The High Modernist, Postmodernist and Recent Poets
Understanding Poetry
(Revised)

BEGE 106

V
High Modernist, Postmodernist and Recent Poets

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**THE HIGH MODERNIST, POSTMODERNIST AND RECENT POETS**

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The first half of the twentieth century in English literature was dominated by ‘Modernism’. It was a break away from the Victorian and Edwardian style of narration, description and rational exposition in prose and poetry in favour of a stream-of-consciousness portrayal of personality, dependence on imagery as a means of communication and an eclectic use of mythology from European and sometimes also Indian culture in the structures of works of art. There were local factors such as the concentration of population in the megapoles like London, Birmingham and Leeds and the consequent problems associated with over population but the immediate intellectual influence came via France of the Symbolists and the Surrealists.

The **Symbolist Movement** in French literature refers to the period c 1880 – 95. It came as a reaction against the Realism and Naturalism of Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert and Zola who valued ‘sincerity’ above the Romantic love for ‘liberty’. The Realists and the Naturalists both shared the belief that the middle and lower classes of their time provided subjects for literary treatment. The Symbolist Movement refers primarily to works of the poets Mallarmé, Verlaine, Rimbaud and, Laforgue, the dramatists Villiers de L’Isle Adam and Maurice Maeterlinck and, the novelists Joris-Karl Huysmans and Édouard Dujardin. In poetry the Symbolists reacted against the Parnassians, led by Leconte de Lisle, who valued restraint, descriptive precision and objectivity as against the extravagance of the Romantics. The Symbolists were influenced by the mystical writings of Swedenborg, the poetry of Baudelaire, the plays of Wagner and the tales of Edgar Allan Poe. The symbolists opted for suggestions and evocations in the place of direct description and explicit comparisons. Arthur William Symons’ *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) was a major attempt by an Englishman to introduce the Movement in England.

One of the most prominent characteristics of **Modernism** is its bold experimentation in different areas of culture. The French ‘Avant-garde’ - that is advance guard, fore guard or vanguard - is often considered as the hallmark of modernism. **Avant-guard** traces its history back to **Dada** and the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, Switzerland where in 1916 a group of artists from war torn Europe assembled to demonstrate their art. Dada - in French ‘hobby-horse’ and in German ‘Goodbye’ and, ‘get off my back’ – apparently was a one off name suggested for an experimental art the chief quality of which was its newness. Dada was born out of a reaction to Word War I. It rejected reason and logic and opted for nonsense, irrationality and intuition. This is evident also in **Cubism** in which, for instance, we are...
expected to appreciate a collage of newspaper cuttings, buttons and knives stuck upon a canvas. Guillaume Apollinaire, the French poet, critic and calligrammetist was an ardent supporter of Dada in poetry and painting. But Dada came under attack from all corners. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer at the Frankfurt School attacked it in their essay ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’ (1944). So did Walter Benjamin in his influential essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1936) berated ‘modernism’. ‘Their poems are’ wrote Benjamin, ‘“word salad” containing obscenities and every imaginable waste product of language. The same is true of their paintings, on which they mounted buttons and tickets.’ Regarding Dada Benjamin went on, ‘One requirement was foremost: to outrage the public.’

Surrealism founded in Paris in 1924 stood on less contested grounds. ‘I have always been amazed’ wrote André Breton in his first Surrealist Manifesto (1924), ‘at the way an ordinary observer lends so much more credence and attaches so much more importance to waking events than to those occurring in dreams . . . the dream finds itself reduced to a mere parenthesis, as is the night’. He went on, ‘I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality, if one may so speak. It is in quest of this surreality that I am going, certain not to find it but too unmindful of my death not to calculate to some slight degree the joys of its possession’. Surrealistic art is about the depths of human psyche and thus of human personality. In 1929 Salvador Dali joined this movement introducing illusionistic ‘dream’ imagery indebted to Freud. Breton in his Surrealist Manifesto of 1929 tried to reconcile Freud and Marx. Among those who joined the group in the late thirties were Herbert Read and Hugh Sykes Davies.

