banditry and harlotry. Geraldine's tale of being abducted by a group of ruffians is believed because of widespread brigandage prevalent at that time. The beautiful Geraldine, with her cinctured breast appears to be an experienced temptress, a suggestion which becomes more obvious in the next part of the poem.

Before we conclude, we should note that Coleridge has used a considerable number of archaic words and phrases, which contribute significantly to heighten the overall medieval atmosphere in the poem. Of these we may mention nouns like 'sire', 'naught', 'palfrey', 'yestermorn', 'yesternight'; adverbs like 'withal', 'belike'; verbs like 'quoth', 'scritch', 'espy'; and finally, phrases like 'ever and aye', 'I wis', 'Woe is me' and 'Ah, wel-a- day'. His attempt to set the poem into the mould of a ballad, where the entire verse is conceived as a statement of a singular bard, also reminds us of the bygone days of the medieval minstrels. In all this, Coleridge succeeds in imparting an unmistakable element of Medievalism, much like his contemporaries like Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott.

❖ Supernaturalism

Coleridge's penchant for the supernatural is already evident in poems like *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Frost at Midnight*. In 'Christabel', he introduces the supernatural in a more complex dimension by launching a character like Geraldine, whose true nature remains ambiguous. She is a witchlike character who puts the innocent heroine under a spell. But she is also a strange, mesmeric, presence in the poem. At times, given the way the two women are linked by touch, we wonder if she is actually Christabel's alter ego, signifying the co-existence of good and evil in the human psyche.

The entire atmosphere is built up by presenting natural objects with an air of mystery which creates an impression of the unnatural; this induces in the readers 'a willing suspension of disbelief' so that they are prepared for the final scene of Geraldine's sorcery with its suggestion of a sensational horror. The 'accidents' of dim moonlight in the wood, or, in Christabel's chamber, create an atmosphere of eerie mystery which sets the tone of the poem. As Christabel steps out into the dim wood, we are filled with a sense of some hidden danger which culminates in her discovery of Geraldine. All this corresponds to the sense of premonition already created by references to the drowsy, untimely call of the crowing cock, the howls of the toothless mastiff in response to the midnight clock, and finally, the wandering spirit of Christabel's deceased mother in the opening lines of the poem. These omens are part of supernatural lore and warn us of the incursion of evil within the protected precincts of the castle.

The enduring interest of the poem lies in the ultimate mystery, left perpetually unresolved by the poet himself. No doubt the details of Geraldine's eyes, gesture, and finally the description of her breasts as 'a sight to dream of, not to tell' mark the pinnacle of sensationalism and horror in the poem; but after the immediate horror is over, we are left with a series of questions never to be answered. What is the status of Geraldine and what is her motive behind casting her spell on Christabel? Can she really espy the spirit of Christabel's dead mother? What does Geraldine mean by the mark of her shame and the seal of her sorrow? What is the peculiarity of Geraldine's bosom and why are the breasts particularly used to cast on Christabel the evil spell? What will happen to Christabel next

– would there be any remedy of her suffering or not? These questions, as we have already observed, have no answer in this poem left incomplete by its poet. It is left to the reader to use his imagination to make up an ending. This makes the poem live on in our mind.

❖ Gothic Elements

The gothic novel was a genre of fiction which enjoyed a great deal of popularity in the 1790s. It was characterized by tales of horror in a romanticised, pseudo- medieval setting. The plots very often dealt with themes of betrayal, revenge, corruption of innocence, often played out through supernatural intervention. It was essentially a genre which dealt with moral and social transgressions, through which the dark, irrational, side of human life could be explored.

Coleridge was familiar with these novels and even reviewed Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk*. Although he disapproved of what he considered their mechanically lurid language, his interest in psychology must have attracted him to this genre as it provided a glimpse into the subconscious realms of human nature. In 'Christabel' we find that he uses many elements of this genre, but, combines them with the allegorical tradition of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. The setting of the poem, the sense of suspense he creates, the eerie half-light in which the events of the night take place, all echo elements of the gothic. Geraldine, a witch masquerading as a victim, is a representation of evil as well as a *femme fatale*. She is also a Lamia-like figure, a kind of snake-woman who is a figure of unfulfilled desires which must prey on the unwary in order to survive. By introducing a subtle sexual element in her embrace of Christabel, Coleridge also reminds us of the many forbidden relationships depicted in gothic novels.

In 'Christabel' Coleridge uses the gothic elements to explore the co-existence of good and evil in the human psyche. He thus, transforms a sensational genre into a more introspective one, using the veil of a fictional tale to focus on the tussle between the forces of light and darkness in the human heart.

2.8.8: Summing Up

In this Unit therefore, we have introduced you to one of the most famous poems

of Coleridge, and thereby to an entirely new kind of poetics of the Romantic period. With help from your counselor, try to read “Kubla Khan” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” to understand the consistent patterns that are at work in the supernatural poems. Through such an exercise, you will definitely discover that the work of Coleridge recalls the tales of wonder involving supernatural agencies, popularised by the German Romantics during the eighteenth century.

2.8.9: Comprehension Exercises

A. Long Answer Type Questions:

1. Attempt a critical appreciation of Coleridge’s “Christabel” (Part I).
2. Would you consider “Christabel” (Part I) as a successful supernatural poem? Substantiate your answer with textual illustrations of the psychological impact of the supernatural.
3. Write a note on the Medieval elements in “Christabel” (Part I).
4. Consider “Christabel” as an adaptation of the gothic mode in literature.

B. Medium Length Answer Type Questions:

1. Is it possible to read “Christabel” (Part I) as an allegorical poem? Substantiate your answer.
2. What is your impression of Geraldine? Answer with textual references.

C. Short Answer Type Questions:

1. Describe the night Christabel comes out to pray in the woods.
2. Where does Christabel discover Geraldine? What does the latter say about herself?
3. How many times does Geraldine sink down upon the ground? How does Christabel help her to gather her spirits?
4. Briefly reproduce the sorcery scene as you find towards the close of the poem.

2.8.10: Suggested Reading

Coburn, Kathleen. *In Pursuit of Coleridge*. The Bodley Head Ltd, 1977.

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Modiano, Raimonda. *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1985.

Spencer Hill, John. *Imagination in Coleridge*. Macmillan, 1978.

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Wheeler, K M. *The Creative Mind in Coleridge's Poetry*. Heinemann Educational Pub., 1981.

Module 3:
British Poetry from Shelley to Arnold

Unit 9 □ Percy Bysshe Shelley: Ode to the West Wind

Structure:

- 3.9.1. Objectives**
- 3.9.2. Introduction**
- 3.9.3. The Ode in Romantic Literature**
- 3.9.4. Text of ‘Ode to the West Wind’**
- 3.9.5. Glossary and Commentary**
- 3.9.6. Development of thought**
- 3.9.7. Key Issues**
- 3.9.8. Summing Up**
- 3.9.9. Comprehension Exercises**
- 3.9.10. Suggested Readings**

3.9.1: Objectives

With P. B. Shelley (1792-1822), we come to what is commonly known as the second generation of Romantic poets. In this Unit we shall have a close textual analysis of Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind’. After reading this Unit you are expected to understand: -

- Shelley’s ideas and beliefs as exemplified in “Ode to the West Wind”
- His striking imagery, pictorial personification and unique similes and metaphors as have been used in the poem
- Shelley’s personal despondency and his prophetic vision as expressed in the poem
- Lyrical quality of “Ode to the West Wind”
- His poetic craftsmanship

3.9.2: Introduction

If you read through the details of Shelley's life, you will find that it was a chequered one. As a Romantic poet Shelley shares certain common characteristics with other great Romantic thinkers like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron and Keats. But Shelley's poetic thought and style are unique. He was much bothered about human bondage, social injustice, inequality etc., though he was, perhaps, conscious of the inevitable gap between desire and fulfillment. Led by his reformatory zeal, he saw the vision of a golden millennium. "Ode to the West Wind" is a representative poem of Shelley, which testifies to his genius as a brilliant artist who knows how to handle both the content and the form. You are advised first to read the text and enjoy the music of the lines. Then you should go for the underlying layers of meaning with the help of the discussions contained in this unit. After reading and rereading the poem, you may make a self-assessment through the questions provided at the end of the Unit.

➤ Composition and Publication

Written between October and November 1819 (first published in the *Prometheus Unbound* volume of 1820), "Ode to the West Wind" is considered to be one of the finest of Shelley's lyrics. In his own note to the poem, Shelley describes the exact circumstances under which the poem was composed:

This poem was conceived and chiefly written in wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, and on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains. They began, as I foresaw, at sunset with a violent tempest of hail and rain, attended by that magnificent thunder and lightning peculiar to the Cisalpine regions.

In a way, the poem is a companion piece to others like "The Cloud," and "To a Skylark," all three standing together, as "an abiding monument to Shelley's passion for the sky," says Desmond King-Hele. Shelley wrote in one of his letters: "I take great delight in watching the changes of the atmosphere."

One very important point about the Ode is its poignant autobiographical significance. When Shelley wrote the poem, he and his wife were passing through

peculiar mixed feelings. There was sadness for the death of a child (William) and also some joyous expectation of a new child who was going to be born (Percy Florence). The Shelleys were naturally thinking in terms of birth, death and rebirth – creation, destruction, and re-creation. This eternal process, which is at work in human life, is found repeated in the cycles of seasons in nature. The West Wind is an appropriate symbol of this life and death dichotomy and no wonder that Shelley addresses it as “Destroyer and Preserver.”

➤ **Central Thought**

“Ode to the West Wind” combines two of the characteristic Shelleyan notes of personal despondency and prophetic passion. The whole poem is in the direct voice of the poet and the West Wind which is apostrophised throughout, is never allowed to recede to the background. The poem is a prayer, beginning with an invocation. Shelley prays to the wildness of the West Wind which, according to Irene Chayes, is “a dynamic, destructive, universal force that is ultimately beneficial, both ‘destroyer’ and ‘preserver’”. ‘Ode to the West Wind’, as Timothy Webb has put it, brings together nature, politics and Shelley’s private life in a richly complex fusion which transcends all three.”

The structure of the poem is based on the Italian *terza rima*. There are five fourteen-line *terza rima* stanzas. Each such stanza has four divisions of three lines each, followed by a rhyming couplet. The first three stanzas describe the effect of the West Wind on the land, the sky and the sea. The perspective is earth-bound and human. He first describes what is closest to him. Then, as if raising his eyes, he describes the sky from zenith to horizon. Finally, he moves beyond this to what he cannot see, the Mediterranean and the surface and floor of the Atlantic Ocean. The reason for Shelley’s prayer is in Stanza IV which records the poet’s own sense of dejection and despair at not being able to fulfill his heroic mission of a poet-prophet. And the final Stanza is once more an appeal or prayer to the West Wind, as mover of the seasonal cycle, to assist the poet’s aim by spreading his message and, thereby, helping him to contribute to a moral or political revolution that is seen as paralleling the seasonal change. All through, the poem, the trumpet of prophecy is the symbol of the revolutionary change that Shelley always stood for. So its tone is inevitably messianic, exalted.

3.9.3: The Ode in Romantic Literature

The term “Ode” comes from the Greek *aeidein*, meaning to sing or chant, and belongs to the long and varied tradition of lyric poetry. Originally accompanied by music and dance, and later reserved by the Romantic poets to convey their strongest sentiments, the Ode can be generalised as a formal address to an event, a person, or a thing not present. There are three typical types of odes: the **Pindaric, Horatian, and Irregular**. The **Pindaric** is named after the ancient Greek poet Pindar, who is credited with inventing the ode. Pindaric odes were performed with a chorus and dancers, and often composed to celebrate athletic victories. They contain a formal opening, or *strophe*, of complex metrical structure, followed by an *antistrophe*, which mirrors the opening, and an *epode*, the final closing section of a different length and composed with a different metrical structure. The **Horatian** ode, named after the Roman poet Horace, is generally more tranquil and contemplative than the Pindaric ode. Less formal, less ceremonious, and better suited to quiet reading than theatrical production, the Horatian ode typically uses a regular, recurrent stanza pattern.

The **Romantic ode** was adopted by the Romantic poets, especially **John Keats**. He experimented with the form so that the three stanza structure is no longer necessarily the norm. “Ode to Autumn” has the regular three stanza structure, while “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and “Ode to a Nightingale” (which is the next Unit in your syllabus) are **irregular** in form, both in terms of stanzas and line length. Other famous Romantic odes are William Wordsworth’s ‘Ode on the Intimations of Immortality’ and of course Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” and “Ode to a Skylark.”

A typical structure of the Romantic ode includes:

- Description of a place or object
- Meditation arising from the contemplation of the place or object
- Personal or spiritual insight into issues arising out of this contemplation.

With this knowledge, try and approach the two Odes that follow in this Unit and the next. With help from your counselor try and make a presentation on how the form of the Ode becomes a vehicle for the expression of Romantic sensibilities in poets like Shelley and Keats.

3.9.4: Text

Ode to the West Wind

I

O WILD West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being
 Thou from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
 Are driven like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
 Pestilence-stricken multitudes! O thou 5
 Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The wingèd seeds, where they lie cold and low,
 Each like a corpse within its grave, until
 Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill 10
 (Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
 With living hues and odours plain and hill;

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
 Destroyer and preserver; hear, O hear!

II

Thou on whose stream, 'mid the steep sky's commotion,
 Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,
 Shook from the tangled boughs of heaven and ocean,

Angels of rain and lightning! there are spread
 On the blue surface of thine airy surge,
 Like the bright hair uplifted from the head 20
 Of some fierce Mænad, even from the dim verge
 Of the horizon to the zenith's height,
 The locks of the approaching storm. Thou dirge

Of the dying year, to which this closing night
 Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre,
 Vaulted with all thy congregated might

Of vapours, from whose solid atmosphere
Black rain, and fire, and hail, will burst: O hear!

III Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay, 30
Lull'd by the coil of his crystalline streams,

Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay,
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,

All overgrown with azure moss, and flowers 35
So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! Thou
For whose path the Atlantic's level powers

Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below
The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know 40

Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,
And tremble and despoil themselves: O hear!

IV

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share 45

The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than thou, O uncontrollable! if even
I were as in my boyhood, and could be

The comrade of thy wanderings over heaven,
As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed 50
Scarce seem'd a vision—I would ne'er have striven

As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.
O! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

A heavy weight of hours has chain'd and bow'd 55
One too like thee—tameless, and swift, and proud.

V

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own?
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep autumnal tone, 60
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe,
Like wither'd leaves, to quicken a new birth;
And, by the incantation of this verse, 65

Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth
The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind? 70

3.9.5: Glossary and Commentary

Stanza I

wild: it refers to the combined ideas of tumultuous, tameless, fierce and mighty. It strikes the keynote of Shelley's admiration of the West Wind as an impetuous power. When it communicates its wildness to the mind of the poet, he becomes wild also in a second sense – 'excited by joy, desire etc'. The poem conveys both the implications.

breath...being: life-breath of Autumn which is personified. The West Wind is an autumnal wind.

unseen presence: the West Wind is invisible, but its presence is felt in its voices and mighty power.

dead: withered.

enchanter: magician.

Yellow, and ...red: different leaves assume different colours when they wither.

hectic: wasting or consuming (referring to the 'hectic flush' of tuberculosis).

Pestilence-stricken multitudes: the fallen leaves whose colours remind the poet of contagious disease and death. Just as the complexion of dying and diseased persons changes, so the colour of the leaves also changes in autumn. In lines 2-5, Shelley embodies the traditional epic simile found in Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton, in which souls of the dead are compared to fallen leaves driven by the wind. G.M. Matthews notes that the four colours are not only actually found in dead leaves, but are those traditionally representing the four races of man – Mongoloid, Negroid, Caucasian, and American Indian.

dark wintry bed: dark place under the soil in which the seeds lie throughout the winter in order to be quickened into life in spring.

winged seeds: flying seeds.

corpse: dead body.

azure sister of the Spring: the mild wind of spring which heralds the coming of bright sunny days with blue skies. The traditional name of the autumnal west wind was Ausonius. (Italy was poetically known as Ausonia). Though the spring west wind was masculine in both Greek (Zephyrus) and Latin (Favonius) mythology, Shelley revises the tradition by making the restorative force of the spring mildly feminine.

azure: blue.

blow her clarion: send forth her message loudly and clearly.

clarion: a narrow shrill-sounding war trumpet. 'Clarion' is one of the many images of stanza 1 repeated in stanza 5 ('trumpet'). Clarion-trumpet-Wind-breath-word-lips-Spring-prophecy links the West Wind with the poet and change through violent action.

dreaming earth: the earth which sleeps and dreams in winter. A brilliant personification.

and fill...plain and hill: the warm wind of spring fills the earth with fresh colours ('hues') and smells ('odours'). The buds that bloom in spring are compared to a flock of sheep driven to pastures by shepherds.

Destroyer and Preserver: the destructive and regenerative powers of the West Wind. These titles come directly from the titles of the Hindu gods Siva, the destroyer and

Vishnu the preserver, known to Shelley from both the translations and writings of Sir William Jones and Edward Moor's *Hindu Pantheon* (1810). Shelley's myth-making power is evident here.

The images of death and rebirth are announced in the first stanza.

Stanza II

steep sky's commotion: the vault of the sky, which rises in a steep slope from the horizon, is in an agitated state. The ancient Greeks described the sky as an inverted bowl, its highest point the zenith. Shelley used their image but did not share their belief in the sky as a bowl.

Loose clouds: high, wispy cirrus clouds (the word means 'curl' or 'lock of hair' in Latin)

Thou...shed: a beautiful image in which Shelley draws a parallel between the dead leaves of the previous stanza and the clouds described here. The West Wind is compared to a stream on which the clouds are borne, just as a stream carries on its current dead leaves of trees scattered by wind. **tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean:** during the storm the clouds fill up all spaces between the sky and sea which seem to meet together and look like the intertwining branches of trees. **Angels:** literally 'messengers'. One of the many instances of Shelley's use of Biblical-sounding image without orthodox Biblical meaning.

aery surge: the movement of the wind across the blue skies is compared to the rushing forward of waves across the ocean.

Maenad: frenzied female worshipper of Bacchus, the Greek god of wine. Shelley had seen the Maenads as depicted in Florentine sculpture as drunken women with loose hair, in a frenzied dance. This image makes it appropriate to term the clouds as the "locks of the approaching storm".

dim verge: dark border.

zenith: highest point of the sky.

The locks...storm: the hair-like shreds of long wavy clouds that show a coming storm.

ll.18-23: The cirrus clouds are scattered all over the sky by the West Wind. The clouds are being compared to the light hair of the Maenads.

dirge: a song of mourning; a funeral song. The West Wind is associated with autumn ('dying year'). The sound of it announces the approach of winter and the death of the year. Its music is therefore mournful.

closing: drawing near.

dome: hemispherical roof.

sepulchre: tomb. (Note the many images of death in Stanza II: 'dying year', 'closing night', 'vast sepulchre'.)

vapours: clouds.

vaulted...vapours: the vault of the tomb will be formed by the accumulated mass of clouds in the sky.

solid atmosphere: compact gaseous mass having the appearance of being solid. This is a powerful oxymoron iterating the idea of Wind as Destroyer and Preserver. The poem is built on this oxymoron which also shores up the force with which the storm will burst. Shelley may have had volcanic rain in mind, hence 'black rain' and 'fire'.

Stanza III

ll.29-31: The Mediterranean is calm and still in summer, but becomes rough in autumn when the West Wind starts blowing.

summer: all the four seasons of the European year are mentioned in this poem. Here, summer is associated with the past (over, done with). Summer is also associated with sleep and dream which Spring and the poet's words will end.

lulled: soothed to sleep.

pumice isle: volcanic island. The porous rocks formed by volcanic lava are known as pumice.

Baiae's bay: a fashionable sea-side resort of the ancient Romans in the Bay of Naples on the western coast of Italy. "From a boat beside an island of *pumice* (porous lava) Shelley had the previous December seen the overgrown villas from the days of imperial Rome underneath the waters of the Bay of Baiae". (Shelley, *Letters*, II, 61)

wave's intenser day: the clear water acts as a lens that gathers and intensifies the rays of the sun; the image quivers because of the water. Shelley, like Coleridge and others of this post-Newtonian world, was fascinated by the properties of light.

the sense...them: the sense seems to be overpowered in the attempt to imagine its fragrance, not to speak of inhaling it. Shelley's sensuous imagination is at its full flight here.

Thou: a sonnet's effect depends on the turn from the octave to the sestet. In this last line of the octave, Shelley switches to the describing the Atlantic Ocean. He makes similar switches just prior to the onset of the sestet in stanzas I, II, and V. Stanza IV, a transitional stanza in many ways, is the only one in which it is difficult to locate the shift.

Atlantic's level powers...chasms: the West Wind parts the waters of the Atlantic Ocean into deep hollows. Another instance of the precision with which Shelley observed and recorded the empirical world. Note the onomatopoeia.

ll.39-42: even the vegetation deep below the sea reacts to the transforming powers of the wind. "The phenomenon alluded to at the conclusion of the third stanza is well known to naturalists. The vegetation at the bottom of the sea, of rivers, and of lakes, sympathizes with that of the land in the change of seasons, and is consequently influenced by the winds which announce it." (Shelley's note). Nora Crook says, "the sapless foliage of the Ocean that inspired that line was seen by Shelley in a glass bottomed boat in the Bay of Naples on 8 Dec. 1818". **voice:** Shelley uses "voice" not "sound", linking the Wind's power to 'incantation', 'prophecy', 'words'.

Stanza IV

If I were...thy power: in these lines the poet applies the images of dead leaves, the clouds and the waves to himself. These lines link the stanza with the previous three stanzas where the poet has spoken of the 'dead leaf', 'swift cloud' and 'wave'.