Strange as it may sound, scientific theories and literary creeds of a given period show some kind of family resemblance. Donne’s poetry in the seventeenth century expresses the doubt and confusion of the Astronomical Revolution led by Nicolaus Copernicus, Johann Kepler, Tycho Brahe and, Galileo Galilei. Newtonian physics and the confidence and certainty about our knowledge of the universe and the euphoria evident in the arts in the Long Eighteenth Century - the Age of Reason, neoclassicism and the Enlightenment - are in tune with the spirit of the age. Modernism – Dada, Cubism and, Surrealism – in art and the works of Albert Einstein and Max Planck who gave respectively the Theories of Relativity and Quantum Mechanics together reflect the Zeitgeist of the age. From the Theories of Relativity we gained the ideas of spacetime continuum, time dilation, length contraction, universal speed limit and mass-energy equivalence. We learnt from Planck that particles are discrete packets of energy with wave-like properties. The word ‘quantum’ derives from Latin, meaning ‘how great’ or ‘how much’. There is a family resemblance between Breton’s surrealism and the tilt in modern physics from the solid facts of ‘nature’s laws’ in classical physics towards, for the common people, often confusing facts such as spacetime continuum or particles as discreet quanta of energy. The works of Planck, Paul Dirac, Enrico Fermi, Erwin Schrodinger and Satyendranath Bose made not only a scientific but also a cultural impact immediately on the West but gradually on the East as well. We cannot go into the details of these comparisons of the arts and the sciences in this brief introductory note. Nonetheless these are a few seeds of ideas that will germinate and grow within you in course of time.
The late fifties of the twentieth century saw the birth of new fields of enquiry in physics in America which influenced the West – 1. the Communication or Information Theory of Claude Shannon, a mathematician and electronic engineer and, 2. the Chaos Theory of the mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz. Later in the mid-seventies, came Fractal Geometry of the French mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot. These have made Western culture profoundly different from that of the first half of the twentieth century. The advent of the Information Age and the Knowledge Society about which we hear so often was initiated by scientists such as Shannon and the English Alan Turing. Influence of Fractal Geometry on our culture remains to be seen in times to come.

The winds of change in the late fifties of the last century were felt in the United States which was recorded by Daniel J Boorstin, an American historian, in *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1961). Pseudo-events are activities that serve little or no purpose. The Italian Umberto Eco saw in Western culture a tendency for fabricating false reality or hyperreality which is to be consumed as real. This is the art of a consumerist culture. Brand X shows that one is fashionable.

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) Jean-François Lyotard (1924 -98) opines thus:

> Our working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age.

‘This transition’ Lyotard goes on, ‘has been underway since at least the end of the 1950s, which for Europe marks the completion of reconstruction.’ Lyotard is thinking about the reconstruction of Europe after the Second World War (1939 -45). Lyotard points out at the ‘merchantilisation of knowledge’ knowledge as an ‘informational commodity’ as it is now, as never before, indispensable to worldwide competition for power. This new feature of our culture has led us to a paralogy – a movement against an established way of reasoning. We witness in our culture today a distrust of metanarratives or grand narratives, a comprehensive explanation of historical meaning, experience or knowledge that promises a society legitimation through the expected completion of that idea.

Fredric Jameson’s (b. 1934) *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) is a landmark study of Western culture in the sixties and thereafter. He points out that postmodernist art is marked by depthlessness. He illustrates his point by comparing Van Gogh’s ‘A Pair of Shoes’ with Andy Warhol’s ‘Diamond Dust Shoes’. While the former invites interpretation, a construction of the peasant world and their difficult life the latter does not offer anything beyond what we see. A modern work such as Edvard Munch’s ‘The Scream’ reifies the modern experience of angst and alienation whereas in postmodern works of art feelings wane, there is ‘the waning of affect’.

It would be a good idea to bear these general directions of thought while reading the literature of the twentieth century.

Amiya Bhushan Sharma
The High Modernist, Postmodernist and Recent Poets
## UNIT 21 WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

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### 21.0 OBJECTIVES

After you have read this unit, you will be able to:

- Critically respond to W.B. Yeats’s life and works.
- Understand Yeats’s poetry in relation to Irish politics and history of his time.
- Appreciate the relationship between form and content of his poetry.
- To examine Yeats’s contribution to poetic modernism.
- Examine the poems “To a Shade,” “No Second Troy,” and “The Second Coming.”

### 21.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we will have first look at W.B. Yeats’s life and works. Yeats lived a long and eventful life. There was a direct connection between his social, and political life and the kind of literature he wrote. Therefore understanding his life may hold some key to comprehending his poetry.

The first poem in this unit is “To a Shade,” which Yeats wrote to commemorate the great Irish nationalist Charles Stuart Parnell. As a nationalist Yeats was greatly influenced by this revolutionary leader, and his passion for the
independence of Ireland. Let us see by reading this poem what kind of tribute does the poet pay to this revered leader.

The second poem is titled “No Second Troy.” As the title suggests, the poem makes a reference to the Greek epic *Iliad* that celebrates the war of Troy. The poem is, however, not about Iliad but Ireland of Yeats’s times. Yeats compares his beloved Maud of Gonne to the mythical Helen of Troy. Read the poem to find out why Yeats does so.

The third poem in this unit is “The Second Coming.” It is one of the most anthologized of Yeats’s poems. It presents the Yeatsian theory of history through his symbol of gyre. It has Christian connotations. Instead of the second coming of the Christ, the poem announces the coming of a monstrous figure with the body of the lion and head of a man as an anti-Christ.

You are advised to read the poems before you read other sections of the unit.