If even...in my boyhood: this regret for the passing away of the days of childhood or of youth is a recurrent note in English romantic poetry.

The comrade...vision: if ever I could run with the wind as I did in my boyhood, when to race with the swift wind seemed almost possible to me.

I fall upon the thorns of life: Shelley's favourite self-portrait which occurs again in *Adonais*. Here, Shelley refers to the miseries of his life. He was abandoned by the society and howled down by the critics. Behind Shelley's image – besides other literary references – lie Jesus's crown of thorns and Dante's metaphor of life as "a dark wood...rough and stubborn" (*Inferno*, I.1-5).

ll.55-56: an echo of Rousseau's famous words 'Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains.'

Stanza V

Make me thy lyre...forest is: the autumnal forest is like an Aeolian harp which plays melodious music when the wind flows through it. The poet also wants to be the 'lyre' (as the forest is) of the West Wind. The 'lyre' probably alludes to Orpheus, the mythical poet who created the world by playing his lyre just as the present poet hopes to create a new world through his poetry. Orpheus also returned from the land of the dead. So, the image is also connected with regeneration – a recurrent image in the poem.

mighty harmonies: i.e. 'harmonious madness' of *To a Skylark*. Here lies the uniqueness of the West Wind to Shelley. It can create harmony through its fierceness – something 'sweet' out of 'sadness'. This is an oxymoron.

Be thou, Spirit fierce...impetuous one: the poet prays to be identified with the West Wind in its fierce impetuosity. He aspires to merge with the Wind so that he can transform the present world.

dead thoughts: ideas which are outdated.

quicken a new birth: the leaves of trees fallen in autumn lead to vigorous burst of life in spring. Similarly, the 'dead thoughts' of the poet will give way to a 'new birth' – a new set of social idea where there will be no ills, evils and oppressive laws.

incantation of this verse: magic spell of poetry. The poet's words will act like magic on earth – that is his hope. In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley said that ancient poets were "magi" or wise men whose poetry was magical, which was why they had the status of prophets in society.

as from...hearth: the mind of Shelley is like a hearth which has been dimly burning because he has been weakened by time and miseries of life.

Ashes and sparks: i.e. dead thoughts and new bright ideas for regeneration

unawakened earth: earth which is sleeping. The people of the earth are yet to be awakened to consciousness about the social injustice and evils.

trumpet: in stanza I, the dreaming earth will awaken in spring when a clarion will blow; in stanza V, the poet's words are the trumpet of a prophecy that will awaken an

‘unawakened earth’. Shelley’s zeal for reforming the world finds pointed expression here. Shelley believed that “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” and therefore a poet has a prophetic role to play. *O Wind...behind?*: when winter appears, we may be sure that spring and the rebirth of vegetation cannot be far distant. This is a strong and profound note of hope, very characteristic of Shelley, and uttered here with a great deal of conviction.

3.9.6: Development of Thought

Stanza I: Shelley begins the Ode with an invocation to the West Wind and describes its activity on the earth. The wind is ‘wild’; it is the tumultuous and omnipresent spirit of autumn. It has a dual role of the “Destroyer and Preserver”: the ‘pestilence-stricken multitudes’ of the dead leaves are driven away in the octave and the winged seeds are preserved in their dark wintry bed (for their future resurrection during spring) in the sestet.

Stanza II: The second stanza of the Ode describes the activities of the West Wind in the sky: the effect of the wind upon the formation of clouds. The clouds are supposed to be the foliage of heaven and ocean (thus the first three stanzas are beautifully linked) and are swept off by the West Wind like real dead leaves shaken into a river. The clouds are again compared to the dishevelled hair of a frenzied female worshipper of Bacchus. Again, the wind is regarded as the singer of the dirge of the dying year to which the clouds of the dark autumn night form a sepulchral vault. Winter rains are a prelude to the fertility that returns with the spring.

Stanza III: The effect of the wind upon water is described in stanza III. Not only the life on land, but the life in the sea is also affected by the mighty power of the wind. The West Wind agitates the ocean and awakens the blue Mediterranean from his summer dreams. It cleaves the glassy surface of the Atlantic and the vegetation at its bottom is ruffled by the sound that heralds its approach.

Stanza IV: In the fourth stanza Shelley invokes the West Wind for strength and expresses his eagerness to share the impulse of its force. By bringing in the leaf, the cloud, and the wave of the previous stanzas Shelley wants the wind to fill him with strength and to lift him from his dire misery – ‘the thorns of life’. Once upon

a time he also, like the West Wind, was tameless, swift and proud. But now, he is chained by a heavy weight of time which also crushes his once-indomitable spirit.

Stanza V: In the concluding stanza, the wind is a metaphor for the invisible force that will scatter the poet's words. The poet hopes that with the endless energy of the wind his glowing prophecy of reawakened earth and man's victory over evil will be broadcast to mankind. Shelley compares himself to the autumnal forest, when the trees become apparently dead. He compares his thoughts to the dead fallen leaves, which by concealing and fertilising the seeds, help the efflorescence of a new life in spring. So, he hopes that his winged words will help the new ideas and impulses, which he thinks are hidden in humanity, to blossom forth into beautiful activities. For this to happen he appeals to the autumnal wind to be to himself and his thoughts what it is to the forest and its leaves. The Ode concludes with the prophetic utterance and the hope for the future regeneration of mankind.

Activity for the Learners!

1. Find out words from the poem which are related to death and decay.
2. All the four seasons are mentioned in the poem. In what particular contexts are they referred to?

3.9.7: Key Issues

❖ **Hopes and Aspirations:**

As you have already noted, Shelley is mainly a poet who talks of regeneration and reconstruction. So far as humanity and the world at large were concerned, Shelley was a hardcore optimist. His optimism and aspiration moulded him in the role of a prophet. But it must be admitted at the same time that there is a deep undercurrent of melancholy in most of his poems. This melancholy was due to the fact that Shelley could not reconcile the hard facts with his ideas and ideals. Shelley's personal despondency, however, did not give rise to any morbid feeling. His poetry is full of hopeful messages – that happiness would follow misery, that the world of evils and corruption would be replaced by a new millennium where justice, liberty, equality and fraternity will reign.

“Ode to the West Wind” contains some notes of depression, no doubt. Shelley almost groans “I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!”. But this kind of depressive note is but exception. Rather a bold and determining attitude is that of optimism and aspiration, of dream and hope. In ‘Ode to the West Wind’, Shelley at first wonders at the might of the West Wind on the earth, in the sky and the sea. He feels the inadequacy of his life in comparison to the mighty potential of the West Wind. But he does not allow himself to be carried away by depression and frustration. He rather takes shelter in hope and aspiration. He implores the West Wind to imbue him with his dynamic thoughts and also to scatter his own thoughts and ideas, lying still dormant, throughout the world just like the withered leaves of trees in autumn in order to quicken a rebirth of humanity:

“Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!”

In every detail of the poem Shelley has emphasized life coming out of death, a motif of hope. The present in the poem is imaged in terms of objects that are nearly dead but have seeds of life in them. The future is represented by images of new life (seeds, spring, rain, awakening etc.). New life emerges from death-like states such as sleep (stanzas I, III and V). In stanza III, The Mediterranean turns back nostalgically and sees “old palaces and towers” that were the remains of the Roman Empire. But, unlike the Mediterranean, Shelley is not interested in palaces and towers. Instead, he concentrates on the life that has grown over the ruined signs of a dead empire, “the azure moss and flowers.” The moss and flowers are the natural growth that has hidden the ruins of the Roman Empire.

Towards the end of the Ode, Shelley appeals to the West Wind to give him faith, valour and inspiration; he wants to regenerate himself so that he could preach his thoughts, ideas and messages of hope to mankind, steeped in ignorance and inertia. The poet is quite sure of the birth of a new era. He sees beyond the dismal winter the dawn of a happy spring on humanity – full of happiness and possibilities: “If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?”. This last line of the poem can be source of unfailing inspiration to all men and women at any time, anywhere. Shelley believed that man is to be made perfect by the complete dissolution of all traditional ties

by which the race is at present bound together. This is the hope and aspiration of a revolutionary who believed in the idea of a new millennium – the future Golden Age of great happiness and prosperity for everyone.

❖ Imagery

If you read “Ode to the West Wind” with rapt attention, you will feel Shelley’s highly spontaneous lyricism. His intensity of feelings and deep passions are best expressed through his individual expressions which are marked by a cluster of images, metaphors and similes. For Shelley was fond of visualizing his idea in concrete shapes, his use of images is ‘kaleidoscopic’, i.e. Shelley did not give one or two features at a time but a whole series of them.

Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” is rich in dazzling images. The images used here are decorative, apt and compelling and show the influence of Greek literary art upon him. In the poem image succeeds image in rapid and spontaneous flow. The images are pictorial, natural, scientific, mythical and even biblical. The theme of death and rebirth is worked out in the poem in powerful images. The poem begins with autumn and ends with spring. The Wind is the spirit of destruction and regeneration, the common power that moves through both. With the instinctive truths of a fervid imagination, Shelley creates myths and his myth-making power is exemplified in the personifications used to describe the various activities of the West Wind.

In the very beginning, the Wind has been conceived as a spirit driving through the earth, scattering away the old and dead leaves. The mighty impact of the Wind on the leaves has been likened to the magical power of an enchanter who mysteriously drives away ghosts. The ghosts symbolize death, which image is further enlarged upon by the use of the sickly colour effects. The ‘yellow’, ‘black’ and ‘pale’ are colour words which give us pictures of disease, calamity and death. This death imagery reaches its climax when the fleeing, dead leaves are compared to people rushing away “pestilence-stricken”. The image of the ‘chariot’ is very significant. A chariot carries a king with due ceremony; likewise, the wind conveys the seeds amidst splendid dusty display. The image of the archangel blowing clarion is biblical. Again, the images of death and rebirth are suggested in “Destroyer and preserver”.

In the second stanza, the sky is imagined as a tree from whose boughs the

leaves like loose clouds are shaken. Here, Shelley employs the mythological image of the fierce Maenad. The dark masses of moving clouds are imaged as disheveled hair of a Maenad streaming up from her head as she dances in religious frenzy. Next, the Wind is imagined as the dirge of the dying year. In the third stanza, there is the calm image of the Mediterranean sleeping and dreaming in summer by “the coil of his crystalline streams”. The West Wind lashes the Mediterranean Atlantic into fury. The underwater vegetation shedding the leaves is imaged as a man losing his glowing appearance when fears grip him. These pictures are objective, visual and descriptive.

In the fourth stanza, the poet relates his own sense of oppression and restraint to wind’s freedom and strength. The images of ‘chain’, ‘weight’, ‘thorns’ suggest his personal oppressions, sorrows and despondency in the society. In the last stanza, the poet uses the image of the dreary autumnal forest to describe his own weak condition. But the poet is sure that the West Wind will awaken powerful music in him, just as it does in the autumnal forest which is imagined as a lyre. The poet brings in the images of a dying hearth to describe his mind which though apparently dead can produce a new conflagration. The poem ends with the image of the cycle of seasons – of dreary winter followed by spring which symbolizes regeneration.

Shelley’s imagery used in ‘Ode to the West Wind’ reflects the state of the poet’s mind – his heightened imagination, his lofty idealism and his intense love for nature and natural phenomena. What Shelley tries to convey through his imagery is that nature is a permanent force which not only provides a sense of joy but also a sense of beauty which is not subject to wear and tear of the physical world. The telescoping of the images that can be noticed here gives to the poem a beauty and excellence of its own. Shelley’s love of nature expressed through his imagery highlights the loftiness of his vision and idealism.

3.9.8: Summing Up

After going through the poem and the discussions on it, you can now understand how Shelley’s personal despondency, his ideas and ideals, his optimistic vision of a new millennium, his ideas about the social duty of a poet are expressed through

the brilliant images of the poem. We see that Shelley's revolutionary thoughts and social ideals make him a romantic with a difference. However, the above discussions on the poem will, hopefully, help you understand the various aspects of Shelley's poetry and also make you interested in reading Shelley further.

3.9.9: Comprehension Exercises

A. Long Answer Type Questions:

1. Consider Shelley as a romantic poet with reference to "Ode to the West Wind."
2. What is an image? Discuss the images used by Shelley in "Ode to the West Wind."
3. Estimate Shelley as a poet of hope and aspiration with reference to "Ode to the West Wind."
4. Shelley's poetry is a vehicle of his prophetic message – Discuss with reference to "Ode to the West Wind."

B. Medium Length Answer Type Questions:

1. Discuss the function of the West Wind both as Destroyer and Preserver with reference to Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind."
2. Consider Shelley as a lyrical poet with reference to "Ode to the West Wind."
3. Examine Shelley's attitude to Nature as expressed in "Ode to the West Wind."
4. Consider "Ode to the West Wind" as an Ode.

C. Short Answer Type Questions:

1. Describe the various activities of the West Wind on land.
2. What personal picture of Shelley do you get in Stanza IV of "Ode to the West Wind"?
3. How does Shelley present the theme of death and rebirth in "Ode to the West Wind"?

4. “If Winter comes can Spring be far behind?”—Bring out the significance of the above line with reference to Shelley’s own ideals.

3.9.10: Suggested Reading

Baker, Carlos. *Shelley’s Major Poetry: The Fabric of Vision*. Princeton UP.

Donovan, Jack and Cian Duffy. *Percy Shelley: Selected Poems and Prose*. Penguin Classics. 2017

Fogle, R.H. *The Imagery of Keats and Shelley*. U of North Carolina Press, 1949.

King-Hele, Desmond. *Shelley, His Thought and Work*. Macmillan, 1962.

Reiman, Donald H. and Neil Fraistat. *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*. 2nd edn. Norton, 2002.

Unit 10 □ John Keats: Ode to a Nightingale

Structure:

- 3.10.1. Objectives
- 3.10.2. Introduction
- 3.10.3. Text of John Keats' Ode to a Nightingale
- 3.10.4. Summary & Annotations
- 3.10.5. Critical Commentary
- 3.10.6. Key Issues
- 3.10.7. Summing Up
- 3.10.8. Comprehension Exercises
- 3.10.9. Suggested Reading

3.10.1: Objectives

After having read an Ode by P. B. Shelley, here we will understand how the same poetic form takes different dimensions in the work of John Keats (1795-1821), whose Odes are a very significant contribution to Romantic literature. As learners, you need to understand how Keats constructs his world of 'fancy', which he ultimately universalizes as a human condition, and finally establishes vital connections between such a rhapsodic state and the reality of lived life. So, the element of dramatic reversal will be an important aspect to understand in our analysis of this poem. Besides, there is another quality of Keats that is manifest in this Ode – the ability to admirably combine with Romantic elements, the lushness of Classicism, whether it be in the use of allusions, reference to places and objects, or in the very structuring of his Odes. The present poem too has some of these qualities.

3.10.2: Introduction

In the spring of 1819 Keats was residing in a house in Hampstead near London, with his friend, Charles Armitage Brown. One morning he sat out in the garden for

two or three hours and Brown noticed that when he came back into the house, the poet had some scraps of paper in his hand, which he quietly thrust behind some books. Brown recovered the papers and found them to be the draft of this exquisite poem. The statement of Charles Armitage Brown on the composition of the poem is notable:

In the spring of 1819 a nightingale had built her nest near my house. Keats felt a tranquil and continual joy in her song; and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast table to the grass-plot under a plum-tree, where he sat for two or three hours. When he came into the house, I perceived he had some scraps of paper in his hand, and these he was quietly thrusting behind the books. On inquiry, I found those scraps, four or five in number, contained his poetic feeling on the song of our nightingale.

So you understand that the sight of a real bird was the occasion behind the poem. Obviously, the range of thoughts that Keats engages in with the birdsong as the trigger, are what become the staple of everlasting poetry. As we go through this Unit, with reference to the biographical knowledge about the poet you have acquired in Unit 17, you should be able to understand how personal predicament translates into poetic expression of universal worth.

3.10.3: Text

Before we come to the actual text of the poem, a few words would be in place. Notice that even though the occasion was a particular bird, Keats uses the generalised ‘a’ rather than the more expected ‘the’ in his title. The word ‘nightingale’ in fact appears only in the title, but the bird and its rich intoxicating nocturnal world are at the centre of the poem. Keats, a lover of the Hellenic spirit, would have known the Greek myth of Philomel, daughter of Pandion, King of Attica. She was raped by her sister’s husband, Tereus, and at her own prayer was changed by the gods into a nightingale in order to escape his vengeance. In the poem, the nightingale is a symbol of beauty, immortality and freedom from the troubles, worries, and pains of the world. The reference in the title prepares us for the many allusions to Greek

myth that we will find in the poem. In fact this blend of Hellenic spirit with the Romantic nature of themes and their treatment makes John Keats stand out as a poet of his time.

ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
 My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
 Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
 One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
 'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
 But being too happy in thine happiness—
 That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
 In some melodious plot
 Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
 Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
 Cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth,
 Tasting of Flora and the country green,
 Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
 O for a beaker full of the warm South,
 Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
 With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
 And purple-stained mouth;
 That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
 And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
 What thou among the leaves hast never known,
 The weariness, the fever, and the fret
 Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
 Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
 Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
 Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
 And leaden-eyed despairs,

Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Clustered around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets covered up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Called him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
 No hungry generations tread thee down;
 The voice I hear this passing night was heard
 In ancient days by emperor and clown:
 Perhaps the selfsame song that found a path
 Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
 She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
 The same that oft times hath
 Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam
 Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
 To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
 Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
 As she is fabled to do, deceiving elf.
 Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
 Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
 Up the hill side; and now 'tis buried deep
 In the next valley-glades:
 Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
 Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

3.10.4: Summary and Annotations

❖ Stanza 1:

As the poet listens to the song of the nightingale, he feels an acute sensation of pain in his heart through an excess of pain. His senses get numbed. He feels that like a wood nymph, the nightingale sits on a tree and sings from it. The bird sings spontaneously to celebrate the charms of summer.

My heart....numbness pains: here the poet, John Keats, feels an aching sensation in his heart. That sensation is so acute and intense that he becomes drowsy. His senses seem to be gradually lost in a state of paralysis or numbness. It also implies that the poet is gradually losing his consciousness and he is induced to a state of sleepiness or slumber.

Hemlock: a poison prepared from a herb or a poisonous or venomous drink prepared from that herb. Socrates, an eminent Greek philosopher, died of a cup of hemlock which he drank. Hemlock can also be used as a sedative. Christopher Marlowe has referred to it in his translation of Ovid's *Amores* (iii, 613). The poet thinks that a state of numbness or paralysis has been injected into his senses by some doses of hemlock. He also feels that he had taken a certain quantity of hemlock and this has generated a numbing effect on his physical sensations.

Emptiedthe drains: The poet also imagines that he has drunk the entire narcotic to the full or to the lees. Language here used by the poet is fraught with metaphorical or figurative associations. It brings to the surface the picture of a cup, containing opium to the brim.

Lethe: a river in Hades, in the Underworld. According to Greek myth, the dead are obliged to drink the water of this river in order to forget their past lives or everything said and done when alive. Keats has become thoroughly forgetful or oblivious of his own conscious existence after taking opium or narcotic to the full. Charles Lamb, one of the notable romantic essayists and prose writers, has alluded to this river in his essay titled "Dream Children: A Reverie".

'Tis not happy lot: here the poet intends to mean that he does not feel envious or joyous of the happy destiny of the bird, nightingale.

But being..... happiness: rather the poet becomes happy in the blissful state of the nightingale. The poet has attained a stage in which he has annihilated his private or personal self and surrendered himself completely and unconditionally to the nightingale.

Light-winged Dryad of the trees: a wood nymph. Dryad or nymph is a female personification of natural features like mountains and rivers; they are young, beautiful and long-lived. They like music and dance. Dryad was connected to a specific tree and died when the tree died.

Melodious plot: place resonant with the melody or music of the nightingale. It is an example of Hypallage or Transferred Epithet because here the plot is not musical or melodious. Rather the song of the nightingale is melodious or musical. The epithet or adjective 'melodious' has been shifted or transferred from its proper place to a place to which it does not originally fit.

Beechen green: green beech trees. 'Beechen' is the adjective form of 'beech'. These trees are green to the core and from the core.

Singest of summer in full-throated ease: The nightingale sings about summer days in a spontaneous, effortless and natural way. The expression 'full-throated ease' suggests the picture of a bird singing at a very high pitch of the voice in a care-free and normal manner.

❖ **Stanza 2:**

The poet yearns to lose himself completely in the song of the bird. He seeks inspiration from wine which has been cooled and stored for a long time under the earth. The thought of drinking wine reminds him of the romantic associations of the country where the wine originated. He visualizes the picture of a cup full of wine which will redden his lips when he drinks it.

Oh, for a draught of vintage: the poet invokes vintage that might play an important role in conjuring up a romantic world of the nightingale.

Draught of vintage: a certain quantum of wine or vintage that can be taken at a single gulp.

Cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth: quality of wine depends on how long it is kept in the abysmal depth of the earth. Its quality is also determined by how much cool it is. The greater the cool, the better is the quality of wine. The poet has a firm belief that nature of a wine is dependent upon the duration and extent of coolness. In this regard, it is relevant to mention that use of 'vintage' in place of 'wine' is much more poetic. Keats has used the term 'vintage' again in *Lamia* (ii, 203) and *Otho the Great* (Act v, scene v, 123).

Tasting of Flora..... green: wine is supposed to be more intoxicating and inebriating when it contains the flavour of Nature in her green panorama. Wine is assumed to be tastier when it is prepared from the different aspects of green Nature in the countryside.

Flora: is the Roman Goddess of flowers.

Provençal song: song of Provence which is a famous wine-producing area of France. Here, wine is prepared from ripe grapes.

Sunburnt mirth: recreation or carnival in the warm sunshine. It also refers to the merry-making at the annual grape gathering.

Oh....beakerful of Warm South: here the poet once again makes an earnest and sincere address to the wine made in the southern parts of France.

Beaker: a large drinking vessel with wide mouth.

Warm South: wine which is prepared in Southern France and Italy. It is an example of Metonymy because here place stands for the product or object it is famous for. Here, Warm South means wine from the South. European countries around the Mediterranean are notable for a superior kind of wine.

The true, the blushful Hippocrene: Hippocrene is the spring or fountain on Mount Helicon which is sacred to the Muses in Greek mythology. Water of this spring is refreshing and invigorating. If one drinks this water, he or she will be empowered with poetic creativity. In Keats's imagination, Hippocrene is always identified or equated with poetic abilities. Keats is willing to drink this water because it will endow him with creative and poetic capabilities. Keats is fond of taking this wine which is reddish in colour. Here Keats has given a catalogue of the essential features of wine that will enable him reach the romantic and imaginative world of the nightingale.

Beaded: clustered.

Bubbles: bubbles of wine when it is poured into a glass. Wine produces bubbles as water does. Bubbles are transient and short-lived. These are clustered around the rim of the glass which is full to the brim.

Winking at the brim: Bubbles are created and these rise to the surface when wine is poured into a glass. Bubbles twinkle at the border of the glass. Gradually and finally, these subside and disappear. The easiest way to understand this is when you pour a cola in a glass full to the brim and then see the fizz that gathers!

Winking: twinkling or brightening constantly and ceaselessly.

Brim: border or edge.

Purple-stained mouth: the poet imagines that his mouth will get reddish when he will drink the wine in the cup. Here, the colour 'red' is significant because it is associated with poetic inspiration.

Leave the world unseen: Keats is keenly interested to leave the world of reality in such a manner that none will detect him. His flight from this mundane world is invisible and imperceptible.

And with.....dim: here the poet wants to transport himself to the world of the nightingale which is a world of beauty, romance, perfection and fulfillment.

❖ **Stanza 3:**

The poet expresses his keen desire to escape from the sorrows and sufferings of this world. The bird knows nothing of these woes of human life. Here each man sits and hears the other groan. Old men here get afflicted with palsy, young men either away and die prematurely, beauty loses its charm and love its warmth too soon.

Fade.....forget: the poet is intensely eager to depart from the mundane existence ready to lose his own entity or identity and forget everything of this world.

What thou.....known: the poet is of the view that the nightingale does not know the worries, anxieties of mundane life. It is completely devoid of the annoyance of the earthly existence.

The weariness.....fret: the nightingale is free from the ennui, boredom, anxiety that plague human beings intermittently and continually. This line bears a close resemblance to Wordsworth's words in *Tintern Abbey* (lines 52-53). This world-weariness which has diseased the human beings in this mundane universe is also easily noticeable in the speeches and soliloquies of Hamlet in William Shakespeare's Hamlet.

Here.....groan: Keats has made a comparison between the world of the nightingale and that of the human world where people are subjected to endless suffering and miseries both at the physiological and psychological levels. He is of the view that in this mundane existence, people hear the tales of languishment, separation and trauma.

Where.....hairs: here 'palsy' has been personified. It has been endowed with living or human attributes. In this context, Palsy refers to Old man. 'Few, sad, last grey hairs' are suggestive or connotative of the old age. Keats is of the opinion that in this mundane world, people are beset with decay, old age, ravages of Time and death.

Where.....dies: the poet is extremely sad when he ponders over the common phenomena of decay, death and destruction of beautiful things and persons in this mundane world. He has expressed his sense of anguish that in this world, youth gradually loses his lustre or glamour. He becomes as thin as a ghost or apparition and ultimately dies. This line is reminiscent of Tom Keats who died of tuberculosis

in the month of December, 1818 at the age of 19. This line also has a striking similarity with Wordsworth's poem *Excursion* (iv,760): "While man grows old, and dwindles, and decay..."

Where.....despairs: the poet has said that in this world of human beings, thinking makes a man sad, melancholy and pensive. A thoughtful or contemplative person is sure to be burdened with sorrows, miseries and despondency. Keats thinks that this world is a vale of tears, miseries and sufferings. These are all inevitable and unavoidable. Despairs have been personified. These have been presented as living beings with lead-like eye balls. Keats has used a concrete image in order to bring out depression and dejection which pervade this universe. This line has a striking correspondence or equivalence in Keats's letter written to Benjamin Bailey, May; 1818: ".... I have this morning such a Lethargy that I cannot write...I have not an Idea to put to paper — my hand feels like lead — and yet it is an unpleasant numbness it does not take away the pain of existence".

Where....eyes: Here Beauty is personified and consequently it is used in capital letters. The poet is intensely pained to think that whatever is beautiful in this world is evanescent and short-lived. Beautiful persons lose their bright complexion or lustre in this mundane world in course of time.

Or new.....tomorrow: Love has been personified in this context. The poet, John Keats, points out that in this time-bound world, people are easily tired of old love and they hanker after new love or new lovers. Here people cannot retain their love for each other for a long time. They go on changing their concept of love and lovers quickly. Their love is transient and temporary.

❖ Stanza 4:

The poet gives up the idea of flying to the nightingale's world with the help of wine. He will do so on the invisible wings of poetic imagination and the next moment, he finds himself with the nightingale. The moon shines in the sky, surrounded by the stars.

Away! Away! This is a kind of refrain, indicating the poet, John Keats's desperate wish to fly from this world of grim reality and actuality. He is keenly interested in escaping from this mundane world to the world of the Nightingale, representing the world of idealism, romance, beauty, perfection and permanence.

Charioted: rode in a chariot.

Bacchus: the Roman God of Wine, also known as Dionysus.

Pards: the leopards that pulled Bacchus's chariot. The poet has rejected wine as a means of escaping to the world of the Nightingale.

Viewless wings of Poesy: here Imagination has been referred to. The poet has discarded the first option of opium or wine as a means of conveyance to the world of the Nightingale. He regards Imagination as an effective and fruitful vehicle of transportation to the world of the Nightingale.

Though....retards: the poet's brain cannot work logically and properly though his imaginative flight is high and intense enough. His cerebral power is not strong enough to take him to the land of the Nightingale.

Already with thee: the poet imagines that he is one with the Nightingale's world. He imagines that he has reached there.

Tender is the night: the poet thinks that the night in the world of the nightingale is calm and quiet. Keats is a poet of sensations rather than of thoughts. This has been evidenced here. This expression is connotative of strong tactile sense of the poet.

Haply: perhaps, possibly, probably.

Queen-Moon: Diana, Apollo's twin, is the goddess of the moon. Apollo, god of poetry, was special to Keats in the way that Bacchus was to Shelley. There is an implied suggestion that Keats abandons the feminine for the masculine deity of poetry though the moon is feminine in Greek mythology. Moon, Queen of Heaven, has been imagined by the poet to be seated on her throne.

Clustered....fays: the Moon-goddess is encircled by the fairy-like creatures who are the attendants. Here the stars have been imagined to be attending on the moon-goddess.

But....blown: the poet imagines that in the world of the nightingale, there are the glimmerings of dim light here and there which are coming from heaven as the wind.

Verdurous glooms: enveloping darkness created by the green leaves of the trees.

Winding mossy ways: zigzag or mazy passages through which the trees covered with moss. Here the poet, John Keats, has attempted to create an atmosphere or ambience, sometimes darkened and sometimes lighted by the rays or beams of the Moon. It is an atmosphere of semi-light and semi-darkness.

❖ **Stanza 5:**

The poet is in the darkness of the forest by the side of the nightingale. He cannot see what flowers have blossomed around him but he can identify each flower by its smell. The impression therefore is one of a composite sense, a peak of romantic hush where the sensuous is completely unbridled. It is imperative to find in these lines of description an echo of the Spenserian bower of bliss.

I....feet: the poet cannot visualize the flowers at his feet.

Nor.....boughs: neither does the poet discover the fragrant or scented flowers and fruits hanging from the branches of the trees. But he imagines that he is seated with the nightingale in a world of romance, beauty and permanence. The expression 'soft incense' is revelatory of Keats's use of tactile or tactual sensations in conjuring up the atmosphere. Keats is extremely sensuous and voluptuous in his approach to different objects of Nature.

Embalmed darkness: darkness filled with or fraught with the fragrance of the flowers. It is darkness steeped in scents. The word 'embalmed' foreshadows the preoccupation with death in many of the poems of Keats.

Seasonal month: Month of May in which flowers bloom luxuriantly. The poet, John Keats, can easily understand the flowers and the fruits there even in the midst of brooding darkness.

The thickest: the bush.

Pastoral Eglantine: a kind of wild rose that usually grows in the countryside.

Fast-fading violets: flowers that fade away quickly and swiftly.

Full of dewy wine: the rose is saturated with the evening dew on the surface and there it is juicy.

Murmurous haunt of flies: the scented and fragrant flowers seem to attract the bees which have gone out to collect honey from the sweet flowers. The whole atmosphere is resonant with the buzzing sound of the bees.

Summer eves: the bees come out in swarms in the evenings of the summer.

❖ **Stanza 6:**

The poet says that he has often been in love with easeful death. It is a luxury

to die in the midst of such ecstasy listening to the song of the nightingale. But the bird would not cease singing even after his death.

Darkling: in the dark or in darkness. The poet listens to the song of the nightingale in darkness.

Half in love: the poet, John Keats, is as much fond of life as he is of death. He has equal fondness or fascination for life and death. F. R. Leavis comments, “Keats is strictly only half in love with death...The desire not to die appears in the thought of becoming a sod to the nightingale’s high requiem and of having ears in vain (line 59-60), and it swells into strong revulsion against death in the opening lines of the next stanza” (*Revaluation*, 1936, 249). Self-referentiality is one of the prominent characteristics of Romantic poetry. Here Keats ironically recalls his early poetry in which death had been spoken of as a luxury.

Called....rhyme: the poet has addressed Death in many of his poems by sweet, tender and endearing expressions.

To....breath: the poet is highly indebted to Death for taking his breath, the very symbol of life, without giving him any physical pain and agony.

Now.....pain: Keats thinks that this is the high time on his part to embrace Death because at this time, he is listening to the melody of the nightingale’s song. He hopes that in this intense moment of joy and happiness, his death will be a means of relief or emancipation from worldly worries and anxieties. Further he hopes that his death will be painless. Such a death is also luxurious to the poet. Death here has been celebrated as a luxury as it has been in *Endymion* (ii, 33-34). Paradoxically or ironically enough, Keats finds extreme pleasure in the experience of Death.

While....ecstasy: this is the prime time for the poet to die because the nightingale has been singing in a spontaneous, effortless and unpredictable manner. The bird is also singing in a loud way out of a sense of excitement, joy, jollity and joviality.

Still.....vain: the nightingale will continue singing for an infinite time though the poet will not be in a position to listen to the bird’s melody. He is thinking that his ears will cease to function properly because he is physically dead.

Requiem: a song of mourning or lamentation. It also means a song for the dead.

Sod: a lump of clay.

To...sod: The poet thinks that the nightingale's song will be a befitting elegy for the demise of the poet. He will be insensible and lifeless as a cold patch of earth – unresponsive to the miseries of the fading world, and in complete surrender to the song of the nightingale. Logically, if the poet were to die, the bird's singing would be unaffected, but because it would be singing at a time of death, its song would be the equivalent of a requiem. The logic makes the poet's longing for death ridiculous; but it also expresses a desire of being frozen through the medium of art. This is a theme to which Keats keeps returning time and again in different ways. You will see one of these – a dramatic reversal of thought, in this poem itself. His 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is a very mature treatment of this same theme, in a different context – the key parallel being the contest between art and life with regard to permanence/ reality. In fact, it is possible to trace a line of argument on this aspect in English poetry from the sonnets of Shakespeare to the poetry of John Keats.

❖ **Stanza 7:**

Unlike the death wish of the poet, the bird however is not born for death. If you keep in mind that it is not one particular nightingale that Keats addresses in this poem, then you can easily understand why he writes that the voice of the bird is immortal. The voice must have regaled the ears of men and women also in the past. It must have soothed the agonized heart of Ruth and have reached the ears of a captive lady in some enchanted castle.

Thoubird: Keats is evidently thinking of the nightingale's song unchanging from time to time, from age to age. This line is subject to divergent critical interpretations and perspectives. Some critics have pointed out that the song of the nightingale is immortal or eternal though the bird is mortal and perishable. Others have said that the nightingale as a species, not as an individual bird, is considered deathless and imperishable. Therefore, though the particular nightingale will die away in course of time, its music is permanent and perpetual.

No....down: Keats is assertive in saying that nothing under the sun will wipe out or demolish the nightingale. The bird's music will be equally appealing and enthralling to each and every generation of mankind.

This passing night: the night when Keats was listening to the bird's song.

Ancient days: primitive times.

Emperor and clown: the nightingale's song had been heard by the people of all classes, starting from the monarchs to the fools in the court.

The self-same song: this very song of the nightingale.

The sad.....corn: Ruth, a Moabitish woman mentioned in the old Testament, was driven by famine from her native land and had to work in the fields of her kinsman Boaz (Ruth ii,3).

Ruth was consoled by the sweet and melodious song of the nightingale during the time of exile, solitariness, seclusion and loneliness.

Oft-times: often times, almost always.

Charmed: captivating, hypnotizing influence

Magic casements: openings of the enchanted castle in which a princess has been confined by an evil spirit.

Opening on the foam: encircled by the seas full of foams, the wild seas that is. Notice that like Coleridge, Keats is also constructing a nowhere-nowhen environs, where it becomes possible for fancy to luxuriate. But towards the end of the section, the word 'forlorn' rings a bell in his mind, and it becomes a trigger to return to reality.

Perilous seas: dangerous, tumultuous and tempestuous seas, full of fierce animals like sharks etc.

Fairy lands: lands of imagination, fancy lands created by the poet imaginatively, utopian lands.

Forlorn: discarded, deserted, alone and solitary.

❖ Stanza 8:

The word 'forlorn' in the last stanza reminds the poet of his own miseries and desolate state. He comes back to reality. The bird flies away. He hears the notes of the bird gradually fading away from his ears. He doubts if all this was a mere dream or a vision.

Forlorn: an admission or acknowledgement that the poet's romantic daydream is at an end. Forlorn is a refrain here, indicating the poet's consciousness of reality or actuality.

The very....bell: here the very word refers to 'Forlorn'. It acts as a kind of bell or warning calling the poet back to grim reality or actuality.

To toll....self: it suggests that return to reality is a kind of death to the poet. Cleanth Brooks has rightly pointed out that the world of the imagination offers release from the painful world of actuality, yet at the same time renders the world of actuality more painful and compelling by contrast. Yet the return to reality brings a significant closure to the poem.

Adieu!: bidding farewell to the world of the nightingale.

The fancy...well: according to the poet, fancy has so long created a false, illusory and tantalizing world of romance and in this way, it has deceived the poet who thinks that fancy is devoid of power which keeps a person under false impression of euphoria for a long duration.

As.....do: Fancy has been presented as a female.

Deceiving elf: elf is the inhabitant of fairyland. Keats here underlines the negative aspect of the imaginative vision by referring to it as a deception by the elf. Elves are often maliciously mischievous in folk tales. Fancy was at the other end from the imagination in the Romantic hierarchy of poetic tools.

Adieu! Adieu!: Keats has repeatedly bade his farewell to the nightingale's world

Plaintive anthem: the sad, melancholy tune of the nightingale which gradually fades away.

Meadows: grassy fields.

Still stream: river which is calm, quiet and tranquil.

Now....glades: eventually or finally, the song of the nightingale was buried in the valleys which are far away from the poet's habitation.

Was....dream: the poet is undecided and confused. When he thinks whether he was really with the nightingale or he was simply day-dreaming to be with the nightingale in the nightingale's world.

Do I wake or sleep? : The poet has been baffled by the dilemma arising out of the overlapping of the state of reality and that of reverie. He cannot decipher whether he was waking or sleeping while listening to the nightingale's song. A sense of doubt or uncertainty has plagued him at the end of the poem. He was not at all

sure whether he was in a wakeful or dreamy state. The subtle borderline between the world of actuality and the world of imagination represented by the nightingale seems to trouble him intensely and acutely. The poem concludes with a note of questioning or interrogation.

3.10.5: Critical Commentary

One of the prominent concerns of the poet in “Ode to a Nightingale” is the perception of the conflicted nature of human life—the interconnectedness of pain and joy, intensity of the feeling and numbness or lack of feeling, life and death, mortal and immortal, the actual and the ideal, and separation and connection. In this ode, Keats focuses on immediate and concrete sensations and emotions from which the reader can draw a conclusion. In the meditation or contemplation on poetic experience, the poet attempts to conceptualize a reconciliation of beauty and permanence through the symbol of the nightingale. Often thought of as the second of the spring odes, ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ was written in May 1819. The ode was first published as “Ode to the Nightingale” in *The Annals of the Fine Arts* (1819): 354-356 and then in 1820. Keats in this ode uses a stanza that combines a Shakespearean quatrain (a b a b) with a Petrarchan sestet (c d e c d e). Keats could have looked back to a long tradition of poems about nightingale including those written by Anne Finch, Mary Hays, Joseph Warton, George Dyer, three poems on the nightingale written by Charlotte Smith in her *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784), two odes by Mary Robinson, “Eastern Ode” by Anna Seward and two poems written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge titled “To the Nightingale” in 1796 and “The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem” in 1798. Keats reports that when he met Coleridge on Hampstead Heath on April 11, 1819, they spoke about “nightingale” among “thousand things” including poetry and metaphysics. The influence of William Wordsworth and William Hazlitt has been identified in the final two stanzas in particular.

3.10.6: Key Issues

❖ Keats’ Sensuousness

Sensuousness in the language of poetic criticism consists in a poet’s responsiveness to the impressions of external nature on the mind through the sense organs of sight,

touch, sound, smell and taste. All Romantic poets are bound to be more or less sensuous; but with John Keats poetry is hardly anything else than sensuous. “Keats”, says Matthew Arnold, “is abundantly and enchantingly sensuous” and Wordsworth is for him a ‘spring-board’. Shelley has laid emphasis on idea first, then sense while in Keats senses are of paramount importance and in case of Wordsworth sensuous enjoyment contributed him to grasping the idea which contains the deeper truths of life. On this ground they are all akin to the mystic poet. Though Keats’s poetry is abundantly sensuous, it is not without the element of reflection. His poetry reflects on the evanescent nature of human life, and joy, the relation between life and art and conflict between the ideal and the real.

The pleasures of the senses are raised to the region of poetry by the magic of his genius. He longs to share the Nightingale’s joy more completely. So, he at first seeks to taste a wine ‘cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth’. The drink will inspire his soul to rise to the beauty of the song. Old wine gains in flavour. Keats, a sensuous poet, is here an epicure. The wine brings to his mind all the associations of its land of origin, Italy or South France. He will see the beaker’s liquid beauty of “a purple-stained mouth”. The sensuous observation of the poet is worth- mentioning here. Keats rightly notices that the beak of a cup of red wine looks redder than the rest of the surface and again this “blushful Hippocrene with beaded bubbles winking at the brim” will bring poetic inspiration to him. Taste, smell, colour, sound, touch — all are to be gratified by the cup of wine. He will also hear the Nightingale which sings in “verdurous glooms” and “the murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves”. The sensuous aspect has been explicitly brought out by the onomatopoeic effect of the line containing ‘s’ and ‘z’ sounds. Besides, his smell is regaled by the “soft incense hangs upon the boughs”. Pleasures of the senses are a luxury to him. The fourth stanza reflects a spontaneous luxuriance of his sensuous feelings.

❖ Relation between Art and Life

‘Ode to a Nightingale’, Keats makes an attempt to compare the world of art represented by the nightingale’s world and the world of life or reality symbolized by the world in which the poet and other humans live. Wordsworth escapes to Nature, the limitless world of flowers, trees, mountains, valleys etc., Coleridge to the mysterious world of the supernatural and the Middle Ages and Shelley to the Golden Millennium of the future. Like the earlier poets, Keats is also a poet of escapism. A note of escapism

is noticeable in this poem. The poet wants passionately to 'leave the world unseen' and with the nightingale 'fade away into the forest dim'. Though the poem is read as a poem of escape dealing with the world of imagination or fantasy, reflection of human reality and condition cannot be completely overlooked. The poet reflects on the tragic human experience that human life is a boring tale of sorrows and miseries. Third stanza of the poem is a powerful commentary on the predicament of human situation. The old men with their bald heads and white hairs grow more feeble and struck with paralysis, young men become pale, spectre-thin and bound to face a premature death, beauty fades in course of time. This is a highly imaginative and romantic poem in which the poet initially strives to flee from reality. He intends to get rid of the tyranny and bondage of life. Being tired with harsh realities of life, the poet wants to escape because he does not find any trace of happiness in this mundane world. In order to forget sorrowful experience and existence, the poet is willing to escape to the ideal world of his imagination. His personal afflictions are considered as part of the sad destiny of humanity as a whole. The general scenario of malady is undeniably moving in its pitiful starkness. He decides to fly on the wings of poetic imagination and resides in the company of the nightingale on the shady branch of a leafy tree. The note of escapism is more strongly accentuated in the death-wish of the poet. The soothing darkness brings out his desire for dark death. The poet definitely asserts the yearning to court painless death in order to escape the constantly painful life. Finally, Keats does not fail to realize that escape from reality is absurd and realistically he can feel that the nightingale's song is nothing as joyous as it pretended to be, but a 'plaintive anthem'. At the end of the poem, he wakes up from his indolent dream to face actual life on its terms.