## 21.2 WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS (1865-1939)

W.B. Yeats will go down in history as perhaps the greatest Irish writer ever. He was more than a poet; he wrote plays as well as prose, worked as an anthropologist and folklorist, was one of the theatre-managers at Abbey Theatre that he founded along with Lady Gregory, organized political meetings and lectures for the Irish movement for independence. However, with all his other accomplishments, he would be remembered mostly for his poetry that runs into numerous volumes. In his interview to *The Paris Review* in 1994, Seamus Heaney talks about the impossibility of ignoring Yeats in any assessment Irish poetry, and that he had to be included in his acceptance speech of the Noble Prize. Yeats both observed and influenced the political and literary history of Ireland, since the 1890s to his death. Working as a nationalist poet for almost half a century from the 1889 to 1939, he either took part or closely watched critical developments of that era such as the formation of the Irish National Theatre Society (later named as the Abbey Theatre), Irish Home Rule Movement, Easter Rising of 1916, and the Irish War of Independence, also called the Anglo-Irish War, that was fought between 21 January 1919 and 11 July 1921. Though, Yeats was averse to political violence, and never took part in any violent struggle against the British colonial forces, he tirelessly worked for cultural nationalism, reviving the oral and folk tradition of Ireland, as well as writing plays and poetry on nationalistic themes. The ambivalent streak in his poetry and personality is evident in the following lines from his poem “Man and Echo,” in which he painfully wonders if his play, *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*, inspired young Irish men and women to violence and death in the Easter Uprising of 1916:

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All that I have said and done,
Now that I am old and ill,
Turns into a question till
I lie awake night after night
And never get the answers right.
Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?
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So, Yeats’s influence on Irish politics remains undeniable. Paying tribute to the key role the poet played in securing the independence of Ireland, Oliver St John
Gogarty said, and “If it had not been for W.B. Yeats, there would be no Irish Free State!” He was appointed to the first Irish senate in 1921. He also served a second term in 1925.

Yeats was a major force in the English poetic tradition. Though remaining astutely Irish in outlook, he wrote in the tradition that he inherited from Blake and Shelley calling himself “the last romantic.” However, in the second decade of the 20th century, he along with T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound radically transformed English poetry, making it suggestive and symbolist. In the process, he made himself a key figure in the European Modernism.

In his search for poetic truth, Yeats also came under the influence of Indian philosophy and poetry, especially through the Upanishads and the poems of Rabindranath Tagore.

Now let us look at his life in more detail.

W.B. Yeats was born in Dublin, now the capital of Ireland, on June 13, 1865. His father, John Butler Yeats, was a painter of modest success, and belonged to a respected family line of Protestant aristocrats and clergymen. Yeats, the poet, was named after his grandfather William Butler Yeats, who was a rector at Tullyish. Yeats’s mother, Susan Yeats, belonged to a family of business men in County Sligo on the west coast of Ireland. Though qualified as a barrister, the poet’s father decided to move to London with a hope to become a painter. However, Susan Yeats, unhappy with her husband’s decision, chose to live for some months every year from 1867 to 1873 at Sligo. Living with his grandparents and uncles at seaside Sligo, and with his father in London, Yeats and his five siblings came into contact with two completely different worlds – urban and the center of colonial Britain, London, and the typical Irish rural world, that evoked his postcolonial imagination quite early in life.

In his early lyrics, composed in the 1890s, Sligo inspired Yeats to write about the Irish landscape filled by lakes, hills, clouds and streams, which was a counterfoil to the colonial, urban, and metropolitan culture represented by London. In the most famous lyric from this phase of Yeats’ oeuvre, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” the poet says,

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey
I hear it in the deep heart’s core.

The beautiful island of Innisfree, with a lovely stretch of woodland, was in Lough Gill, about three miles away from Sligo. To the north of Sligo, a few miles away, was Ben Bulben, the mountain with a waterfall. Under this mountain lay the Drumcliff Churchyard, which the poet wished to be the place of his burial. He expressed this wish in his poem Under Ben Bullben (1939)

Under bare Ben Bulben’s head
In Drumcliff Churchyard, Yeats is laid

In London, the young Yeats came across artists and intellectuals who came to visit his father, and who talked about philosophy, religion, and arts, whereas at Sligo, Yeats came to know the Pollexfens and Middletons, the loving uncles,
aunts and cousins, who introduced him to the world of intense feeling, practical living amidst Irish nature, and folktales and fairies. The poet’s father would say: “By marriage with the Pollexfens, I have given a tongue to the sea cliffs.” Yeats would, for the rest of his life, remember Sligo as attached with childhood bliss, Irish family traditions, and folk and oral traditions of Ireland.

In 1881, financial hardships forced the family to return to Ireland. They took a cottage in Howth, a village on the sea shore, some 10 miles northeast of Dublin. The young Yeats accompanied his father daily to London by train, where in his studio, the father read aloud poems of Shakespeare, Byron, Shelley, and Keats. Yeats grew fascinated with Blake, Shelley and Byron, as the romantic wielded great influence on his poetic sensibility early on. He wrote in their imitation. As a boy, he was captivated by Shelley’s Alastor, a poem about the idealist and passionately romantic as well as visionary hero, also a poet, who turns his back upon the world completely disillusioned with it.