❖ The Keatsian brand of Romanticism

"Ode to a Nightingale," Keats makes an attempt to compare the world of art represented by the nightingale's world and the world of life or reality symbolized by the world in which the poet and other humans live. Wordsworth escapes to Nature, the limitless world of flowers, trees, mountains, valleys etc., Coleridge to the mysterious world of the supernatural and the Middle Ages and Shelley to the Golden Millennium of the future. Like the earlier poets, Keats is also a poet of escapism. A note of escapism is noticeable in this poem. The poet wants passionately to 'leave the world unseen' and with the nightingale 'fade away into the forest dim'. Though the poem is read as a poem of escape dealing with the world of imagination or fantasy, reflection of

human reality and condition cannot be completely overlooked. The poet reflects on the tragic human experience that human life is a boring tale of sorrows and miseries. Third stanza of the poem is a powerful commentary on the predicament of human situation. The old men with their bald heads and white hairs grow more feeble and are struck with paralysis, young men become pale, spectre-thin and are bound to face a premature death, beauty too fades in course of time. This is a highly imaginative and romantic poem in which the poet initially strives to flee from reality. He intends to get rid of the tyranny and bondage of life. Being tired with harsh realities of life, the poet wants to escape because he does not find any trace of happiness in this mundane world. In order to forget sorrowful experience and existence, the poet is willing to escape to the ideal world of his imagination. His personal afflictions are considered as part of the sad destiny of humanity as a whole. The general scenario of malady is undeniably moving in its pitiful starkness. He decides to fly on the wings of poetic imagination and resides in the company of the nightingale on the shady branch of a leafy tree. The note of escapism is more strongly accentuated in the death-wish of the poet. The soothing darkness brings out his desire for dark death. The poet definitely asserts the yearning to court painless death in order to escape the constantly painful life. Finally, Keats does not fail to realize that escape from reality is absurd and realistically he can feel that the nightingale's song is nothing as joyous as it pretended to be, but a 'plaintive anthem'. At the end of the poem, he wakes up from his indolent dream to face actual life on its terms. It is this element of reversal, the turn from the 'inebriated' desire to escape to a full realization that there is no way one can bypass the cycles of life, that makes Keats a Romantic poet who must be read to the core.

❖ Blend of Classicism and Romanticism

Keats was an ardent lover of Greek literature, mythology, sculpture and almost everything Greek. It has influenced his attitude to nature and life immensely. Throughout the entire poem of Ode to a Nightingale, references to the classical world are scattered. In the word 'Hemlock', the readers discern an allusion to Socrates, one of the notable Greek philosophers, who has drunk the juice produced from hemlock. A small quantity of it leads to profound sleep, a greater quantity generates death. Socrates died by taking a cup of Hemlock. Keats' classicism is perceptible in his reference to 'Lethe' which, in Greek mythology, is the river of

forgetfulness or oblivion flowing round hell. The souls of dead men forget their earthly memories when they cross this river. Hippocrene is one of the fountains of the Muses in Greek mythology, drinking the water of which makes one achieve poetic power. Keats wants to drink such wine which shall have the poetic efficacy of the Hippocrene, but at the same time it should have the visual attractiveness of a reddish colour, like that of a blushing face. Here wine is spoken of as the true inspirer of poetry. Reference to Ruth undoubtedly creates an ambience of classicism in the poem. Ruth was a Moabitish woman in the Old Testament, who might have been consoled by it when she became a widow and spent her days gleaning corns in the field of Boaz, a Kinsman of her mother-in-law, Naomi, to maintain herself. Keats's romanticism is manifested in his use of imagination. His concern is with imagination in a special sense and he is not far from Coleridge in his view of it. His romanticism is clearly evidenced in his sincere yearning to get away from the miseries and frustrations of life, to escape 'the weariness, the fever and the fret', which the poet experienced from his failure to achieve fame, love and health. What he generalizes as the lot of humanity is authentically based on his personal afflictions. The nightingale, the source of the purely joyous music, is a symbol of perfect happiness and beauty, and its world amidst the forest is the ideal offering a contrast to the sordid, painful and morbid world of man. This purely romantic conception of aspiring for the ideal and bewailing the fact that it cannot be attained by mortal man, is comparable to the attitude of Shelley in "To a Skylark" and of Yeats in "The Stolen Child." Here too the poet is intensely aware of tragedies of human life and he wants to escape from this stark and gruesome reality to the world of the nightingale on the 'viewless wings of imagination'. by virtue of his unfettered romantic fancy he can lose himself in the midst of the dark foliage of the trees and sit beside the nightingale. Sensuousness or voluptuousness is another characteristic of Keats' romanticism. The richly sensuous stanza on flowers where the sense of smell is highly exercised is noteworthy. The poet at once takes us into a fragrant atmosphere of the dark garden, where we inhale and identify white hawthorns, eglantines, violets and the musk-rose, astonishing mythed as 'Mid-May's eldest child'. Sensuousness is explicitly visible in Keats' description or narration of wine. Love of romance, deep delight in different aspects of Nature and fondness for classical art and sculpture are other significant components of romanticism in 'Ode to a Nightingale'. The voice of the nightingale is the voice of romance and beauty, a voice that is deathless.

3.10.7: Summing Up

“Ode to a Nightingale” is said to be the most personal or subjective of the Odes; it is also one of the most anthologized and syllabised poems of Keats. Perhaps it would be better to say that from the abrupt/ frenzied beginning of the poem “My heart aches ...” onwards, it creates the impression of being the most subjective. Leaving aside the claim by many critics that it is personal in an autobiographical manner, how is this impression of subjectivity achieved or attained? It is the process and movement of the poet’s mind that are the central concerns of “Ode to a Nightingale,” and the personal ‘I’ is very much in evidence. But as we have repeatedly shown here, it is equally important to see the progress from the subjective ‘I’ to the universality of theme.

3.10.8: Comprehension Exercises

A. Long Answer Type Questions:

1. Is Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale” a poem of escape or a reflection of human experience?
2. How the contrast between transience of life and permanence of art has been presented in Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”?
3. “Ode to a Nightingale,” unlike other Odes, has no one central theme. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.
4. Illustrate with reference to “Ode to a Nightingale” Keats’s art of sensuous depiction of natural beauty.

B. Medium Length Answer Type Questions:

1. Comment on Keats’ treatment of the themes of Beauty and Mutability in the Nightingale Ode.
2. Analyse the theme and structure of “Ode to a Nightingale.”
3. Do you read “Ode to a Nightingale” as a poem of escape or a reflection of the human experience? Discuss.

C. Short Answer Type Questions:

1. Analyse the moment of reversal in “Ode to a Nightingale.”
2. List the several sensory images that Keats uses in the Nightingale Ode.

3. Show how Keats uses the idea of fairy land in “Ode to a Nightingale” to secure the element of return to reality.

3.10.9: Suggested Reading

Abrams, M.H, (Ed.). *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*. OUP, 1975.

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Unit 11 □ Alfred, Lord Tennyson - Ulysses

Structure:

- 3.11.1. Objectives
- 3.11.2. Introduction to Alfred, Lord Tennyson
- 3.11.3. “Ulysses” – Text and Glossary
- 3.11.4. Summary and Analysis
- 3.11.5. Critical Commentary
- 3.11.6. Summing Up
- 3.11.7. Comprehension Exercises
- 3.11.8. Suggested Reading

3.11.1: Objectives

In this Unit you will be introduced to the most prominent of Victorian poets, Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) —who later became the Poet Laureate of England in 1850. Tennyson’s approach to poetry can be seen in his treatment of and perception of nature in his milieu. Like Shelley, he presents the various aspects of Nature with a scientific accuracy and precision of detail. Influenced by the evolutionary theory, he discards the traditional idea of a benevolent and motherly Nature, and brings out her fiercer aspects as well. He also finds nature ‘red in tooth and claw’, and shows the cruelty perpetrated in the form of the struggle for existence. His scientific temper blunts his sensitiveness to the soothing charms of Nature. In these ways you will find both the continuities and discontinuities that the Victorian Age shares with its preceding Romantic Age. Tennyson is a true representative of his Age, who voices the various feelings, sentiments, ideals and trends as well as social and moral concerns of his Age. He cherishes the values and ideals of his Age, but he also protests against those of them that he finds to be wrong or unsuitable for people. Tennyson’s poetry contains the most faithful reflection of, and offers the best commentary on, the life, thoughts and beliefs of the Victorian Age. In this Unit we will read his short poem

“Ulysses” that reflects several aspects of Victorianism and is also considered highly representative of Tennyson’s oeuvre.

3.11.2: Introduction

More than any other Victorian writer, Tennyson is the embodiment of his age, both to his contemporaries and to modern readers. In his own day he was said to be — with Queen Victoria and Gladstone—one of the three most famous living persons, a reputation no other poet writing in English has ever had. As official poetic spokesman for the reign of Victoria, he felt called upon to celebrate a quickly changing industrial and mercantile world with which he however felt little in common, for his deepest sympathies were called forth by an unaltered rural England. The conflict between what he thought of as his duty to contemporary society and his allegiance to the eternal beauty of nature seems peculiarly Victorian.

When he was not even quite eighteen his first volume of poetry, *Poems by Two Brothers* (1827), was published. Alfred Tennyson wrote the major part of the volume, although it also contained poems by his two elder brothers, Frederick and Charles. It is a remarkable book for so young a poet, displaying great virtuosity of versification and the prodigality of imagery that was to mark his later works; but it is also derivative in its ideas, many of which came from his reading in his father’s library. Few copies were sold, and there were only two brief reviews, but its publication confirmed Tennyson’s determination to devote his life to poetry. Most of Tennyson’s early education was under the direction of his father, although he spent nearly four unhappy years at a nearby grammar school. His departure in 1827 to join his elder brothers at Trinity College, Cambridge, was due more to a desire to escape from Somersby than to a desire to undertake serious academic work. At Trinity he was living for the first time among young men of his own age who knew little of the problems that had beset him for so long; he was delighted to make new friends. He was extraordinarily handsome, intelligent, humorous, and gifted at impersonation; and soon he was at the center of an admiring group of young men interested in poetry and conversation. It was probably the happiest period of his life.

3.11.3: Text

Before we come to the text of the poem, it would be in place to say a few words about it. The poem “Ulysses” was written in 1833 and published in a two-volume collection titled *Poems* (1842). Using the blank verse and the iambic pentameter rhyme scheme, Tennyson writes a dramatic monologue in which he recreates from a Victorian point of view, the character of Homer’s Ulysses in which he draws heavily from *Odyssey* (Book IX) and Dante’s *Inferno* (Canto XXVI). You will learn more about the Dramatic Monologue as a literary form in the next Unit. For now, we may say that “Ulysses” is not really one of the best examples of a dramatic monologue because in this poem, through the representation of Ulysses, Tennyson voices much of the dichotomies of Victorian society that was tentatively poised between progress and adherence to the past, an enigma that was as much Tennyson’s own predicament as well. Composed as part of his protracted responses to life after the death of his dear friend Arthur Henry Hallam, “Ulysses” is about the aged title character of Homer’s epic, who is still irreconciled between homebound duties as the King of Ithaca and his dauntless spirit of adventure. According to the Britannica, “The ironic distance of the narrative voice intensifies the ambiguity as to whether Ulysses is proving his noble courage or shirking his responsibilities in Ithaca for a journey that may prove to be futile, fatal, or both.” (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ulysses-poem-by-Tennyson>)

In the backdrop of the poem is the knowledge of the Homeric hero who has learnt from a prophecy of his impending death on a sea voyage. Dante’s *Inferno* actually takes up in greater detail this sea voyage, wherein Ulysses is depicted as a tragic hero with an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Once you read Tennyson’s poem, you will realize how the poet draws upon these two accounts – once Classical and the other Medieval. In that sense, Tennyson’s “Ulysses” combines treasure houses of European literature of the preceding ages. The Tennysonian quest for knowledge beyond death, and the hope of a reunion after death of course has as the immediate impulse the passing of his friend Hallam as mentioned earlier. Simultaneously, the poem also embodies the Victorian thirst for reaching out to the widening/ widened frontiers of the world at a time when British imperialism was beginning to expand its geographical limits. All these aspects must be kept in mind while reading “Ulysses”, which is on the face of it, a charged monologue of an ageing hero.

Ulysses

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these **barren crags**,
Match'd with an aged wife, I **mete and dole**
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

I cannot rest from travel: I will **drink**

Life to the lees: All times I have enjoy'd
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone, on shore, and when

Thro' **scudding drifts** the **rainy Hyades**

Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;

For always roaming with a **hungry heart**

Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,

Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;

And drunk delight of battle with my **peers**,

Far on the **ringing plains of windy Troy**.

I am a part of all that I have met;

Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'

Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades

For ever and forever when I move.

How dull it is to pause, to make an end,

To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!

As tho' to breathe were life! Life piled on life

Were all too little, and of one to me

Little remains: but every hour is saved

From that **eternal silence**, something more,

A bringer of new things; and **vile** it were

For some three suns to store and hoard myself,

And this **gray spirit yearning in desire**

To follow knowledge like a sinking star,

Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

This is my son, **mine own Telemachus**,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle,—
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:
There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—
That ever with a **frolic welcome** took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'T is not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order **smite**
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will **wash us down**:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,

And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
 Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
 We are not now that strength which in old days
 Moved earth and heaven, **that which we are, we are;**
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
 Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Glossary

barren crags - it refers to the island of Ithaca which is covered with rocks that are barren as nothing can grow on them.

mete and dole – distribute

drink life to the lees - make the most use of life

scudding drifts – Broken clouds driven by winds

Rainy Hyades – Hyades is a group of stars (a constellation) that was held by the ancients to indicate rainy weather; therefore called rainy Hyades.

Hungry heart – in search of knowledge

Peers – comrades/ fellow warriors

Ringling ...Troy – It is said that during the ten years of the Trojan War, heavy winds constantly kept sweeping over the battlefields of Troy, such inimical weather conditions making things even more difficult.

Yet all experience ...move – The image of the arch is an apt one that Tennyson uses to imply that the earth and the sky, that seem to meet in the horizon, never really meet. Thus the destination is never reached. Similar is the case with the thirst for knowledge that only keeps leading one on and on.

Eternal silence – Every moment of life

Vile – base/ sub-human

Gray ...desire – While the spirit yearns with insatiable desire, the physical body often stagnates and hence falls short

Mine ...Telemachus – The paternal affection is quite evident, though as it emerges a little later, Ulysses is aware of a qualitative difference between himself and his

son, as far as the unputdownable spirit of the adventurer is concerned

there gloom... seas – the sea looks dark and sombre

Frolic welcome – With sporting spirits

Free ...foreheads – Unbridled emotions and free thinking minds

Not unbecoming ...Gods – The use of the double negative is interesting. The reference obviously is to the epic battles that Ulysses and his fellow warriors have fought in earlier times, the implication is that they are no ordinary men who would spend their old age sulking and awaiting pallid deaths.

Smite – Attack/ take on

Sounding furrows – Mounting waves

Wash us down – get drowned/ defeated in the final journey

touch the Happy Isles – in Greek mythology the Happy Isles were considered to be the paradise of perpetual summer where spirits of dead heroes of the past lived.

Achilles – the great Greek hero of the Trojan war famous for his valour and manly beauty.

Ulysses (Odysseus in Greek) is a legendary figure in Tennyson's poem whose adventures were first recorded in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Tennyson draws on Homer's narrative in the poem, although most critics think that his poem recalls Dante's Ulysses in *Inferno*. The poem is in the form of a dramatic monologue. Ulysses himself is the speaker and he seems to be addressing his mariners who were his companions in the Trojan War. His son Telemachus seems to be standing by him.

That which ...we are – We do not deny the fact of being mortal humans

One ...hearts – However, this is not to deny that we are bound by fixity of purpose and are made of similar elements, so there can be no discord insofar as setting sail for probably one last time is concerned

To strive ...yield – The climax of the poem says it all

3.11.4: Summary and Analysis

Ulysses (Odysseus) declares that there is little point in his staying home "by this still hearth" with his old wife, doling out rewards and punishments for the unnamed

masses who live in his kingdom. Still speaking to himself he proclaims that he “cannot rest from travel” but feels compelled to live to the fullest and swallow every last drop of life. He has enjoyed all his experiences as a sailor who travels the seas, and he considers himself a symbol for everyone who wanders and roams the earth. His travels have exposed him to many different types of people and ways of living. They have also exposed him to the “delight of battle” while fighting the Trojan War with his men. Ulysses declares that his travels and encounters have shaped who he is: “I am a part of all that I have met,” he asserts. And it is only when he is traveling that the “margin” of the globe that he has not yet traversed, shrinks and fades, and ceases to goad him. Ulysses declares that it is boring to stay in one place, and that to remain stationary is to rust rather than to shine; to stay in one place is to pretend that all there is to life is the simple act of breathing, whereas he knows that in fact life contains much novelty, and he longs to encounter this. His spirit yearns constantly for new experiences that will broaden his horizons; he wishes “to follow knowledge like a sinking star” and forever grow in wisdom and in learning. Ulysses now speaks to an unidentified audience concerning his son Telemachus, who will act as his successor while the great hero resumes his travels: he says, “This is my son, mine own Telemachus, to whom I leave the sceptre and the isle.” He speaks highly but also patronizingly of his son’s capabilities as a ruler, praising his prudence, dedication, and devotion to the gods. Telemachus will do his work of governing the island while Ulysses will do his work of traveling the seas: “He works his work, I mine.” In the final stanza, Ulysses addresses the mariners with whom he has worked, traveled, and weathered life’s storms over many years. He declares that although he and they are old, they still have the potential to do something noble and honorable before “the long day wanes.” He encourages them to make use of their old age because “’tis not too late to seek a newer world.” He declares that his goal is to sail onward “beyond the sunset” until his death. Perhaps, he suggests, they may even reach the “Happy Isles,” or the paradise of perpetual summer described in Greek mythology where great heroes like the warrior Achilles were believed to have been taken after their deaths. Although Ulysses and his mariners are not as strong as they were in youth, they are “strong in will” and are sustained by their resolve to push onward relentlessly: “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”, or *charaibeti* as we say it in Bangla, thus becomes the final call of the poem.

3.11.5: Critical Appreciation

As you know by now, in this poem Tennyson reworks the figure of Ulysses by drawing on the ancient hero of Homer's *Odyssey* ("Ulysses" is the Roman form of the Greek "Odysseus") and the medieval hero of Dante's *Inferno*. Homer's Ulysses, as described in Scroll XI of the *Odyssey*, learns from a prophecy that he will take a final sea voyage after killing the suitors of his wife Penelope. The details of this sea voyage are described by Dante in Canto XXVI of the *Inferno*: Ulysses finds himself restless in Ithaca and driven by "the longing I had to gain experience of the world." Dante's Ulysses is a tragic figure who dies while sailing too far in an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Tennyson combines these two accounts by having Ulysses make his speech shortly after returning to Ithaca and resuming his administrative responsibilities, and shortly before embarking on his final voyage. While that relates to the source of the poem from classical legends, the obvious question for us now is the relation that the theme can have to the context of Victorian England in general, and to Tennyson in particular.

We need to know that this poem also concerns the poet's own personal journey, for it was composed in the first few weeks after Tennyson learned of the death of his dear college friend Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833. Like *In Memoriam*, then, this poem is also an elegy for a deeply cherished friend. Ulysses, who symbolizes the grieving poet, proclaims his resolution to push onward in spite of the awareness that "death closes all" (line 51). As Tennyson himself stated, the poem expresses his own "need of going forward and braving the struggle of life" after the loss of his beloved Hallam. The poem's final line, "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield," came to serve as a motto for the poet's Victorian contemporaries: the poem's hero longs to flee the tedium of daily life "among these barren crags" (line 2) and to enter a mythical dimension "beyond the sunset, and the baths of all the western stars" (lines 60–61); as such, he was a model of individual self-assertion and the Romantic rebellion against bourgeois conformity.

Thus for Tennyson's immediate audience, the figure of Ulysses held not only mythological meaning, but stood as an important contemporary cultural icon as well. In a broader contemporary context, we can definitely relate the poem to the Victorian spirit of a further and unending quest – the search for exploring the limits

of progress and growth that had been pushed beyond hitherto known frontiers by the Industrial Revolution. In that sense, Tennyson's poem can be seen as embodying the Victorian zest for going beyond established frontiers and establishing a new work ethic.

"Ulysses," like many of Tennyson's other poems, thus deals with the desire to reach beyond the limits of one's immediate field of the visible, and the mundane details of everyday life. Ulysses is the antithesis of the mariners in "The Lotos-Eaters," who proclaim "we will no longer roam" and desire only to relax amidst the Lotos fields. In contrast, Ulysses "cannot rest from travel" and longs to roam the globe (line 6). Like the Lady of Shalott, who longs for the worldly experiences she has been denied, Ulysses hungers to explore the untraveled world. As in all dramatic monologues, here the character of the speaker emerges almost unintentionally from his own words. Ulysses' incompetence (rather incompatibility) as a ruler is evidenced by his preference for potential quests rather than his present responsibilities. He devotes a full 26 lines to his own egotistical proclamation of his zeal for the wandering life, and another 26 lines to the exhortation of his mariners to roam the seas with him. However, he offers only 11 lines of lukewarm praise to his son concerning the governance of the kingdom in his absence, and a mere two words about his "aged wife" Penelope. Thus, the speaker's own words betray his abdication of responsibility and his specificity of purpose.

Ulysses is old now in age but not in spirit. He is greatly dissatisfied with his present condition as the king of Ithaca, which he considers a barren island. His subjects are rugged and savage in the sense that they do not value the importance of work and justice or even knowledge, in life. They are the people who only "hoard, and sleep, and feed and know not me." His wife is old now and his son is young enough to take over the responsibility of his father's kingdom and family.

Ulysses has been a great explorer and has made great discoveries. Though old now, yet his untiring spirit yearns for new adventures abroad. He says that he has been to different places, has come across different kinds of people and of different "manners, climates, councils, governments". He further says that all those people have paid honour and tribute to him, as a result of which his name has become synonymous with that of a great adventurer and explorer. He has proved his exploits

in the Trojan War, and as an explorer he has found that the world is too large to be measured by a single life. Hence he feels that the more he explores the more of it remains to be discovered. He says that his spirit is indefatigable and for him old age is not the time for rest and rusting but to gain more experiences in life. He is of the opinion that life means experiences and the more one gathers them the greater in age one becomes.

He then contrasts his present life with that which has been and wishes “to shine in use”. He also says that he will not be alive for many more years, and wishes that before he is laid to rest he might become a discoverer of new things. His spirits are very high and his ambition is to follow knowledge even beyond the seas. He also says that in his absence, his son Telemachus will be the king of Ithaca and hopes that he will try in every possible way to civilize a rugged and savage people by slow degrees and make them useful and good. Moreover, his son knows what his duties towards family are, and he will also properly worship his household gods. While Ulysses goes abroad, his son will remain at home and perform all the duties that are expected of the head of a family.

All preparations for Ulysses’ departure have been completed — the sails of his ship are full of wind and his mariners are prepared to sail with him to meet any and every kind of adventure that comes their way. His mariners are undaunted and have never known any fear. They have been “free hearts, free foreheads” and though as old as he himself is, yet they and he are alike in spirits. Like Ulysses, his mariners also believe that though death is an unfailing certainty, yet before death and even in old age “some work of noble note” can still be done. This zest they derive from the fact that they were the people who “strove with gods” in the past. All is ready for his departure. It is the evening time, the moon is visible in the sky and the sea seems to invite the mariners with many kinds of noise. Ulysses asks his mariners to get ready immediately for “pushing off”, because his ambition is to reach the legendary “Happy isles” where he hopes to see his great ancestor Achilles face to face.

He now regrets that he and his mariners are now not in possession of that energy and vigour that were theirs in their former youthful days when they could

move “earth and heaven”. They have now been considerably weakened both by fate and by time. But for them there is no cessation from activity. They are all of “One equal temper of heroic hearts” and by defying both time and fate they must continue their old mission “to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield”.

This poem is written as a dramatic monologue: the entire poem is spoken by a single character, whose identity is revealed through his own words. The lines are in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter, which serves to impart a fluid and natural quality to Ulysses’s speech. Many of the lines are enjambed, which means that a thought does not end with the line-break; the sentences often end in the middle, rather than the end, of the lines. The use of enjambment is appropriate in a poem about pushing forward “beyond the utmost bound of human thought.” Finally, the poem is divided into four stanza-like sections, each of which comprises a distinct thematic unit of the poem. Tennyson had once said, “There is more about myself in Ulysses, which was written under the effect of loss and that all had gone by, but that still life must be fought out to the end”. The loss referred to in the foregoing lines is the death of his father in 1831 but the more important event for him was the death of his close and intimate friend Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833. Hallam had been Tennyson’s close Cambridge friend and Tennyson was emotionally tied to him.

So the poem “Ulysses” remains as a classic example of the Victorian tempo wherein the personal and the societal make a good blend.

3.11.6: Summing Up

- The poem “Ulysses” by Tennyson makes him realize that for him there was no escape and that life had to be lived and fought and at this time
- The myth of Ulysses gave him great encouragement. He wrote that the poem gave him an impetus about the need of going forward and braving the struggle of life.
- It is significant how Tennyson combines personal thought and universal wisdom in the poem.
- “Ulysses” in several ways is reflective of the paradoxes of thought that Victorian society was beset with.

3.11.7: Comprehension Exercises

A. Long Answer Type Questions:

1. Critically comment on Tennyson's use of autobiographical content in "Ulysses" and how he blends it with universal wisdom.
2. What qualities of a dramatic monologue do you find in "Ulysses"?
3. Comment on Tennyson's handling of the Ulysses legend in his eponymous poem.

B. Medium Length Answer Type Questions:

1. What idea of the character of Ulysses do you form after reading Tennyson's poem?
2. Briefly comment on Tennyson's narrative technique in "Ulysses".
3. Is there any spirit of optimism in Tennyson's 'Ulysses'? Answer with textual references.

C. Short Answer Type Questions:

1. What story is the poet referring to when he says "I cannot rest from travel: I will drink/ Life to the lees"?
2. "Yet all experience is an arch" – To whom does 'experience' seem like an 'arch' and why?
3. Explain with reference to the context : "To strive, so seek, to find, and not to yield."

3.11.8: Suggested Reading

Auden, Wystan Hugh. *Tennyson. An Introduction and a Selection*. Phoenix House Ltd, 1946.

Bristow, Joseph. *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Pinion, F. B. *A Tennyson Companion: Life and Works*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1984.

Unit 12 □ Robert Browning – My Last Duchess

Structure:

- 3.12.1. Objectives
- 3.12.2. Introduction
- 3.12.3. Robert Browning and the Dramatic Monologue
- 3.12.4. “My Last Duchess” – Publication Details
- 3.12.5. Text and Glossary
- 3.12.6. Summary and Analysis
- 3.12.7. Critical Commentary
- 3.12.8. Summing Up
- 3.12.9. Comprehension Exercises
- 3.12.10. Suggested Reading

3.12.1. Objectives

With the knowledge you have gathered on the complexities inherent in Victorian society and culture, and the place of poetry therein, this Unit will acquaint you with one of the most anthologised poems of Robert Browning. Let us make it clear at the outset that Browning is a poet who might be perceived as standing quite in contradiction to Tennyson, the Poet Laureate, whom you have read in the previous Unit, and Matthew Arnold who follows in the next. Although they all belonged to the same age, their oeuvres differ remarkably in spirit. In the course of your study of Browning and his poetry you will also gain valuable insights into the different ways in which sensitive minds from the same age react to situations and compulsions inflicted upon them. Of specific importance in this Unit is Browning’s handling of the poetic form known as the **Dramatic Monologue**, in bringing out complex states of the human mind. In an age that was deficient in dramatic output so to say, you will discover how this new poetic form approximates drama in unravelling conflict and complexities.

3.12.2: Introduction

Robert Browning (1812 -1889) belonged to the Victorian age, spanning the years roughly between 1830 and 1900. It was an age marked by a number of developments in the political, social, economic and cultural spheres. First, it was the age of Queen Victoria's long, uninterrupted reign which witnessed great imperial expansion and ensured political stability for England. This was reflected in the social environment where Victorianism became an ethos in itself, entailing a set standard of public behaviour. Decorum, propriety, correctness and moral righteousness were upheld with great zest. It was also an age of great economic well-being for some, but great economic distress for factory workers and peasants. The Industrial Revolution brought about a greater division between working classes and ruling classes.

Caught in this conflicting world were the writers, thinkers and artists. Some hailed the overall prosperity of England while some deplored the unjust system. Scientific progress and new discoveries only heightened the divide, Darwin's theory of the evolution of man becoming the chief centre of conflict between complacent faith and skeptical questioning. Tennyson, the Poet Laureate, hailed the greatness of his nation, but was also aware of progress 'halting on palsied feet'. Matthew Arnold was torn between faith and unfaith and found himself 'enised'. You have now read poetry by both these poets.

Browning, though aware of all these developments, kept his work largely free of these conflicts, focusing on his own artistic evolution. Further, as you know from the previous Unit, he had relocated to Italy after his elopement and marriage to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a leading poet of the times. Against the backdrop of such diverse developments, Browning experimented with a variety of themes and forms, which were markedly different from the mellifluous poetry that people in England were used to since the Romantics and then, Tennyson.

Born in this age of conflicting conditions, Browning, with his bold innovativeness, had to wait a long time to find his rightful place in the world of contemporary literature. Tennyson, his contemporary, enjoyed fifty years of success, while

Robert Browning tasted success only in the last phase of his life, twenty years after the collected volume of 1849. It took a long time for Victorian England, as it continued to stick to conventional standards, to recognize the range of Browning's poetry. Browning was a poet ahead of his times who anticipated modern techniques such as impressionism and psycho-analysis in poems such as "My Last Duchess", "Porphyria's Lover", "Home Thoughts from Abroad" and so on. His intellectual analysis of the human psyche was a disturbing feature for the complacent Victorian world.

3.12.3: Robert Browning and the Dramatic Monologue

The Dramatic Monologue was a form that Browning had perfected in the course of his experiments with different forms of poetry and verse drama. In this, a speaker tries to justify his own position and convince the listener about his point of view and his actions. Most of his dramatic monologues are set in a particular milieu, a particular time. The historical setting is very important for a proper understanding of the poem. In "My Last Duchess", the setting of late Renaissance Italy is fundamental to our understanding of the Duke's character – specially the fine sensitivity to art and, on the other hand, his feudal, uncompromising, materialistic temperament.

A dramatic monologue is fundamentally different from a soliloquy. In the former, the speaker's attention is directed outward, towards the listener whom he is trying to influence. In the latter, the attention is entirely directed inwards, where the speaker is trying to come to terms with his ideas and emotions and consists of internal debate, as in Hamlet's famous soliloquy, 'To be or not to be.' Further, the meaning that emerges from a soliloquy is exactly what the speaker is intending to communicate. In a dramatic monologue, the speaker tries to impose his established point of view, but, with the opposite result. The reader's/ listener's reaction is contrary to what the speaker had aimed at. A dramatic monologue is generally uttered at a moment of historical crisis when the speaker is desperate to convince his listener as in "My Last Duchess", or trying to get out of a sticky situation as in "Fra Lippo Lippi", or even trying to justify his

convoluted psychology as in “Porphyria’s Lover”. A dramatic monologue, while consisting of an utterance by a single speaker, also contains elements of drama by making the presence and reactions of the listener/ audience palpable. In “My Last Duchess”, the presence and responses of the envoy are communicated to us throughout. Also, there is in a Dramatic Monologue a sense of movement and unfolding of action as in “Porphyria’s Lover”, a poem that we would suggest you read on your own or with help from your counsellor.

Browning’s dramatic monologues explore the psychological complexities of the speaker’s mind, where the speaker unwittingly reveals his character while trying to mislead the listener. In the course of justifying and explaining his standpoint, Browning makes the speaker reveal his true nature through his diction/ language, images, metaphors, turn of phrase etc. In fact, Browning established the technique of ‘point of view’ long before it was developed in prose fiction by Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and others in the twentieth century. Browning’s principal concern was the creation of dramatic speakers and dramatic situations. In the poems prescribed for you, we find some of the best illustrations of the dramatic monologue as developed by Browning.

3.12.4: “My Last Duchess – Publication Details

This poem was first published under the general title ‘Italy and France’, with the contrasting poem, ‘Count Gismond’. It had its present title in 1849, and in 1863 was included in *Romances*. Browning collected the material of this poem while preparing for “Sordello”. The Duke is modelled on Alfonso II, the fifth Duke of Ferrara and the last of the Este family. Alfonso was born in 1533 and married Lucrezia de Medici, daughter of the Duke of Florence, in 1558, when she was only fourteen years of age. She died in 1561 in mysterious circumstances. In 1565, the Duke married the daughter of Ferdinand I, the Count of Tyrol and whose capital was Innsbruck. The emissary of the Count to whom this dramatic monologue is addressed is Nikolaus Madruz.

3.12.5: Text

MY LAST DUCHESS*Ferrara*

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps
Fra Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat." Such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy.
She had a heart—how shall I say?— too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,

The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody’s gift. Who’d stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—which I have not—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, “Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark”—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse—
E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will’t please you rise? We’ll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master’s known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretense
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter’s self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we’ll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

Glossary

Fra—Brother of a missionary sect, priest

Design – on purpose

Pictured- painted

Countenance-expression, appearance

Durst- dare

Mantle – cloak

Officious – interfering in an obtrusive way

Lessoned – taught, corrected

Forsooth – indeed

Stooping - lowering one's standard, bending

Company – gathering, guests

Munificence - great generosity

Warrant – justification, authority

Pretence – claim

Avowed – openly stated

Rarity – a rare or precious thing

3.12.6: Summary and Analysis

“My Last Duchess” was written in the summer, or early autumn of 1842. The story of the poem is temporally placed in the Renaissance, when art was deeply appreciated, especially painting. The Duke is the speaker, addressing the envoy of the Count of Tyrol, who has come to discuss marriage negotiations between the Duke and the Count's daughter. As the Duke takes the envoy on a tour of his house, he points to a picture of the ‘last duchess’, i.e., Lucrezia de Medici, painted by Fra Pandolf, an imaginary painter. The point to note here is that the Duke had commissioned a priest, and not any other painter, to paint a picture of his wife. The Duke is full of admiration for the painting and calls ‘that piece a wonder’. He asks the envoy to sit and look at the painting with care and states that he mentioned the name of the painter as ‘Fra Pandolf’ deliberately, because he did not want ordinary people looking at her. In fact, even now, after

her death, no one but he can remove the curtain that covers the painting. He explains that his wife was very easily pleased and the envoy may be wondering as to what had 'called that spot of joy' in her cheeks. He goes on to explain that something as insignificant as the priest saying, by way of courtesy, that her wrist was too beautiful to be covered by the mantle or that the painter's brush can never reproduce the 'half-flush that dies along her throat', could make her glad. In fact, according to the Duke, she had a heart that was 'too soon made glad'. She 'liked whatever she looked on, and her looks went everywhere'. She considered his 'favour' for her at par with other little things such as 'the dropping of the daylight in the West' or the 'fool' who brought cherries for her or the white mule she rode on. She was equally thankful towards all and 'ranked' his 'gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name' with 'anybody's gift'. She did not realize the worth of being married into such an old family. Incidentally, her family did not have such an illustrious lineage as his.

But the Duke was too proud to correct her lack of discernment and even if he had that 'skill in speech', he would not have bothered to make his 'will' clear to 'such an one'. And even if she were prepared to correct herself where she missed or exceeded the mark, he would still think that there would have been some stooping and he had chosen 'never to stoop'. He says that she always smiled when he passed her, but then, she smiled on everybody else who passed her. As she continued in this manner, he 'gave commands' and 'all smiles stopped together'. The Duke ordered her death as he found her unworthy of the honour of being the wife of a Duke with a 'nine-hundred-years-old name'. And now, in this painting she looks 'as if alive'. After describing the last Duchess and her fate, the Duke asks the envoy to rise and go below where the others are. He slyly refers to the generosity of the Count in the matter of dowry and hypocritically states that it is his daughter in whom he is actually interested. As they go down together, the Duke draws the attention of the envoy to a sculpture of Neptune, identified with the Greek sea-god, Poseidon, taming a sea-horse, which Claus, an imaginary sculptor from Innsbruck, the capital of Tyrol, had 'cast in bronze' for him. In all this, you need to remember that the woman whom the Duke has had killed out of jealous possessiveness was all

but just a young girl of fifteen. So you can well understand that she would not even have understood the Duke's anger at what would have been her very natural demeanour befitting an adolescent child!

3.12.7: Critical Commentary

Placed against the temporal frame of the Renaissance, "My Last Duchess" works out a delicately delineated portrait of the Duchess and more subtly, of the Duke. In this poem, Browning anticipates as it were the domain of Impressionistic art in his depiction of the object of discourse as a work of art(ifice).

The 'aesthetic' man, i.e., the Duke is trying to convince the envoy of his masterful presence, which actually indicates his need for assurance on that head. He tells the story of the last duchess in order to inform the envoy about what he expects from his future bride, perhaps. In a dramatic manner, he unveils the picture of his former wife, pointing out its artistic merit and then moves on to discuss her nature and conduct which he found unbecoming for the wife of a Duke with a 'nine-hundred-years-old name'. In the course of defining her lapses, he unwittingly reveals his own insecurity which prompted him to give 'commands' so that her smiles which she bestowed on all were 'stopped' forever. The Duke in his insane logic feels that he did the right thing in killing her, thereby preserving the dignity of his family's name and preserving her beauty in art.

The Duke's attitude illustrates Freud's theory of obsessional neurosis. The psychological complexity of the Duke of Ferrara is brought out in his blind belief that he can never be wrong, that he is to decide the fates of others. He even controls the actions of such insignificant people as the envoy who he orders to 'sit' or 'rise'. He behaves as a theatrical producer. He even monitors the responses of the envoy towards the portrait of the last duchess, prompting him to notice her wrist, her cheeks, and the 'faint half-flush that dies along her throat'. These reveal his own sexual frustration in 'failing' to have been the sole proprietor and controller of her life. Despite being supposedly a connoisseur of art and beauty, his elevated aesthetic sense does not protect him from sinking into the lowest depths of depravity, insecurity and cruelty. The Duke's theatrical rhetoric produces

a series of dramatic shocks and as Robert Langbaum has pointed out, the last ten lines 'produce a series of shocks' that reveal the Duke's character which leave the reader 'panting after revelation'. Before we have time to recover from the shock of his crime we find him ruthlessly exposing his greed by referring to the dowry he expects from his future bride and his intention of exercising control by the reference to the sculpture of Neptune taming a sea-horse.

In the course of narrating the story of the last duchess, the Duke reveals his supreme arrogance and his distorted view of aristocratic lineage. He is harsh, cruel, heartless and ruthless, with inhuman pride. The swift change of topic in his discourse reflects his complete indifference and absence of feeling towards others. There is no trace of guilt, no regret, no fear. He is almost lunatic in his egotism and blindness. At the same time, he has the cool, practical logic of a heartless man. In a business-like, practical way he introduces the subject of dowry. For him, marriage is a business transaction to be negotiated. He is also avaricious. His extreme greed is brought out in the reference to the Count's munificence'. His calculating nature and hypocrisy is revealed in his claim that his daughter's 'fair self' is all that interests him. In drawing the envoy's attention to Neptune taming a sea-horse there is a note of misgiving regarding his expectations from his new bride. The Duke utters the monologue at a critical point in his life, when he is about to take a decision about his second marriage. He wants to make his position clear regarding his relations with the last duchess. The scene and situation is indicated in the title and the first few lines with the utmost economy, where the Duke leads the envoy from his future bride's home to view the portrait of his 'last duchess'. The Duke's typical Renaissance attributes such as love of art, painting and pride of aristocratic lineage are brought out right at the beginning. The moment of historical crisis in his life has the effect of splitting the speaker's personality into opposing elements and the conflict of these leads to revelation of character.

There is an indirect exploration of psychological processes in the Duke's mind. Presence of audience forces the speaker to assume a stance or mask according to the effect he wants to make on the listener. Throughout the poem, the presence of the listener is made palpable through references to

his reactions, expressions and movements. The element of drama, both in content and presentation is strongly present, while the monologue offers the audience a chance to glimpse into the hidden recesses of an abnormal mind. In this, it is a perfect dramatic monologue. And, in the attempt to justify his treatment of his former wife, he reveals more of his own failings than he would have done at any other time. His intention of conveying what he expects from his second wife by pointing out the lapses of the last (late) duchess, has just the reverse effect.

He lets slip a number of his character traits which at any other time he would have tried to conceal, such as his greed, arrogance, hypocrisy, insecurity and insane jealousy. This revelation of character is the fundamental object of Browning's dramatic monologues. It is done in an oblique way with great subtlety and dramatic effect. While the Duke thinks he is making a grand impression on his audience, he is actually exposing his frailties and grievous lapses.

He ends up bringing out the last duchess's goodness, while trying to dismiss her. For him, the real person was insignificant, but her life-like portrait makes her 'seem alive'. She has become an object of art for the connoisseur. Browning's handling of the dramatic monologue is best brought out through his use of language. The Duke in all his pride of superior artistic taste leads his listener to look upon the portrait of his dead wife and appreciate the 'piece' which is a 'wonder'. And at the same time, he makes the envoy understand that the merit of the work of art should not be confused with the subject of that work. It is through a subtle use of language that the Duke tries to monitor the responses of his listener. The metaphor of art acts as a continuing motif through the poem, culminating in the reference to the statue of Neptune taming a sea-horse. The vulnerable duchess who could not be tamed as he wished had to pay with her life and become transformed into an object of art. And the sculpture of Neptune sends a veiled message as to what he would want from his future bride. The imagery of Neptune taming a sea-horse is in contrast to the duchess riding her 'white mule' on the terrace. Strength is pitted against vulnerability.

Browning makes use of subtle irony in revealing the character of the Duke by making him utter the most damaging things about himself while he felt he

was making a great impression by his self-satisfied account of his opinions and actions. The unobtrusive rhyming couplets and the syntax of the lines help in creating a dramatic effect as well as the rhythm of speech. The run-on lines with pauses here now and then especially convey a sense of conversational rhythm. The dominating presence of the Duke is brought out through the swift changes of subject and tone.

The lover of art and beauty who fails to love humanity begins and ends his monologue with peremptory orders to notice works of art – first, a painting of the duchess he killed and, second, a statue of Neptune in the act of taming, as he wished to do with the last duchess and proposes to do with the next.