Yeats’s romantic tendencies, his belief in imagination, and his belief in poetry and literature as the truest form of self-expression led him to regard himself as the most authentic voice of Irish renaissance or the Irish Literary Revival. His reading of the romantics and the Irish oral folklore had produced in him a strong belief in spiritual self as against the intellect, the former he identified with Ireland and the latter with Britain.

Yeats’s first collection of verse The Wanderings of Oisin (1889) announced the arrival of a truly original poet, of exceptional imagination that could transform Irish myths and legends into contemporary narratives. He adopted myths, ballads, and folktales, and used their diction and rhythm in his poems. Oisin, the warrior poet from Irish mythology, ultimately sees through the mystery of the three islands that tempt in him in the beginning, and he returns to Ireland, “in the house of the Fenians, be they in flames or at feast.”

Yeats’s primary interest in the 1890s lay in starting a cultural revolution in Ireland that could inspire and support the political revolution against Britain. In 1896, he joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and began organizing conferences, delivering speeches and writing articles about the future of Ireland. In 1897, he met Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn, and formalized a manifesto of the Irish Literary Theatre, which was renamed as Irish National Theatre in 1901, and finally the National Theatre Society (also the Abbey Theatre) in 1904. Yeats not only wrote for this theatre, but also served as its managing director along with Gregory and Synge. He saw the theatre as a movement to foster culture nationalism, as the manifesto, Our Irish Theatre, says,

We propose to have performed in Dublin…certain Celtic and Irish plays…to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland. We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism.

In the collection of poems published as The Wind among the Reeds (1899), Yeats continued to explore the contraries and antithesis as the central trope of his poems, which would in fact remain so throughout his career. The quotidian and the ideal, dreams and reality, soul and intellect, mythology and contemporary Ireland return as subjects of his poems.
Yeats met Maud Gonne in 1889 and fell in love with her, but his love remained unrequited all his life. Maud Gonne was a fiery nationalist, who played an active role in the struggle for independence. She was also a fine actress, and played the role of the Cathleen, the old woman and the symbol of Ireland herself, in Yeast’s postcolonial play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. But she chose John MacBride, the revolutionary who was executed for his role in the Easter uprising, over Yeats. In his poem *Easter 1916*, Yeats commemorated the death of MacBride and other revolutionaries in the Easter uprising, while also denouncing the use of violence for securing the independence of Ireland.

Yeats wrote some wonderful love lyrics to remember his love for Maud Gonne. For example, in “Adam’s Curse,” he says

> I had a thought for no one’s but your ears:  
> That you were beautiful, and that I strove  
> To love you in the old high way of love;  
> That it had all seemed happy, and yet we’d grown  
> As weary-hearted as that hollow moon.

With *In the Seven Woods* (1904), there are indications of a shift in Yeast’s style, as he begins advancing towards a modernist poetics. But it is only after meeting Ezra Pound that a radical change in his poems; they come across as less ornamental, and become suggestive, sparse, and symbolist. Yeats had always been a symbolist. As early as 1900, in his essay, “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry,” he writes:

> It is only by ancient symbols, by symbols that have numberless meanings besides the one or two the writer lays emphasis upon, or the half-score he knows of, that any highly subjective art can escape from the barrenness and shallowness of a too conscious arrangement, into the abundance and depth of Nature.

However, it was his meeting with Ezra Pound that brought a change into Yeast’s poetry from a romantic use of symbols to the very texture of the poems becoming elusive, concrete and suggestive. He stayed with Pound during winters from 1913-1916. They shared a cottage in Sussex, and Pound read and edited his poems. Through Pound’s research, Yeats also came to know about the Japanese Noh drama, and learned from it the obscure and symbolist style that rejected naturalism. From now on, Yeats wrote poems that used concrete images, which were sparse and associative. He employed words and objects that resonated with suggestive meanings. He could do this by avoiding abstract words and traditional metaphors. The collection *Responsibilities* (1914) demonstrated these developments in his poetry. His subsequent volumes of verse *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) further revealed the maturity of Yeats’s style, suggestive a rich blending of passionate speech and symbolist energy.

Yeats was bestowed the Noble Prize for Literature in 1923. However, some of his best poems were yet to be written. For all his life, Yeats had been working on a system of thought, a metaphysical framework that was antithetical to the reason-dominated modern Western thought. He found no solace in Christianity, and hence ruminated Neo-Platonism, occultism, theosophy, kabalistic thought, Rosicrucian systems, mysticism, Indian philosophy etc, for an alternate system.
that would symbols to his poetry. He also learnt spiritualism from Mohini Chatterjee, the Indian theosophist. With Madame Blavatsky, he experimented in occultism, particularly the telepathic connections with the immortal Tibetan saints. Yeats had already learnt a great deal from Indian philosophy. He had read the *Upanishads* as well as *Patanjali’s Yoga-sutra-s* with his Indian guru, Purohit Swami. Yeats wrote ‘Preface’ to the former, and ‘Introduction’ to the latter, when his guru translated these works. It was his interest in the Indian philosophical traditions that had inspired him to receive Tagore’s *Gitanjali* with great excitement in 1912-13.

Yeats passionate pursued the esoteric systems of thought as an answer to the modern, rationalist and mechanized intellectual frameworks. He articulated this philosophical system in his prose work *A Vision* (1925), which provided the themes, personalities, and symbols, and geometrical diagrams of the cycles of history, that he in his later poetry. *The Tower* (1928) contained some of his most famous poems: “Sailing to Byzantium,” “Among School Children,” “Leda and the Swan,” and the title poem.

Having read about the life and works of W.B. Yeats, answer the following questions

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<td>Answer the following questions in the space provided. Read the answers after doing the exercise.</td>
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1) Who was W.B. Yeats’s father and what did he do?

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2) How did living with his maternal grandparents and uncles influence Yeats as a person and as a poet?

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3) Who were the poets who influenced Yeats?

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21.3 TO A SHADE (1913)

21.3.1 Introduction

The poem “To a Shade” appeared in the collection Responsibilities (1914). It commemorates Charles Stewart Parnell, a radical Protestant leader, inarguably the most influential Irish politician of the 19th century. He founded the Irish Parliamentary Party, and led various movements against British colonialism, inside and outside the parliament, most significant of which were the Home rule movement, and the land reform agitation. However, his adulterous affair with Katherine O’Shea, wife of Captain William O’Shea, which came to light when the husband sought divorce, shocked both England and the Catholic dominated Ireland. Most of the members of his party shunned him, which brought a sudden downfall of his illustrious political career in December 1890. He died on October 6, 1891, merely a little more than a three months of his marriage with Katherine. However, Parnell continued to be remembered as the greatest Irish leader of his era.

The poem rues the ingratitude of the Dubliners towards Parnell. For all his great sacrifice and service rendered to Ireland, he is a forgotten figure of the past. The Parnell monument, and the sea, as well as the sea gulls and the bleak Dublin houses might respond to a visit by the leader’s spirit, but for the people of Dublin, the leader, who once inspired generations of Irish people, is an obsolete figure, whom some of them brought to disgrace.
The poem also indicts Dubliner’s lack of loyalty and respect for Hugh Lane, a painter, and an Irish nationalist of great esteem.

21.3.2 The Text

IF you have revisited the town, thin Shade,
Whether to look upon your monument
(I wonder if the builder has been paid)
Or happier-thoughted when the day is spent
To drink of that salt breath out of the sea
When grey gulls flit about instead of men,
And the gaunt houses put on majesty:
Let these content you and be gone again;
For they are at their old tricks yet.

A man
Of your own passionate serving kind who had brought
In his full hands what, had they only known,
Had given their children’s children loftier thought,
Sweeter emotion, working in their veins
Like gentle blood, has been driven from the place,
And insult heaped upon him for his pains,
And for his open-handedness, disgrace;
Your enemy, an old foul mouth, had set
The pack upon him.

Go, unquiet wanderer,
And gather the Glasnevin coverlet
About your head till the dust stops your ear,
The time for you to taste of that salt breath
And listen at the corners has not come;
You had enough of sorrow before death—
Away, away! You are safer in the tomb.

Glossary

Shade : a ghost
Glasnevin : Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin, where Parnell is buried
Simile : a figure of speech that compares a thing with another thing unlike it, with an intention to make the description more clear as well as beautiful.

Read the poem and its analysis all over again, and answer the following questions.

21.3.3 Analysis

The poem is addressed to the ghost of Parnell in three stanzas of unequal length. The first stanza has 9 lines, the second 10, while the third contains 7 lines. This corresponds to the uneven progress of the thought of the poem, and the tonal undulation through it. The first stanza concerns Parnell, the second stanza remembers Hugh Lane, while the third moves back to Parnell.
The first stanza begins with a conditional clause, which determines the structure the rest of the stanza. The poet tells the ghost that if it has come back to Dublin merely to look at his monument, or to enjoy the evening sea breeze, or to watch the sea gulls flutter, or the bleak Dublin houses looking beautiful, it should be satisfied. If not, or if it expects more, it should get back to its tomb, because the Dubliners are still the same crafty, mercantile, and distrustful people, busy at their intrigues.

In the second stanza, the poet alludes to Hugh Lane, the contemporary painter, who was devoted to the well-being of Ireland, being close to the Irish nationalists. Like Parnell, he could have inspired generations of Irish children with great thoughts. If he was allowed to pursue his dreams for Ireland, he could have instilled sweet emotions in them through his art, but his efforts too were met with insults and injury by resentful characters such as William Martin Murphy.

In the third stanza, the poet advises the ghost to depart unnoticed covering his head with a bedspread, for the people of Dublin would only insult him, as they had before he died. The poet asks him to return to his tomb, a safer place for him to be in.