3.12.8: Summing Up

As a poem therefore, “My Last Duchess” is thus an extremely intriguing, interesting and terrifying study in abnormal psychology. With the use of the form of the dramatic monologue, Browning subtly makes the Duke reveal the twisted psychology of a person who kills his wife for the absence of perfect and complete surrender to him. Other aspects of nobility like aristocracy, appreciation of art, and magnificence of mind are taken for a toss as readers are given a thorough glimpse of the insides of the mind of a very complex, almost a neurotic person. The best part is that the Duke himself inadvertently reveals it all through his monologue, which is actually intended to have quite the opposite effect. As readers, you need to ponder over the efficacy of the literary mode in an era where we do not see much of new drama emerging.

3.12.9: Comprehension Exercises

A. Long Answer Type Questions:

1. Analyse the Duke’s character in “My Last Duchess”.
2. Comment on Browning’s handling of the dramatic monologue as found in “My Last Duchess.”
3. Discuss Browning’s handling of language and its nuances in “My Last Duchess.”

4. Critically analyse the title of the poem “My Last Duchess” to bring out Browning’s intention of making it a study in neurotic psychology.

B. Medium Length Answer Type Questions:

1. Give an account of the way the Duchess’s story is unfolded.
2. What understanding of art and artists do you arrive at from your reading of “My Last Duchess”?

C. Short Answer Type Questions:

1. What traits in the nature of the Duchess make the Duke of “My Last Duchess” angry?
2. Explain with reference to the context: “This grew; I gave commands; Then all smiles stopped together.”
3. Comment briefly on the concluding image in “My Last Duchess.

3.12.10: Suggested Reading

Armstrong, Isobel. *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics*. Routledge, 1993.

Gibson, Mary Ellis (Ed.). *Critical Essays on Robert Browning*. G.K. Hall & Co., 1992.

Jack, Ian and Robert Inglesfield (Eds.). *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, Vol. 5: *Men and Women*. Clarendon Press, 1996.

Langbaum, Robert. *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*. University of Chicago Press, 1986.

Unit 13 □ Matthew Arnold – Dover Beach

Structure:

- 3.13.1. Objectives
- 3.13.2. Introduction
- 3.13.3. Matthew Arnold – A Bio-Brief
- 3.13.4. “Dover Beach” – Text and Glossary
- 3.13.5. Context
- 3.13.6. Summary and Analysis
- 3.13.7. Critical Commentary
- 3.9.8. Summing Up
- 3.9.9. Comprehension Exercises
- 3.9.10. Suggested Reading

3.13.1: Objectives

You have already read in your course on Victorian society and politics that in Victorian England there was peace and prosperity on the one hand and poverty, doubt and anxiety on the other. Culturally, this was reflected in some ways in the simultaneous rise in the taste for luxury, decadence and a revival in the taste for both Baroque and Gothic architecture and an increase in the awareness of poverty and other social evils and a feeling of isolation and loneliness. The literature of the period mirrored this stark contrast through the simultaneous existence of the literature of writers like the Pre-Raphaelites and the writings of Charles Dickens and Matthew Arnold. However, it may be said of Tennyson and Browning that they had, in some ways, incorporated both tendencies in their work. In the writings of the Victorians, therefore, one encounters, simultaneously, the complicated religiosity of D. G. Rossetti in “The Blessed Damozel”, the doubts against religion raised in Robert Browning’s “Fra Lippo Lippi”, the soul-searchings of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* as well as the attempt to restore

lost faith in Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach". It is with Arnold's search for a wavering faith that you will be introduced in this unit.

3.13.2: Introduction

In a letter to his friend Arthur Hugh Clough, Arnold writes about Keats (and about Browning and Tennyson) that they were, in spite of being poetically gifted, consumed by a desire to produce movement and fullness and therefore were able to obtain only a "confused multitudinousness" in their poetry. This reveals something about Arnold's own poetic creed as much it expresses his views on those of these other poets.

In Arnold's view, these poets were guilty of unalloyed subjectivity and allusiveness in their poetry and therefore, of moving away from the moral responsibilities of a poet towards their readership. Arnold confesses, elsewhere, of having been sometimes tempted by such a desire. However, he resolved to ground his poetry in a poet's moral responsibility towards the society. In Arnold's views, therefore, something may be termed as poetry only when it is able to provide 'enjoyment' to the readers; by 'enjoyment' Arnold meant the act of deriving aesthetic pleasure. This was not possible, according to Arnold, if the poet could not depict suffering to have found "vent in action". Such an action should be such a one that appeals to the "primary human affections"; in other words, those actions which transcend space and time and can be termed universal. Arnold here refers to actions of epic height. Thus, only that could be termed poetry which attempts to ennoble the reader's mind by depicting actions of the greatest sublimity.

Arnold himself attempted works of epic height like *Sohrab and Rustum* (1853) and "Balder Dead" (1855). However, Arnold is at his truest and perhaps at his best when he does not consciously strive to achieve sublimity but spontaneously attains a lyrical intensity through an honest depiction of the dilemma he was in. He was torn between, as says Isobel Armstrong, "the ethical, stabilizing poetry of joy he wished to create" and his anxieties and doubts which were seeking expression through his poems. Arnold's anxieties stemmed from an awareness of the dwindling

of faith and a resultant feeling of psychological isolation. The reason for the loss of faith in God and religion was, in Arnold's eyes, a diseased condition of the mind burdened with material desires and concerns. In "The Scholar Gypsy", he urges the eponymous Oxonian to quit the company of his (Arnold's) contemporary society with the following words:

O born in days when wits were fresh and clear,
And life ran gaily as the sparkling Thames;
Before this strange disease of modern life,
With its sick hurry, its divided aims,
Its heads o'ertax'd, its palsied hearts, was rife—
Fly hence, our contact fear!

Although Arnold sounds disillusioned here, and elsewhere in his poetry, yet he is no pessimist. "In Dover Beach", he tells his companion:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.

Having faith in one another seems to be the antidote to the problem of 'modern life'.

Arnold's dilemma is evident not only in his treatment of subject, but also in his use of language. This is evident from the ending of his poem "The Scholar Gypsy", where the poet uses an extended simile to urge upon the scholar gypsy to distance himself from the company of 'modern' people. Such a studied sort of conclusion hampers, somewhat, the lyricism which is an essential feature of this poem. Arnold's language seems to have a sort of stately elegance that is very apparently the result of careful skill.

Arnold, a very acute social observer, strives, in his poetry to bring to light the doubts and anxieties of his countrymen that lay hidden beneath their material prosperity and complacency. Arnold believed where there was poverty and ignorance degrading one part of the society, there could not be any true advancement; and what was being termed as advancement was actually contributing to a general loss of faith and alienation for, as has been mentioned earlier, it was concerned exclusively with material well-being.

3.13.3: Matthew Arnold – A Bio-brief

A school teacher and historian named Thomas Arnold married Mary Penrose, the daughter of an Anglican priest, in 1820 and settled in Laleham-on-the-Thames. The couple had seven children and their eldest son was Matthew Arnold, born on 24th December, 1822. In 1828, when he was six years old, his father was appointed the headmaster of Rugby School and the family moved from Laleham to Rugby. The next year, Arnold met Arthur Hugh Clough, a boy four years older to him, who would go on to become a poet, an educationist, and his lifelong friend. In 1829, the Arnold family moved to a holiday house at Fox How in the Lake District where Arnold met William Wordsworth.

Arnold began his studies at his uncle the Reverend John Buckland's Preparatory School, as a boarder, and was enrolled at Rugby School in 1837, where he began to win prizes for essay writing and for poetry in Latin and English. In 1840, he composed the poem "Alaric at Rome" which won a prize and was immediately printed. In the same year he received an open scholarship to Balliol College, and he joined the institution the following year. In 1842, however, his father died of a sudden heart attack just before his forty-seventh birthday. Arnold won the prestigious Newdigate Prize for his poem *Cromwell* in 1843, but in the following year he received a second class honours degree, dismaying his family and friends who had expected he would secure a first. He went back to Rugby School, in the same year, to work as a trainee teacher of sorts. In 1846 he secured a one year open scholarship at Oriel College much to

the joy of those whom he had dismayed earlier with his second honours. During his studies at Oriel College, he toured places like Ireland, Wales and France and also cultivated his poetic talent.

In 1847, Arnold was appointed the private secretary of Lord Lansdowne, the president of the Privy Council, and two years later he published his first volume of verse, *The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems*. He got the position of an Inspector of Schools in 1851, a job that he would be doing for the next thirty-five years, retiring in 1886. Having secured a stable means of livelihood at twenty-eight, Arnold married Frances Lucy Wightman, the daughter of a titled judge. The couple settled at Laleham-on-the-Thames and had six children together.

Arnold did not remain very happy in his profession after the first few years. He often complains, in his letters, of the drudgery of the work that he had to do. Robert Lowe, the minister who had been responsible for introducing certain changes into the education system that made Arnold's professional life difficult to endure, was critiqued later in *Culture and Anarchy*. The nature of Arnold's profession, taxing though it had been, had enabled him to observe his country and its people from very close quarters. Arnold's job required him to travel across a large part of England and to interact with the Nonconformist¹ part of the population, who were the poor and the middle class people and were fast becoming the most important segment of the electorate and of the society.

The squalor, poverty, disease and hopelessness of the lower strata of the society clashed very inharmoniously, in Arnold's thoughts, with the materialism and complacency of the middle class and with the indifference and the excesses of the upper class. (In his *Culture and Anarchy*, he terms the upper and middle classes 'Barbarians' and 'Philistines' respectively, and advocates the socio-economic and cultural development of the lower classes, whom he terms the 'Populace'.) As a consequence, he could not entirely rejoice in the technological and socio-economic advancement that the society was undergoing. In one of his letters, he talks of a wave of moral, intellectual and social vulgarity breaking over the British nation. One may be reminded of "Dover Beach" at this idea.

Arnold had by this time, published some more of his verse. In 1852, he published *Empedocles on Etna, and Other Poems*. In the next year *Poems* was published with a preface where Arnold talks of the role of the poet as a guardian of sorts of the morality and education of their readership. In 1857, Arnold becomes professor of poetry at Oxford and during the ten years that he remains in this post, he publishes quite a few books on literary criticism. In 1861, his childhood friend, Arthur Hugh Clough dies and the grief-stricken Arnold composes the poem *Thyrsis*.

In 1865, Arnold published *Essays in Criticism* and resigns from his post of professor of poetry two years later, giving poetry up and concentrating on social criticism instead. He publishes *Culture and Anarchy* in 1869 and for the next four years he publishes treatises like *Friendship's Garland* and *Literature and Dogma*. He returns, however, to literary criticism with the essay "Wordsworth" in 1879. Between 1883 and 1886, he tours America twice, delivering lectures. In 1886 he gives up his post as Inspector of Schools due to his failing health and dies of a heart attack two years later, on 15th April, 1888, at sixty-five years of age.

3.13.4: Text

The lyric poem "Dover Beach" was first published in the collection *New Poems* (1867), though there are traces to suggest that Arnold might have worked on it much earlier. From the spatial details suggested in the text, it is generally held that the poem was located in the English port of Dover in Kent, that overlooked the French city of Calais. The Strait of Dover, it is known, is the narrowest part of the English Channel, and Arnold's description confirms as much. More than the locale however, what is significant is the development of thought that the poem shows, the poet's perceptive holding up of a situation of psychological morass underlying narratives of prosperity and growth in Victorian England, and the ultimate recourse in true love and faith in humanity that Arnold reposes. It is these qualities that make "Dover Beach" a must read for all times to come...

Dover Beach

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
 To one another! for the world, which seems
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 So various, so beautiful, so new,
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
 And we are here as on a darkling plain
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Glossary

➤ Stanza 1:

line 3: straits: refers to the Strait of Dover which is the narrowest part of the English Channel, a water body that separates England from France.

line 7: long line of spray: refers to the mass of water dispersed as droplets for some distance all along the shoreline when a wave strikes the shore.

line 8: moon-blanch'd land: refers to the white colour of the chalk cliffs of Dover; the expression compares the paleness of the cliffs to that of the moon. It could also be said that the white chalk cliffs of Dover seemed to the poet as having been further whitened by moonlight.

line 9: grating roar: refers to the loud rasping sound that is produced when a sea wave pulls back from the shore dragging sand and pebbles along.

line 11: strand: beach

line 13: cadence: the rhythmic flow of music.

➤ Stanza 2:

line 1: Sophocles: an ancient Greek tragedian. You have been introduced to his play in CC 2.

line 2: Aegean: the Aegean Sea, that is, the part of the Mediterranean Sea that is located between the mainland of Greece and Turkey.

line 3: turbid: (here) turbulent.

line 6: northern sea: refers to the North Sea, of which the English Channel is a part.

➤ **Stanza 3:**

line 1: Sea of Faith: a metaphorical comparison of faith to the sea.

line 3: girdle: anything that encirles; like a sash worn around the waist.

line 3: furled: rolled or gathered together.

line 7: drear: dreary, bleak.

line 8: shingles: large, smooth pebbles usually found on beaches.

➤ **Stanza 4:**

line 4: various: (here) varied in character; multifaceted.

line 6: certitude: the state of being certain or assured.

line 7: darkling: (in the) dark.

line 8: alarms: certain musical sounds used in the battlefield to call soldiers to arms.

line 9: Where ignorant armies clash by night: the line refers perhaps to an ancient Greek historian Thucydides' account of the battle of Epipolae that took place in 413 B.C. during the Peloponnesian War, when the Athenians attacked the Syracuseans near Sicily. Thucydides, in his account, says that although there was a full moon, the Athenians were finding it difficult to distinguish between friends and opponents and were often mistaking fellow Athenians for Syracuseans and hitting out at them. It may be worthwhile to note that Arnold's father had translated Thucydides and that, the story of the battle of Epipolae was familiar to the boys at Rugby during Matthew Arnold's time there.

3.13.5: Context

Arnold had got married in June 1851 and had spent a week long honeymoon in Alverstton in Hampshire, on the last day of which he was supposed to have visited Dover with his bride. In September that year a second visit was made to Dover

from where the couple travelled to Paris in France, and it may be that the poem “Dover Beach” was composed sometime during or immediately afterwards these visits to Dover. The draft of the poem “Dover Beach” appears among the notes that Arnold had been making for his poem *Empedocles on Etna* which was published in 1852. The immediate context notwithstanding, it is the universal appeal of the poem that has made “Dover Beach” so famous among readers. With his profuse classical learning, Arnold makes the poem both a critique and an indictment of the much vaunted glories of Victorian England. It is ultimately an appeal for return to basic human values.

3.13.6: Summary and Analysis

The poem opens with a description of the chalk cliffs of Dover and the sea beyond, under a moonlit sky. The poet (who is probably standing at a window facing the sea) informs that the sea was calm, although in full tide, and that a light gleamed on the French coast momentarily and went out, adding to the peaceful solitude of the scene. He then beckons someone to come to the window and enjoy the tranquil atmosphere. He says the night air was sweet and tranquil, the only sound that could be heard being that of the waves continuously lashing against the shore and then withdrawing, and the poet urges his companion to listen to it. The stanza closes with the poet observing that the rhythmic sound of the pebbles being dragged along with the withdrawing waves brings in the “eternal” note of sadness.

In the second stanza the poet says that the note of sadness had also been heard by Sophocles on the coast of the Aegean Sea and that it had reminded him of human misery. Although the Aegean Sea and the North Sea are greatly distant from one another, the sound of the pebbles in the latter sea too is capable of evoking a thought (and a similar one, as is revealed in the next stanza) in the minds of the poet and his companion. So we need to understand that “Dover Beach” is in principle a reflection on the universal human condition, its enticements, and above all its places of nurture and succour in the sanity of humanitarian faith.

The poet explains the thought in the third stanza. He compares faith to the sea and says that the sea of faith had once encircled the world like a bright girdle but now all that can be heard is a grating sound that gets fainter and fainter still as that sea gradually withdraws away from the world, leaving only the dreary beach and the ‘naked’ shingles behind.

In the concluding stanza, the poet addresses his companion as “love” (which leads to the assumption that he was perhaps addressing his bride) and suggests that they should be true to one another for the world, in reality, was not a land of dreams but a joyless, loveless, restless, selfish place devoid of light. The poem closes with the idea that living in the world was analogous to being on a dark plain where confused armies, who know not whether their opponents are friends or foes, clash with one another by night.

3.13.7: Critical Commentary

The poet opens the poem with the description of a tranquil, moonlit scene and concludes with a plea to his wife to be true to him while he is true to her for the world was not such a happy place as it seemed to be: in this poem one may find the theme of love intertwined with the idea of the Victorian problem of loss of faith. The poem has a melancholy and yet a calm tone which shows that the poet is resigned to the loss of faith that had been troubling him and consequently he does not lament it and it does not become the sole object of focus in the poem.

The first stanza closes with the poet feeling the “eternal” sadness by the rasping sound made by the withdrawing waves and the gravel on the beach. That the poet tries to say this sadness was not peculiarly his own, but represented the misery of the human condition itself is evident in the second stanza where, in a rather Keatsian fashion, he says that the same sound had been heard by Sophocles too (although millennia ago and miles away on the coast of the Aegean Sea) and it had reminded him of “the turbid ebb and flow/ Of human misery”. The North Sea too, although it was away from the Aegean, the poet says, was capable of evoking similar thoughts.

Sophocles was one of three great tragedians of ancient Greece whose works have come down to us and the fact that the poet is convinced that he too must have been reminded of human misery by the sound implies that the profound tragic vision that Sophocles had is shared by the poet as well. This further implies that the “sadness” that the poet talks about is not that which is peculiar to any particular time or any particular race, but, as has been mentioned earlier, an essential feature of the human condition itself.

Arnold, in next stanza goes on to explain what exactly was the cause of all this sadness that captures the speaker’s mind, the pleasant company of the beloved notwithstanding. Faith is first compared to a sea and is then further compared to a girdle that encircled the world. The poet could hear that sea of faith receding away from it with a melancholy grating sound which, as the sea moved further away, could be heard only faintly (and it sounded like a gust of night wind). As the sea moved away it left behind the dreary edges of the beach of the world and the naked pebbles; that is to say, as faith receded away, it was replaced by doubt, uncertainty and confusion that made life dreary and bleak. The word “naked” here evokes an image of loneliness and vulnerability.

The poet, however, has a solution to the problem. He reminds his beloved that the world that seemed varied, beautiful and forever new was not really so, but a place where one could have no happiness, no love, no feeling of assurance and certitude, no help from any quarter if one was in trouble, no peace therefore, and nothing positive. There was no light in the world, as it were, and it was like a plain in darkness where all that one could hear was the confused sound of battle raging on between armies who were, in that darkness, unable to distinguish friend from foe. This darkness, of course, represents the lack of hope that results from a loss of faith, and the selfishness and animosity it generates. The solution, or the antidote was to remain true and faithful to one another.

What must be emphasized yet again is that Arnold, albeit disillusioned and without hope, accepts the world, as it was, without any bawling lament, and with a stoic resignation instead. (This kind of a stoicism was perhaps the fruit of his interest in, and study of, the *Bhagavad Gita*.) He merely uses the “turbid ebb and flow/ Of human misery” as a context for making his plea to his newly wedded bride, the plea that they should be true to one another. The opening description does indeed

set the mood of the poem: it is not a poem of despair, but a poem of love; albeit love in the times of despair and loss of faith.

It is interesting to recall that the poem was first composed while Arnold was planning his other poem Empedocles on Etna, a poem he later criticizes himself for it depicts “suffering [that] finds no vent in action”. In other words, he criticizes that kind of lyricism that results from unabashed soul-searching, but “Dover Beach” seems to be another poem in the same vein. Although, it is not helpless and passive suffering that is depicted here, but a resigned sort of suffering that seeks to alleviate the pain through love.

The poem consists of four stanzas of unequal length and rhyme scheme so as to give the reader the impression of being privy to the poet’s thoughts as they unfold and take shape.

3.13.8: Summing Up

- In summing up, it could be said that “Dover Beach” is a poem of love amidst tormenting times. So far from being a conventional love poem, it upholds not just heterosexual love but compassion and humanity as the great virtues that alone can abide even in the most trying and critical of times
- The poem is not one of despair, even though it does not shy away from presenting a realistic and philosophical understanding of the human situation; all the glitz and glam of life notwithstanding
- “Dover Beach” is also a testimony of Arnold’s phenomenal learning

3.13.9: Comprehension Exercises

A. Long Answer Type Questions:

1. Can “Dover Beach” be called a love poem? Give reasons for your answer.
2. What do you think of Matthew Arnold as a Victorian poet? Use your understanding of the poem “Dover Beach” to substantiate your view.
3. With reference to the poem “Dover Beach,” show how Arnold’s poetry becomes a true criticism of life.

B. Medium Length Answer Type Questions:

1. Why does the poet want himself and his “love” to be “true” to one another?
2. Comment on the use of the sea as a metaphor in the poem “Dover Beach.”

C. Short Answer Type Questions:

1. Why does the poet refer to Sophocles in the poem “Dover Beach”?
2. Explain the analogy of the Peloponnesian War and its relevance to the context of “Dover Beach.”

3.9.8: SUGGESTED READING

Armstrong, Isobel. *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*. Routledge, 1993.

Arnold, Matthew and J. Dover Wilson. *Culture and Anarchy: Landmarks in the History of Education*. CUP, 1932.

Bristow, Joseph. *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*. CUP, 2000.

Saintsbury, George. *Matthew Arnold*. William Blackwood and Sons, 1899.

Additionally, you are advised to look up the following link:

<https://www.huckgutman.com/dover-beach>.