Written on 29 September 1913, “To a Shade” compares well with another poem written in the year titled “September 1913.” In both poems, Yeats attacks the self-serving nature of the Dublin middle class, mercantile and selfish, with no sensitivity to the sacrifices of the great leaders of the Irish nationalist movement. In September 1913, while disparaging the present Irish people, he exalts the memory of John O’Leary, a 19th century nationalist and member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, who was arrested in Britain for his involvement in the anti-colonial activities:

Romantic Ireland is dead and gone
It’s with O’Leary in the grave

“To a Shade” begins in the manner of a talk, a style that Yeats had mastered; it gave him great possibilities to unravel the antithesis and contraries running through the speaker’s mind. In a 1913 letter to his father, he wrote:

I have tried to make my work convincing with a speech so natural and dramatic that the hearer would feel the presence of a man thinking and feeling.

The opening line contains mild accents, and a caesura, which creates a rhythmic break in speech, to help the speaker express a feeling of dejection and suppressed anger. The parenthesis in the third line is a colloquial speech:

(I wonder if the builder has been paid)

It works as an aside, giving a sense of actual talk. The use of personal pronouns “you” and “I” reinforces the effect of the speaking in conversations with the spirit of Parnell, while being heard by the readers. The poet ironically mocks the false and pretentious respect shown to the memory of Parnell in the form of the monument constructed on O’Connell Street. Addressing Parnell’s spirit as “thin Shade,” the poet, however, suggests him that if it chose to visit Dublin again, it might be content still with the look of the monument, a symbol of the Dubliner’s
hypocrisy. With the help of concrete nature images such as the “salt breath out of the sea,” the grey gulls,” and “the gaunt houses,” the poet presents nature as an antithesis to the town. Parnell’s spirit might find solace in the natural sights, but it might be for utter dejection if it wants to visit the Dubliners, as they are back at the old habits of scheming against the Irish heroes.

Yeats associates the memory of Parnell with another major nationalist figure from the 19th century, Hugh Lane, who sought to contribute to Ireland through his art, as Parnell did through his political activism. The painter was Yeats’s hero, because for the poet the cultural revival of Ireland was critical for its independence from the colonial rule. Like Parnell, Lane would have engendered great thoughts and sweet emotions in the future generations of his country. Lane worked so that a gallery of contemporary art could be established in Dublin. He wanted to put for exhibition some of his impressionistic paintings, but his efforts were thwarted and he was not allowed permission to put them in the city gallery. Moreover, his wish to work as a curator of the National History Museum of Ireland was also opposed and defeated. The poet singles out William Martin Murphy, the owner of the newspaper, The Irish Independent as the sort of people who defamed a national hero like Lane, and the kind of people who brought disgrace to Parnell. Therefore, he appropriate snubs Murphy as

An old foul mouth that had slandered you had set
The pack upon him

Parnell is buried in Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin. The poet implores his spirit to return to his tomb. The poet imagines the spirit in the person of Parnell, and advises it to wear a Glasnevin bedspread around his head, because, if identified, the people would show no respect or hospitality to him. As the Dubliners do not yet have “gentle blood” flowing in their veins, which these two heroes could have made possible, it is not yet time for Parnell to even enjoy the taste of the sea breeze or visit his neglected monument.

The form of the poem sustains its theme. It is through alliteration such as “grey gulls,” and “salt breath out of the sea,” that the poet conveys concrete imageries. Assonance is also used to similar effects. For example in the following line, where the ‘o’ sound is repeated in musical pattern:

Whether to look upon your monument

The poet uses a simile to convey the great contribution of Irish heroes like Hugh Lane to the Irish society:

Sweeter emotion, working in their veins
Like gentle blood, has been driven from the place,

The simile “like gentle blood” communicates how the cultural revival augmented by artists like Lane transformed the very character of Irish future generation by instilling true values in them.

The rhyme and rhythm of the poem is rather irregular. The first two stanzas follow a set rhyme scheme, but the third is completely uneven. An irregular rhythmic pattern is used to suggest the tone of the poem which is cynical, angry, and even bitter. It almost forces the reader to pause and think about the ingratitude of the Dubliners towards their national heroes.
# Self-check Exercise II

1) Who are the figures addressed or referred to in the poem? How does the poet relate to them?

2) Why Parnell and Lane are still ignored in Ireland? What has been Ireland’s loss because of their absence?

3) Why does the poet urge the ghost of Parnell to return to its tomb with its head covered?

4) Comment on the style of the poet? What poetic devices has the poet used to convey the meaning of the poem?

## 21.4 NO SECOND TROY (1910)

### 21.4.1 Introduction

The poem “No Second Troy” was published in the collection *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910). The subject of the poem is the unrequited love of the poet for Maud Gonne, the beautiful and Irish nationalist firebrand, who he met in 1889, and instantly fell in love with. Though she was Yeats’s friend, and
collaborated with him as actor in the Irish plays the writer produced at the Abbey Theatre, and Yeats would often visit her and show her his poems, she never returned his love. However, Yeats remained fascinated by her beauty and personality all his life. After her husband Major John McBride’s death in the 1916 Easter uprising, Yeats again proposed to Gonne, hoping that she might accept his love, but she again turned down his proposal. Thereupon, he proposed to her daughter, but was to be disappointed yet again.