Module 4:
British Women Poets

Unit 14 □ Anne Kingsmill Finch: The Introduction

Structure:

- 3.14.1. Objectives
- 3.14.2. Introduction to Women's Writing of the Age
- 3.14.3. Works of Anne Kingsmill Finch, Countess of Winchilsea
- 3.14.4. Text of "The Introduction"
- 3.14.5. Notes and Glossary
- 3.14.6. Paraphrase and Critical Analysis
- 3.14.7. Summing Up
- 3.14.8. Comprehension Exercises
- 3.14.9. Suggested Reading

3.14.1: Objectives

This Module is a very special section of this Course, for it is specifically designed to give you a glimpse of how women start carving a space for themselves in the literary canon, and it is expected that at the end of it, you will be in a position to explore subsequent developments in this area. This Unit in particular is especially significant because it is devoted to one of the earliest recorded poetic utterances by a woman in the entire history of English literature. You are already aware of the manifold complexities, both socio-political and cultural, inherent in the period of the history of literature that is called 'The Restoration'. Coming as it does after the ushering in of new learning in the Renaissance, this was the period when the impact of classical thought and learning on the one hand, and the influence of new social stratifications on the other began to exert their influences on literature. Writing by women is often not brought to the fore amidst the complexities of the time. This Unit is aimed at bridging that gap.

3.14.2: Introduction to Women's Writing of the Age

You have already read that it was during the Restoration that we first see actresses on the stage; this will give you some idea of the emergent position of women in contemporary society. Political and religious developments as well as changes in the circumstances of literary authorship led increasing numbers of women to write in many different genres and forms during the seventeenth century. However, cultural prejudices still attempted to limit women's creative achievements. For instance, when Lady Mary Wroth, an accomplished poet, dramatist, and prose writer published her monumental romance *Urania*, she received an insulting poem that instructed her to "Work, Lady, Work. Let writing books alone. For Surely wiser woman never wrote one." It may well be examined that the women writers' responses to this context were guided by their passions as a means to engage with literary discourse. Another question may as well be addressed: what is the role of the passions — love, envy, hatred, pride, anger — in literary creativity? What are the specific constraints and conditions of authorship for women in the seventeenth century? Is there a tradition of early modern women's writing and what are the advantages — and disadvantages — of defining such a tradition?

As you read along this Unit, you should be able to formulate your own responses to these issues.

3.14.3: Works of Anne Kingsmill Finch, Countess of Winchilsea

Although she has always enjoyed some fame as a poet, Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, has only recently received greater praise and renewed attention. Her diverse and considerable body of work records her private thoughts and personal struggles but also illustrates her awareness of the social and political climate of her era. Not only do Finch's poems reveal a sensitive mind and a religious soul, they also exhibit great generic range and demonstrate her fluent use of Augustan diction and forms.

Descended from an ancient Hampshire family, Finch was born in April 1661, the third and youngest child of Anne Haselwood and Sir William Kingsmill. At

the age of twenty-one, Finch was appointed one of six maids of honor to Mary of Modena, wife of the Duke of York, in the court of Charles II. Her interest in verse writing began during this period and was probably encouraged by her friendships with Sarah Churchill and Anne Killigrew, also maids of honor and women of literary interests. It was during her residence in the court of Charles II that she met Colonel Heneage Finch, uncle of the fifth earl of Winchilsea and gentleman to the Duke of York. Finch fell in love with Anne and courted her persistently until they married. She resigned her post, although Heneage Finch continued to serve in various government positions. Their marriage was a happy one, as attested by his letters and several of her early poems. They led a quiet life, residing first in Westminster and then in London, as Heneage Finch became more involved in public affairs with the accession of James II in 1685. The couple wholly supported James throughout his brief and difficult reign and remained forever sympathetic to the interests of the Stuart court.

Following the revolution and deposition of James in 1689, Finch lost his government position and permanently severed himself from public life by refusing allegiance to the incoming monarchs, William and Mary. The subsequent loss of income forced the Finches to take temporary refuge with various friends in London until Heneage's nephew Charles invited them to settle permanently on the family's estate in Eastwell in 1689 or 1690, where they resided for more than twenty-five years. It was during the happy yet trying years of her early married life that Anne Finch began to pursue more seriously her interest in writing poetry. She adopted the pseudonym Ardelia, and not surprisingly, many of her earliest poems are dedicated to her "much lov'd husband," who appears as "Dafnis" in her work. Finch's poetry to her husband connects passionate love and poetry in subtle ways. In "A Letter to the Same Person," she makes explicit the intertwined nature of love and verse, insisting that one is dependent on the other:

Love without Poetry's refining Aid
Is a dull Bargain, and but coarsely made;

Nor e'er cou'd Poetry successful prove,
 Or touch the Soul, but when the Sense was Love.
 Oh! Cou'd they both in Absence now impart
 Skill to my Hand, but to describe my Heart;

Finch's early poems to her husband demonstrate her awareness of the guiding poetic conventions of the day, yet also point to the problems such conventions pose to the expression of intimate thought.

In addition to celebrating her love, Finch's earliest verse also records her own frustration and sense of loss following her departure from court in 1689. She and her husband remained loyal to the Catholic Stuarts, a tenuous stance to assume given the popularity of the Protestant William and Mary in Britain in the 1690s. Finch's most explicit recognition of the problem of succession and of the difficulty of her relationship to the Stuarts appears in her first published poem, an elegy for James II anonymously published in 1701 and titled *Upon the Death of King James the Second*. The poem ends with an appeal to Britain's "Maternal Bosome"—an attack on William and possibly on the currently reigning queen as well—to honor "Rightful Kings" and "All who shall intend thy Good."

As her work developed more fully during her retirement at Eastwell, Finch demonstrated an increasing awareness of the poetic traditions of her own period as well as those governing older verse. Her work's affinity with the metaphysical tradition is evident in poems such as "The Petition for an Absolute Retreat," which represents the distanced perspective of the speaker through the image of the telescope, an emblem common to much religious poetry of the seventeenth century. Finch experimented with rhyme and meter and imitated several popular genres, including occasional poems, satirical verse, and religious meditations, but fables comprise the largest portion of her oeuvre. Most likely inspired by the popularity of the genre at the turn of the century, Finch wrote dozens of these often satiric vignettes between 1700 and 1713. Most of them were modeled after the short tales of Jean La Fontaine, the French fable writer made popular by Charles II. Finch mocked these playful trifles, and her fables offer interesting bits of social criticism in the satiric spirit of her age.

However, Finch's more serious poems have received greater critical attention than her fables. "A Nocturnal Reverie," for instance, is clearly Augustan in its perspective and technique, although many admirers have tended to praise the poem as pre-Romantic. Finch's poem opens with classical references and proceeds through characteristically Augustan descriptions of the foxglove, the cowslip, the glowworm, and the moon. Finch imitates Augustan preferences for decorum and balance in her use of heroic couplets and the medial caesura in setting the peaceful, nocturnal atmosphere of the poem:

Or from some Tree, fam'd for the *Owl's* delight,
She, hollowing clear, directs the Wand'rer right:
In such a *Night*, when passing Clouds give place,
Or thinly veil the Heav'ns mysterious Face;
When Odours, which declin'd repelling Day,
Thro temp'rate Air uninterrupted stray;

While Finch's verse occasionally displays slight antitheses of idea and some structural balances of line and phrase, she never attains the epigrammatic couplet form that Alexander Pope perfected in the early eighteenth century. Her admission in "A Nocturnal Reverie" that her verse attempts "Something, too high for Syllables to speak" might be linked to the Romantic recognition of the discrepancy between human aspiration and achievement. But ultimately she retreats to God and solitude and displays a more properly Augustan attitude in the acceptance of her human limitations. At times her descriptions of natural detail bear some likeness to poets such as James Thomson, but Finch's expression is more immediate and simple, and her versification ultimately exhibits an Augustan rather than a pre-Romantic sensibility.

Another form Finch appropriates is the Pindaric ode. Between 1694 and 1703 she wrote three such odes in the form introduced in England by Abraham Cowley in the 1650s, following his preference for complex and irregular stanzaic structures and rhyme schemes. These poems—"All is Vanity," *The Spleen* (1709), and "On the Hurricane"—all depict metaphysical entities working against humanity to test its strength and faith in God. *The Spleen*, possibly Finch's most well-known poem, was first published anonymously in 1709. The ode was immediately popular and received

much attention for its accurate description of the symptoms of melancholia—the disease often associated with the spleen—which Finch suffered from throughout her life.

In “Ardelia to Melancholy” Finch similarly presents a struggle against melancholy and depression, casting the disease as an “inveterate foe” and “Tyrant pow’r” from which “heav’n alone” can set her “free.” The poem shifts from the first to the third person, generalizing Ardelia’s particular experience to encompass all those who suffer from melancholia: “All, that cou’d ere thy ill got rule, invade, / Their uselesse arms, before thy feet have laid; / The Fort is thine, now ruin’d, all within, / Whilst by decays without, thy Conquest too, is seen.” The imperial language of the poem might also suggest a more abstract relation between her submission to the spleen and her status as a political exile.

Finch circulated two manuscripts of her work before she published *Miscellany Poems*, and several of her poems were published individually in broadsheets and smaller collections. Finch experienced some additional, though limited, recognition after the publication of her *Miscellany Poems*. Richard Steele, for instance, published several of her poems in his *Miscellanies* of 1714. She was personally acquainted with both Swift and Pope, though the full extent of her relationships with them is unknown. Finch is mentioned in several compilations, memoirs, and literary dictionaries during the 18th century, and to a lesser extent, in the 19th century, but has received sustained attention only recently. The first modern edition of her work, though incomplete, appeared in 1903.

Much of the recent interest in Finch arises from current academic efforts to recover the work of previously neglected women writers, exploring how those writers depict themselves as poetic subjects and examining the ways in which they adopt and alter the poetic standards of a particular period. In addition to her representations of melancholy and the spleen—an affliction common to women—Finch also called attention to the need for the education of women and recorded the isolation and solitude that marked women’s lives. In “The Bird and the Arras,” for instance, a female bird enclosed in a room mistakes the arras for a real scene

and flies happily into it. But she is soon trapped, “Flutt’ring in endless circles of dismay” until she finally escapes to “ample space,” the “only Heav’n of Birds.” Such images of entrapment and frustration are echoed in Finch’s description of the limitations of women’s social roles in England at the turn of the 18th century. In “The Unequal Fetters,” the speaker notes her fear of fading youth, but later refuses to be a “pris’ner” in marriage. Finch admits that marriage does “slightly tye Men,” yet insists that women remain “close Pris’ners” in the union, while men can continue to function “At the full length of all their chain.” For the most part, however, Finch’s message is subtle in its persistent decorum and final resignation and consolation in God. Although she was certainly aware of the problems many of her countrywomen faced, and particularly of the difficulties confronting women writers, Finch offers a playful yet firm protest rather than an outspoken condemnation of the social position of women. And although she endured a loss of affluence with James’s deposition, there is little evidence that she abhorred her twenty-five-year retirement in Eastwell, which afforded her the leisure in which to pursue her creative interests.

Finch died on 5 August 1720 after several years of increasingly ill health. Following her funeral, Heneage Finch praised her Christian virtues and persistent loyalty to her friends and family, noting as well her talents as a writer: “To draw her...just character requires a masterly pen like her own. We shall only presume to say she was the most faithful servant to her Royall Mistresse, the best wife to her noble Lord, and in every other relation public and private so illustrious an example of all moral and divine virtues.” Much of the immediate appeal of Finch’s verse to a post-Romantic modern audience lies in the sincerity with which she expressed the Christian values her husband recalls in his eulogy. But clearly Anne Finch belongs to her age and merits greater appreciation for her poetic experimentation and her fluent use of Augustan diction and forms. Her voice is clear and self-assured, evidence of the controlled and confident poise of an aristocratic poet.

3.14.4: The Introduction

Did I, my lines intend for publick view,
How many censures, wou’d their faults persue,

Some wou'd, because such words they do affect,
Cry they're insipid, empty, uncorrect.
And many, have attain'd, dull and untaught
The name of Witt, only by finding fault.
True judges, might condemn their want of witt,
And all might say, they're by a Woman writt.
Alas! a woman that attempts the pen,
Such an intruder on the rights of men,
Such a presumptuous Creature, is esteem'd,
The fault, can by no vertue be redeem'd.
They tell us, we mistake our sex and way;
Good breeding, fassion, dancing, dressing, play
Are the accomplishments we shou'd desire;
To write, or read, or think, or to enquire
Wou'd cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time;
And interrupt the Conquests of our prime;
Whilst the dull mannage, of a servile house
Is held by some, our outmost art, and use.
Sure 'twas not ever thus, nor are we told
Fables, of Women that excell'd of old;
To whom, by the diffusive hand of Heaven
Some share of witt, and poetry was given.
On that glad day, on which the Ark return'd,
The holy pledge, for which the Land had mourn'd,
The joyfull Tribes, attend itt on the way,
The Levites do the sacred Charge convey,
Whilst various Instruments, before itt play;
Here, holy Virgins in the Concert joyn,
The louder notes, to soften, and refine,

And with alternate verse, compleat the Hymn Devine.

Loe! the yong Poet, after Gods own heart,
By Him inspired, and taught the Muses Art,
Return'd from Conquest, a bright Chorus meets,
That sing his slayn ten thousand in the streets.

In such loud numbers they his acts declare,
Proclaim the wonders, of his early war,
That Saul upon the vast applause does frown,
And feels, itt's mighty thunder shake the Crown.
What, can the threat'n'd Judgment now prolong?

Half of the Kingdom is already gone;
The fairest half, whose influence guides the rest,
Have David's Empire, o're their hearts confess't.

A Woman here, leads fainting Israel on,
She fights, she wins, she triumphs with a song,
Devout, Majestick, for the subject fitt,
And far above her arms, exalts her witt,
Then, to the peacefull, shady Palm withdraws,
And rules the rescu'd Nation with her Laws.

How are we fal'n, fal'n by mistaken rules?
And Education's, more than Nature's fools,
Debarr'd from all improve-ments of the mind,

And to be dull, expected and dessigned;
And if some one, would Soar above the rest,
With warmer fancy, and ambition press't,
So strong, th' opposing faction still appears,
The hopes to thrive, can ne're outweigh the fears,
Be caution'd then my Muse, and still retir'd;
Nor be dispis'd, aiming to be admir'd;

Conscious of wants, still with contracted wing,
To some few freinds, and to thy sorrows sing;
For groves of Lawrell, thou wert never meant;
Be dark enough thy shades, and be thou there content.

3.14.5: Notes and Glossary

1. 1 Chronicles 15.
2. 1 Samuel 17-18.
3. Judges 4-5. The judge Deborah.
4. Lawrell: Laurel crowns were awarded as honours to famous poets.

3.14.6: Paraphrase and Critical Analysis

The picture of a woman poet frustrated by the restrictions imposed by society on her is seen clearly in “The Introduction”. The poet begins by anticipating what critics would say about her lines: “And all might say, they’re by a Woman writt.” A woman writer is viewed as “an intruder on the rights of men” and a “presumptuous Creature” who should desire woman’s proper accomplishments, namely, “Good breeding, fassion, dancing, dressing, play.” In fact, the public would feel that “To write, or read, or think, or to enquire / Wou’d cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time, / And interrupt the Conquests of our prime.” This early feminist rejects the idea that “the dull mannage, of a servile house” is woman’s “outmost art, and use”.

To support her idea that women can accomplish more than the public’s limited view of the female role, the poet looks to ancient Israel for examples of women who excelled and includes them in “The Introduction.” To the Biblical account of the return of the Ark of the Covenant to Israel, she adds “holy Virgins” to the crowds of people who sang joyfully and speaks of these virgins’ completing “the Hymn Devine” with their soft notes. When victorious David returned from battle, the women greeted him with songs and with applause which made King Saul feel “itts mighty thunder shake the Crown.” Saul’s time on the

throne is limited because “Half of the Kingdom is already gone; / The fairest half, whose influence guides the rest, / Have David’s Empire o’er their hearts confess’t.” The poet’s last example from ancient Israel, the famous Deborah also had a song to sing, again one of victory. He describes her as follows: “A Woman here, leads fainting Israel on, / She fights, she wins, she triumphs with a song.” After the victory has been won, Deborah the judge “rules the rescu’d Nation, with her laws.” Mallinson speaks of this “appeal to antique precedent” as “lengthy, substantial, and vigorous”, and Rogers notes that Biblical examples “seemed called for in an age when the Bible was constantly used to keep woman in her place.” Unfortunately, women in Finch’s society are not expected to lead as these earlier women had done but instead have been hampered by poor education and by opposition from others if they desire to “Soar above the rest, / With warmer fancy, and ambition press’t.” Women are “Debarr’d from all improvements of the mind / And to be dull, expected and designed”. Because of these negative conditions, this woman poet cautions her Muse to be content with just a small audience of friends. Mallinson interprets the phrase “with contracted wing” as including “a narrow range of song”.

A poet of the early eighteenth century, Anne Finch composed in a variety of contemporary forms, including the verse epistle, the Pindaric ode, the fable, and occasional poetry, exploring issues of authorship, love, friendship, and nature. Her nature poetry celebrates the beauty of the country, especially in contrast to the superficial frivolity of London society, while her love poetry praises married life rather than the attentions of a lover. Finch defended the appropriateness of women writing and often adapted the conventions of male Augustan writers to female experiences and themes. Though rarely adopting the satirical tone of Alexander Pope or Jonathan Swift, Finch was nonetheless encouraged in her craft by these literary figures.

The majority of her poems are characterised by such themes as gender and politics. Marginalised through politics and her desire to write, Finch recognised the difficulties of an eighteenth-century woman assuming the public voice of a poet, while insisting that intellectual pursuits were not the prerogative of men. She commemorated the beauty of nature in “Nocturnal Reverie,” “The Tree,” “The Bird,” and “Petition for an Absolute Retreat,” the latter poem also sug-

gesting her escape from political turmoil. In a similar vein, “Ardelia’s Answer to Ephelia” lauds the value of rural retirement while criticizing the pretentiousness of London society and female vanity. In “The Introduction,” “Circuit of Apollo,” “Ardelia’s Answer to Ephelia,” and “To the Nightingale,” she asserted the validity of women writing. In taking up the pen to write love poetry, she countered the tradition of arranged marriages and male infidelity by celebrating conjugal love in poems to her husband, though she criticised mercenary marriages in other poems. Her greatest eighteenth-century success, “The Spleen,” examines both a generalized public understanding of the condition and treatment of melancholy and her private suffering.

“The Introduction” to her *Miscellany Poems* (1713) never was published with them, probably due to its direct challenge to the male-dominated literary scene of her time. Her self-censorship in fear of public condemnation became a casebook example for feminist critics of the ‘sixties and ‘seventies who sought to explain why women weren’t published more often. Those women were in fact writing, but they knew their work could be condemned or ignored (worse yet!) merely for being “by a woman writ”, perhaps her most famous single phrase. The chilling spectacle of a competent, perhaps even great poet thinking seriously about turning her back on publication and the chance to shape the English language reaches its peak in lines 59-64 in which she directly echoes Milton while rejecting the great poetic gesture for a deliberately lesser effect.

3.14.7: Summing Up

You need to remember dear learner that the poem you just read above belongs to the seventeenth century when women did not enjoy much prominence. Subsequently, their works, too, were treated to be minor among the prolific careers of the male writers, and soon went into oblivion. Later, the awareness of the unique poignancy of women writing made critics look into works like this one as some of the early specimens of women writing in English literature. The poems jointly confront the problematic situation of the women writers at that point of time, and discuss their views and aspirations at length. In the twentieth century, when the global literary scenario is often getting flooded by feminist waves, these poems serve their purpose, though as period pieces, when properly read and evaluated.

3.14.8: Comprehension Exercises

1. Write an essay on the women writers of the seventeenth century with special reference to Anne Finch.
2. Attempt a critical appreciation of the poem 'The Introduction'.
3. Explain with reference to the context:
 Alas! a woman that attempts the pen,
 Such an intruder on the rights of men,
 Such a presumptuous Creature, is esteem'd,
 The fault, can by no vertue be redeem'd.

3.14.9: Suggested Reading

Barash, Carol. *English Women's Poetry, 1649 – 1714: Politics, Community and Linguistic Authority*. Clarendon Press, 1996.

Boris Ford ed. *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, Vol. 4. Penguin, 1991.

Unit 15 □ Elizabeth Barrett Browning: I Thought Once how Theocritus had Sung

Structure:

- 3.15.1. Objectives**
- 3.15.2. Introduction**
- 3.15.3. Elizabeth Barret Browning: A Bio-brief**
- 3.15.4. Background of the Poem**
- 3.15.5. Text with Glossary and Annotation**
- 3.15.6. Critical Appreciation**
- 3.15.7. Summing Up**
- 3.15.8. Comprehension Exercises**
- 3.15.9. Suggested Reading**

3.15.1: Objectives

The objective of this unit is to acquaint you with Elizabeth Barrett Browning, not just as the wife of Robert Browning, but as a poet in her own right. Thereafter, we shall take up a short representative poem by the poet. Cumulatively, our objective is to help you form an idea of one of the major poets of the time, who, sadly, is often missed out in textual illustration amidst the medley of fiction writers of the Victorian period

3.15.2: Introduction

You will be surprised to know that Elizabeth Barret Browning (1806 – 1861) began writing poetry from a very young age, in fact she would hardly have been eleven years of age when she wrote her first poem. She was educated at home, started learning Greek and Latin at a rather tender age, and in fact came to English learning in her teens. Her first volume of poetry was published when Elizabeth was only fifteen, and her parents patronised these early efforts. The influence of the liberal

feminist ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) has been rather pronounced on Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

The death of Elizabeth's mother in 1828, her father's overbearingly restrictive paternal affections thereafter, acute financial crises, and her own ailments – the poet battled it all to keep up her enlightened correspondence with the well-known literary figures and intellectuals of her time such as William Wordsworth, Thomas Carlyle, and even the American poet and short story writer Edgar Allan Poe. In fact her friendship with Robert Browning, who had been corresponding with her as a young admirer, developed through letters. In fact, literary admiration for each other went a long way in paving the way for their marriage, much against the wishes of Elizabeth's father. By the mid-1840s, Elizabeth was a well-known poet in England; and when Wordsworth died in 1850, Elizabeth's talent and fame made her a rival to Alfred Tennyson in becoming the next poet laureate of England.