In “No Second Troy,” Yeats works admits his infatuation for Gonne, while successfully coming out of the provocation to blame her for causing him emotional misery by refusing his love. In order to express the extraordinary beauty of Gonne, Yeats invokes a comparison with Helen of Troy, the most beautiful and controversial woman of the classical world, who was the cause behind the Trojan War, as sung in Homer’s *Iliad*.

However, the poet goes beyond his romantic attraction towards Gonne. In his elevation of the beauty of Gonne and his ‘misery, even as he brings Helen in the context, the poet snubs the middle class Irish people, who lack the ability and resolution to understand her extraordinary character and personality, and rise to her expectations. The age itself does not deserve Maud Gonne, who is so much like the Helen of Troy.

**21.4.2 The Text**

Why should I blame her that she filled my days  
With misery, or that she would of late  
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,  
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,  
Had they but courage equal to desire?  
What could have made her peaceful with a mind  
That nobleness made simple as fire,  
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind  
That is not natural in an age like this,  
Being high and solitary and most stern?  
Why, what could she have done being what she is?  
Was there another Troy for her to burn?

**21.4.3 Analysis**

The poem is structured by four rhetorical questions. Grammatically, it is grouped into two sections of fives lines each, followed by two lines. In the first five lines, using the first rhetorical question, the poet absolves Maud Gonne from blame of being the cause of his misery, as well as for exciting the unworthy men to chaotic violence. In the second group of five lines, posing the second rhetorical question, the poet ironically states that the middle class Irish people, had no moral strength to equal their ‘desire’ of a free Ireland, and wonders how a woman of such noble and tranquil mind as well as exceptional character and beauty as Maud Gonne could find peace in an age so mean. In the last two lines, containing the third and fourth rhetorical questions, the poet makes explicit her comparison with Helen of Troy, but regrets metaphorically that Ireland was no Troy to burn for Gonne, as Troy had done for Helen.
The poem comes across as Yeats’s attempt to reconcile with the rejection by Maud Gonne by overcoming the consternation caused by his unrequited love to blame her. In the same imaginative sweep, however, he also sees an opportunity to resent finds the Sinn Fein men, the rabble that found the better of Maud Gonne as was their leader, and wife of John MacBride, the Irish nationalist was executed for his role in the Easter Uprising. Yeats no doubt disliked MacBride; even in the poem “Easter 1916” written on the Uprising, Yeats could not hide his jealousy and dislike for MacBride:

This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vain-glorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart
Yet I number him in the song

To Yeats, the coarse and plebian mob that Gonne led in different revolutionary activities, and who she chose over the love of Yeats hardly deserved a royal mind and classic beauty that she embodied:

, or that she would of late
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
Had they but courage equal to desire?

The juxtaposition of the images “little street” and “the great” confirms Yeats’s faith in the aristocratic lineage, and his enthusiasm for the traditional Irish society under the protection of the aristocratic lords. The agents of nationalism therefore for him should have been noble and valiant men of the upper class rather than the “ignorant men,” who have no physical or moral “courage equal to desire.”

The poet employs two similes to suggest the nobility of Gonne’s mind and her extraordinary beauty:

What could have made her peaceful with a mind
That nobleness made simple as fire,
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
That is not natural in an age like this,

It is the exalted nature of her mind, as pure “as fire,” as well as her physical “beauty like a tightened bow” that that gives her superiority over the crowd, and makes her presence out of place “in an age like this.” In the smile “beauty like a tightened bow,” the word/object “bow” transforms into a symbol of sternness and grace, a mix of austerity and passionate action, restraint and violence.

In the final movement of the poem, Yeats wonders what would Maud Gonne do knowing what she is, as there was no another Troy to burn for her.

The poem is in the form of a sonnet, with an exception. It does not have the couplet that ends a sonnet. It has 12 lines, whereas a sonnet has 14 lines. Shakespeare’s sonnet no. 126 only has 12 lines rather than 14. Unlike grammatically, the rhyme scheme structures the poem into three quatrains of 4 lines each: abab, cdcd, efef. The metre employed, as in a sonnet, is that of iambic
pentameter, in which five stressed syllables each follow an unstressed syllable. In other words, an iambic pentameter line would contain 10 syllables set in a pattern in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable:

What could have made her peace-ful with a mind

Now that you have read the poem and its analysis, answer the following questions.

<table>
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<th>Self-check Exercise III</th>
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<tr>
<td>1) Who was the Helen of Troy alluded to in the poem?</td>
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<td>2) What is the significance of the title “No Second Troy”?</td>
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<td>3) Why does the poet consider the people of his era and time not deserving Maud Gonne?</td>
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21.5 THE SECOND COMING (1920)

21.5.1 Introduction

In Christianity, the phrase ‘the Second Coming,’ refers to the Second Coming of Christ, his return to the earth as prophesied in the gospels. It is believed that in ‘end of the world’ or apocalypse, with his coming, the Messianic Age of peace and happiness will be established.