3.15.3: Elizabeth Barrett Browning – A Bio-brief

To talk of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work is to majorly talk of her collections of poetry. The first of these is *Poems* (1844) that impressed Robert Browning with her originality of thoughts, profundity of pathos, and the richness of language. Her next major work *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (published in 1850) is a collection of poems that records Elizabeth's thoughts about her relation with Robert Browning. Elizabeth began composing the poems secretly during their courtship. After three years of their marriage, she showed the works for the first time to Robert. He insisted that they should be published. Thus in 1850, the poems became public. The sequence is marked by Elizabeth's astonishment that a person like Robert was in love with someone who had been incapacitated by chronic illness. In this way, it reverses the Petrarchan archetype of the persuasive, servile male lover who is always at a loss because of his cruel mistress. On the other hand, it also encapsulates the loss of familial bliss that Elizabeth sensed when she eloped with Robert Browning. After marriage the Brownings briefly stayed in France and then moved to Italy (first Pisa and then Florence). The Florentine phase is marked by her most ambitious work, *Aurora Leigh* (1856). The leading art critic of the Victorian era and an acquaintance of the Brownings, John Ruskin (1819-

1900) called it the greatest long poem of the nineteenth century. It is epic; and is often called a *Künstlerroman* (novel about an artist's growth) in verse for it blends intense poetry with novelistic interaction focussing on the development of Elizabeth as a literary artist. The work is set in Florence, Malvern, London, and Paris—the places to which Elizabeth Browning went after her marriage. She remarkably employs her knowledge of Hebrew and Greek; but she also makes the work contemporary. Among the nine books into which the poem is divided, as far as the fifth book, Aurora narrates her past, from her childhood to the age of about twenty-seven. In Books 6–9, the events are reported as entries in a diary. In the text, a debate pertaining to the aims and relevance of literature takes place between the eponymous narrator of the poem, and her cousin Romney Leigh. While Aurora advocates the soul-addressing aesthetics of poetry, Romney argues that the development of a sceptical, socio-political awareness should be the aim of literary works. Romney thinks that poetry is effeminate, and he disrespects Aurora's vocation. However, Aurora defends herself as well as her vocation by emphasising the power of poetry. For her, poets do not merely imitate as Plato proclaims. In fact, poetry goes far beyond mere re-presentation, and ameliorates the tragic vicissitudes of reality.

3.15.4: Background of “I Thought Once how Theocritus Had Sung”

“I Thought Once” is the opening sonnet in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's popular sonnet sequence named *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, which she composed during her courtship with Robert Browning between 1845 and 1846. The sequence came to light only in 1849, when she showed them to her husband after almost three years of their elopement and marriage. It got published in 1850 in her collection titled *Poems* after repeated insistence and encouragement from her husband.

What is of renewed importance is the fact that the sequence is a poetic autobiography of the poet's love for Robert Browning and the first sonnet is significant, as it marks the advent of love and passion in her life after a prolonged period of physical invalidity and its attendant emotional ordeals. The title of the sequence often makes it look like the translation of a collection of Portuguese poems. It seems to be intentionally misleading, in order to conceal

its autobiographical elements. However, there is an element of truth in it. Robert Browning’s admiration for Elizabeth Barrett Browning began with his admiration for her 1844 poem “Catarina to Camoens”, a fictional farewell to the great Portuguese poet Luis Vaz de Camoens by lady Catherina de Athaide, who was the poet persona’s lady love in some of Browning’s love poems. Their relationship broke up soon and the lady died in 1556. In Elizabeth’s poem, the speaker on her deathbed bids her farewell. As Robert loved this poem of hers, Elizabeth might have imagined herself as Catarina, who was filled with admiration for Robert, considered the Camoens of their time. In that way, one might consider the sonnets as the utterance of a ‘Portuguese lover’, who wrote them for the poet she admired, and who loved and admired her back.

Sonnets from the Portuguese secures a unique place in the tradition of sonnets, as its approach is remarkably different from Petrarch, Wyatt, Sidney, or even Shakespeare. Unlike her precursors—whose sonnets mostly complained of the beloved’s nonchalance towards the sonneteer’s love—Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* expresses the astonishment at the fact that someone with as great a reputation as Robert Browning is in love with *her*! As being the love interest of the renowned poet was something that was beyond her expectation, the sonnets reveal her conflicting state of mind that made her sceptical toward his love, and she was unsure whether to count on it. Her prolonged illness is perhaps the reason behind the scepticism, which made her think herself to be undeserving of love. This sequence of 44 sonnets provides a soulful rendering of her love for the poet, her unease and guilt for loving him more than she loved God, and her hope that the almighty would equip their love with the ability to thrive beyond death. The first sonnet, “I Thought Once” is instrumental in setting the introspective mood of the sequence and marks the poet’s unconventional exploration of love poetry by blurring the binaries of speaker/listener, subject/object of love, and most importantly, that of male/female voices.

3.15.5: Text with Glossary and Annotations

Sonnet I

Sonnets from the Portuguese

I thought once how Theocritus¹ had sunga

Of the sweet years, the dear and wished for years,b

Who each one in a gracious hand appears	b
To bear a gift for mortals, old or young:	a
And, as I mused it in his antique tongue,	a
I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,	b
The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years,	b
Those of my own life, who by turns had flung	a
A shadow across me. Straightway I was 'ware,	c
So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move	d
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair ² ,	c
And a voice said in mastery while I strove,	d
"Guess now who holds thee?"—"Death," I said. But, there,	c
The silver ³ answer rang.. "Not Death, but Love."	d

Glossary and Annotations

1. Theocritus—Greek poet (c. 308-c. 240 BCE), in whose bucolic *Idyll* 15, Adonis, welcoming the advent of Spring and the reawakening of Love, describes the Hours bringing gifts to mortals.
2. Hair—Echoes the *Iliad* 1.204, where an invisible Athena pulls Achilles backward by his hair.
3. Silver— Alludes to Shakespeare's "silver sound" of music in *Romeo and Juliet*, act 4, scene 5, ll. 125-38. In her letters EBB refers to the "silver sound" in RB 's words or voice: e.g., "those words of the letter which were of a better silver in the sound than even your praise could be" (*The Browning's Correspondence* 11:165)

3.15.6: Critical Appreciation

Elizabeth Barrett Browning begins her *Sonnets from Portuguese* with "I thought Once"—a piece that calls attention to the speaker's ruminations on her melancholic past, the ephemerality of human life, and the tussle between death and love.

First quatrain: The speaker begins the poem by paying homage to the bucolic poetry of her muse Theocritus, the Classical Greek poet. She reminisces the great poet who “had sung/ Of the sweet years, the dear and wished-for years”, in order to promulgate the idea that every year offers ‘a gift to mortals’. These gifts are bestowed on the old and young alike. No one is deprived of these splendid gifts given by the ‘gracious hand’ of time.

Second quatrain: As the speaker broods on Theocritus’ song, her eyes are moist with tears and she laments that unlike Theocritus’s song, her bygone years have not been that kind to her. The years that were ‘sweet’ in Theocritus’ poetry, brought sadness and melancholy to her life, casting a sorrowful shadow upon her.

First Tercet: Being under the shadow of her melancholy life, the speaker finds herself weeping. During this time, she feels the presence of an unidentified, “mystic shape” behind her, who tries to pull her backward by her hair.

Second Tercet: As she strives to free herself from the “mystic shape” who holds her back, it asks her in a masterly voice if she could guess who held her. Still regretting having spent her glorious years in sadness and melancholy, the speaker guesses it to be Death. However, she is astonished to know that it is not Death but Love that tugs her back. Rather than preparing herself for death, the ‘voice’ perhaps asks her to make room for love.

3.15.7: Summing Up

The sonnet therefore acquaints you with one very vital aspect of the poetics of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, that is in a way quite remarkable in the Victorian litscape. “I Thought Once...” makes a fusion of love as mysticism that is heightened with her knowledge of classical poetics. It is of course seeped in the poet’s deeply romantic temperament, that is manifest first in her loving care for childhood, then in the spirit of revolutionary anger, and finally in the exaltation of romantic love into the realm of the mystical – qualities that one comes across on reading the sonnet sequence.

3.15.8: Comprehension Exercises

A. Long Answer Type Questions:

1. Analyse “I Thought Once ...” as an utterance of the bliss of love in an otherwise complex Victorian social scenario.
2. Examine the title of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “I Thought Once ...” to bring out the central element of the poet’s thoughts.

B. Medium Length Answer Type Question:

1. With reference to the text, briefly discuss the distinctive features in the style and content of this sonnet in comparison to its classical predecessors.

C. Short Answer Type Questions:

1. Comment on the motifs of ‘Death’ and ‘Love’ used in the poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.
2. Identify and illustrate any two intertextual references used by Elizabeth Barrett Browning in the sonnet.

3.15.9: Suggested Reading

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Unit 16 □ Christina Rossetti – A Dirge

Structure:

- 4.16.1. Objectives
- 4.16.2. Introduction to Christina Rossetti
- 4.16.3. Text with Annotations
- 4.16.4. Critical Appreciation
- 4.16.5. Style, Imagery and Technique
- 4.16.6. Summing Up
- 4.16.7. Comprehension Exercises
- 4.16.8. Suggested Reading

4.16.1: Objectives

Following upon Finch and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in this unit you will be acquainted with another poet of the Victorian period whose poetry is rich in melodies and pictorial details. Widely published and appreciated in her lifetime, Christina Rossetti had mastered the art of poetic narration as well as lyric expression. The art of Rossetti bears clear influence of the English Romantic tradition, and yet manages to carve its own niche along with the works of the other important Victorian poets like Tennyson, Browning, Arnold and Hopkins.

4.16.2: Introduction to Christina Rossetti

In this rather long sub-section, we will introduce you to two aspects – the literary life of Christina Rossetti which shows her rearing amidst the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; and her evolution as a poet.

The fourth and youngest child of Gabriele and Frances Polidori Rossetti, Christina Rossetti was born on 5 December 1830 in London. Christina's father, an Italian by birth, was a political refugee who came to England in 1824. Keenly interested in Italian art and literature, especially in the works of Dante, Gabriele Rossetti became

a Professor of Italian in King's College London and married Frances Polidori, who was also half-Italian by descent. The four Rossetti children— Dante Gabriel, Maria Frances, William and Christina were thus brought up in a bi-lingual atmosphere of home under the strict supervision of their deeply religious mother.

The Anglican principles that Christina's mother inculcated in her had a profound influence on her life and art. The daughters of the household did not have any formal schooling and were taught at home by Frances. From a very tender age Christian started composing poetry. She began entering her completed poems in notebooks in as early as 1842. Her poetic talents were recognised and appreciated by her family members and in 1847 her first volume of poetry was privately published by her maternal grandfather. But the situation at home was not very propitious for the young poet, in 1843 Gabriele had fallen ill and the eventual threat of blindness forced him to give up his teaching post. Christina's elder sister, Maria took up a position as a governess and William became a clerk in a government office. In the following years Christina was assisting her mother in setting up a private school which, however, proved to be a commercially unprofitable venture.

The year 1848 proved to be a significant one in the history of the Rossetti household and also in the history of English Literature and art. In 1848, a group of young artists, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti, set up the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a consortium of painters who attempted to recreate the fusion of sensuousness and religiosity in their painting. The stated objective of the group was to go back to the artistic principles adopted by the painters of Italian High Renaissance before Raphael, hence the name pre-Raphaelite (commonly acronymed as PRB). The spirit and aims of the Brotherhood found expression not only in the painting of the members but also in the poetry of Dante Gabriel, Christina Rossetti, Charles Algernon Swinburne. Christina, who was never a member of the Brotherhood, but remained at the margins of the group, was introduced to a young painter named James Collinson through his association with the PRB. Christina got engaged to Collinson but broke the engagement when he decided to convert to Roman Catholicism. Meanwhile Christina continued to write poetry and also started writing prose. The year 1862 saw the publication of *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, and in 1866 *The Prince's Progress* was published.

A second engagement, this time with Charles Bagot Cayley, was broken around this period as Christina could not reconcile herself with Charles' unorthodox religious views. Publication of her works had begun in earnest since the 1860s through the encouragement and mediation of Dante Gabriel. Thus in 1870 Christina's first prose volume *Commonplace and Other Short Stories* was published; it was followed by *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book* (1872); *Seek and Find* (1879); *A Pageant and Other Poems* (1881). By the time Frances Rossetti died in 1886, Christina's reputation as one of the leading poets of the late nineteenth century was firmly established. Always of frail health and suffering from various ailments, Christina was diagnosed with cancer which took her life in late 1894.

Unlike Emily Bronte, Christina was a much published and respected poet during her lifetime. Her religious poetry as well as her nursery rhymes were much admired by the contemporary readers. Though this judgment of her work still holds good, modern critics have drawn our attention to some other aspects of Rossetti's work which are equally compelling. The deft combination of the flesh and the spirit which marked so much of the paintings of the Brotherhood is also unmistakably present in Christina's poetry. She seems equally at ease while writing short simple lyrics and long, often symbolic, and complexly structured poems. Rich in imagery, mellifluous and at the same time amenable to different interpretations, Rossetti's poetry probably needs to be studied with more careful diligence and critical attention than is generally accorded to her work.

Since the hundred and twenty years or so after her death, Christina Rossetti's critical fortunes have undergone quite a radical transformation. Rossetti herself, along with Emily Bronte and Elizabeth Barrett Browning before her, were writing within an already established tradition of poetry by women. They had their worthy predecessors in the likes of Felicia Hemans, Anna Letitia Barbauld and Letitia Elizabeth Landon, all of whom were well-known and popular poets of the Romantic period. Victorian women poets though, like their Romantic counterparts, had to negotiate a discourse of their own as poetry had traditionally been thought of as being predominantly a masculine sphere of literary activity. The Victorian "poetess" had a certain public and social role to play. In an age which often thought of women as fulfilling one of the two diametrically opposite roles of being either "the Angel in the House" or "the devil in the flesh", it

was no easy task for them to write poetry which would meet the standards of contemporary aesthetics as well as contemporary morality.

In keeping with the critical temper of her times Rossetti's poetry was deemed suited for women readers and children. This state of things continued till long after her death. She was often remembered as a rather marginal figure hovering at the periphery of the Pre- Raphaelite Brotherhood as also someone who wrote nursery-rhymes. Standard histories of literature will characteristically give more prominence and critical attention to her brother than to Christina herself. However, Rossetti's critical fortunes revived in the last quarter of the twentieth century with the advent of feminist literary theory and criticism, especially with that branch of it which concerns itself with writing by women ("Gynocriticism" to use the term coined by Elaine Showalter). *Goblin Market*, Rossetti's long poem revolving around the two sisters Lizzie and Laura and their dealings with Goblin men who sell luscious magical fruits and specifically tempt women to buy from them, has generally been at the centre of this critical reappraisal of her entire oeuvre. The sexual innuendoes and psychological complexities of the poem reveal hitherto undiscovered layers of connotations in a work which had long been read as a children's poem. Critics have also noted the frequent use of the grotesque as well as animals of the lower order in Rossetti's works, problematising a straight-forward reading of her poems as merely pleasant stuff. It is important to see Rossetti's work in the context of Victorian poetry as well as in the broader context of writing by women and to evaluate her poetic achievements accordingly.

4.16.3: Text

'A Dirge' was composed in 1865 but was first published in the *Argosy* in January 1874. You perhaps know that a 'dirge' is a song of lament for the dear departed. Read the short poem for yourself to understand the significance of the title.

A DIRGE

Why were you born when the snow was falling?
 You should have come to the cuckoo's calling,
 Or when grapes are green in the cluster,
 Or, at least, when lithe swallows muster

For their far off flying
From summer dying.

Why did you die when the lambs were cropping?
You should have died at the apples' dropping,
When the grasshopper comes to trouble,
And the wheat-fields are sodden stubble,
And all winds go sighing
For sweet things dying.

Annotations

The title - Dirge is a poem of mourning on the occasion of a particular person's death. A dirge is generally shorter and less complex in structure than an elegy. Like lyric poetry dirges were also originally meant to be sung.

- i-ii. The first two lines refer to two seasons— winter and spring respectively
- iv. Lithe, graceful and supple; muster— assemble or gather in troops. The swallow typically migrates to hotter climate zones during late autumn in search of food.
- vii. The “cropping” of lambs may refer to both the practice of docking the lambs' tail when they are very young, and to feed by grazing. In both senses it again refers to a season— the season of spring when lambs are born
- ix. Probably an allusion to the well-known fable of “The Ant and the Grasshopper” found in *Aesop's Fables*. The indolent grasshopper sang and danced through the warm months of summer and came to trouble with the onset of winter as he had not stored food.
- x. Sodden- soaked through; stubble- the stalks of plant left on the ground after the harvest.

4.16.4: Critical Appreciation

‘A Dirge’, as you have already noted, is a poem of mourning. This short poem is a lyrical expression of grief and has the graceful melody of a song. Structurally, the two stanzas run parallel to each other and the two rhetorical questions that

begin each is the pivot on which the rest of the poem turns. Between “Why were you born when the snow was falling? And “Why did you die when the lambs were cropping?” We have a sense of the “untimeliness” of the death of the person being mourned. This symmetry is repeated in the concluding couplets of the stanzas as well— the repetition of the word “dying” in the last line of each reinforce the sense of the speaker’s melancholy and serve almost as a refrain. The rhetorical question posed at the beginning of each stanza is responded to in the second line of each and the answer is followed by an enumeration of the characteristic natural scenes of the seasons being talked of. The birth of the unnamed deceased should have taken place in spring or summer and not in the dead of the winter with the snow falling. Winter is the season of desolation and barrenness; the birth of the one being mourned should have been celebrated in spring when the sky would have been echoing with the call of the cuckoo, the harbinger of spring. The birth should have taken place in the full glory of the season, when green grapes —signifying youth and vigour— hang in clusters from the boughs. At least, she/he could have been born while the swallows prepare for their annual migration before the onset of winter. Though the impending flight of the swallows indicates the death of summer, it still takes place before winter comes to wipe away every trace of new life from the face of nature.

The death of the beloved is equally untimely. It takes place when the young lambs are cropping and the world in general seems to bask in the glory of summer. The death should have visited the person during late autumn or early winter when the harvested wheat fields lose their beauty and grandeur and is covered with stubble. The sighing of the winds through the trees would have provided fit music to the dying of sweet things. This untimeliness seem to go against the very grain of nature as in the cycle of seasons spring/summer is the season of fruition whereas autumn and winter signify ripeness, maturity and eventual extinction.

While reading the poem, you may notice an interesting parallel with John Keats’s “To Autumn”. Some of the images used by Rossetti have their antecedents in Keats, most remarkably the swallows, the lambs and the stubble fields. The two poems, however, register a radical difference in the attitudes expressed towards the seasons. We see Keats appreciating the ripeness of autumn, its fullness is taken as the climax of the seasonal cycle and the note of desolation is found only at the end of the poem and it takes the form of a calm acceptance of the inevitability of the cycles of life and death.

4.16.5: Style, Imagery and Technique

The first thing about the short lyric that you must have noted is the use of simple and lucid language and a rich profusion of natural images. In ‘The Dirge’, the series of images drawn from nature imparts a pictorial quality to the poem. The two stanzas consisting of six lines each rhyming aa bb cc gives the poem a rapid movement. The couplets, however, are of varying length— beginning with decasyllabic ones, the later couplets give the impression (both visual and aural) of gradual compression culminating in the last line of each stanza with only five syllables. This gradual compression provides a sense of closure and finality to the last lines. Richness of details expressed in simple and evocative language is the strength of the second lyric. The images drawn from the world of nature and the world of art in the first and second stanzas respectively offer a profusion of colours—he rainbow tints of the shells, the rich purple of the dais, the silver and gold of the embroidery create a veritable riot of colours in the short space of the sixteen lines. It would indeed not be wrong to say that the rich natural imagery of ‘The Dirge’ reminds us of Keats’s “To Autumn”, a poem that is not in your syllabus as such but definitely one that you should read for yourselves.

4.16.6: Summing Up

- Christina Rossetti’s “A Dirge” is a short lyric composed in a lucid yet rich language.
- The poem shows Christina Rossetti’s eye for visual details, as well as her propensity to use images and symbols drawn from the world of nature.
- The rhymed and neatly structured poem uses poetic devices like refrain, interrogation and anaphora and create a beautiful but not overtly poetic verbal as well as visual pattern.
- It is a good example of Rossetti’s characteristic poetic technique and style.

4.16.7: Comprehension Exercises

A. Long Answer Type Questions:

1. Critically comment on Christina Rossetti's use of imagery in her poetry, with close textual references from your syllabised text.
2. Analyse the significance of the title of the poem "A Dirge."

B. Medium Length Answer Type Questions:

1. Comment on the variations of line-length as used by Rossetti in 'A Dirge'
2. Briefly comment on Rossetti's association of death with winter in 'A Dirge'
3. Explain with reference to the context: "And all winds go sighing/ For sweet things dying."

C. Short Answer Type Questions:

1. What story is the poet referring to when she says "When the grasshopper comes to trouble"?
2. Briefly narrate the cycle of seasons and their relation with human emotions that you perceive in the poem "A Dirge."

4.16.8: Suggested Reading

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