The poem is, however, based on a vision of the poet about the coming of an anti-Christ. This prophetic event suggests the advent of a civilization opposite to the present Christian civilization. The present civilization has lasted for 2000 years,
and is now coming to an end as signaled by widespread violence, bloodshed, and a period of great anarchy.

In “The Second Coming,” Yeats integrates mythology and history into an organic whole. He abstracts a mythological system out of history, as well as reads history in terms of myth. While Yeats borrowed widely from Greek and Irish mythology, he had long been working on his personal mythology, an imaginative system to comprehend history and civilization, as well as the modern reality dominated by violence and bloodshed during the World War I, and the Anglo-Irish war. His efforts materialized in a prose work called A Vision, which was published in 1925. However, in his numerous poems prior to his publication of A Vision, Yeats had already expressed many of his ideas and images. The poem “The Second Coming” is one such poem, which employs the concept of a cyclic creation and destruction of the world, as an alternative to Christian doctrines about creation and the dissolution of the world. As an expression of the Yeatsian apocalypse, it announces the coming of the anti-Christ, and in the process, subverts the Christian notion of revelation. In his earlier poems such as “Easter 1916,” Yeats had already expressed a revelatory vision antithetical to the Christian doctrines:

All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

“The Second Coming” was written in 1919. It was first published in The Dial, an American magazine, in November 1920. In same year, it appeared in the collection of Yeats’s verse called Michael Robartes and the Dancer.

21.5.2 The Text

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?
Glossary

Gyre : a spiral or cone. In the Yeatsian system, the rotation of a gyre represents the movement of both history and the human mind.

Spiritus Mundi : a “spirit world,” or a storehouse of images and symbols that creative people share, according to Yeats.

Bethlehem : a Palestinian city, located near Jerusalem. According to the New Testament, it is the birthplace of Jesus Christ.

Apocalypse : a prophetic or visionary revelation about events of great devastation and violence, such as described in the Apocalypse, the Book of Revelation in the Bible.

Having read the poem and its analysis, now answer the following questions.

21.5.3 Analysis

The poem is written in 21 stanzas, divided into two stanzas. The first stanza contains 8 lines; while the second has 14 lines. It is unconventional in structure. However, its structure compliments the development of its theme. The two stanzas divide the poem into two parts: the first part being an intense reflection on the violence and disorder of the society is shorter, and give way to the fuller projection of the nightmarish vision in the second part, which is as long as sonnet. The first stanza presents interconnected images of a fragmented world living in the midst of confusion, anarchy, and violence. Through the image of the falcon flying free out of the control of the falconer, who may be taken as a symbol of a unifying being, the God, poet presents an impression of a murderous world let loose without control. The spiral movement of the gyre upon reaching its end at its widest expanse is occasioned by mindless violence. It acts as a symbol for ‘the end of world’ phase of human history characterized by anarchy and bloodshed. The innocence of the world is overtaken by violence. The people with quality and ability who could bring some order to the society are apathetic, while the worst are driven by frenzy, escalating social disorder and violence.

The second stanza separates from the first stanza by the images abruptly forming in the mind of speaker-poet as he reflects upon the panorama of violence and chaos. The massive scale of destruction makes him predict and utter that certainly the return of the Christ, his “Second Coming” is imminent. It here that the speaker has an extremely disturbing vision of grotesque figure, “the rough beast” emerging out of “Spiritus Mundi,” the creative unconscious shared by the poets and visionaries. This repulsive figure, the anti-Christ, with a lion body and a human head, is spotted in a desert scene. Its eyes are remorseless and blank, as indifferent as that of the sun, unlike the benevolent eyes of the Christ. It is a stark and nightmarish vision. As this figure moves its beastly things, the desert birds of prey hover about it, even as darkness descends on him. The poet infers that this horrendous figure, the signaler of the new history, had been lying dormant as if in “a stony sleep” for the last “twenty centuries” when the Christian civilization lasted. As this civilization ends with enormous violence and chaotic scenes all around, it’s time for this creature to come out of its “rocking cradle,” and walk towards Bethlehem, where Christ was born, to be born and inaugurate the new civilization.
The meaning, images, and symbols of the poem are based on the geometrical figures that lie in the background. The first line refers to the expanding gyre:

Turning and turning the widening gyre

Yeats imagines a pair of antithetical gyres, locked into each other, as constituting opposite progress of human history. One of the gyres or cones is widening, while the other is tapering. He associates the widening gyre with the elevating flight of the falcon:

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Yeats had used the flight of the bird as an image of the widening gyre of history in his earlier poems as well, such as “The Wild Swans at Coole”:

I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.

The widening gyre represents the historical progress of 2000 years that had begins with the birth of the Christ. It is at this point, that the world order is all well, as the ‘falcon’ is well within the control of the falconer, stationed at the pointed base of this gyre. But as this gyre moves ahead and up, widening further and higher, the ‘falcon’ soars higher and higher and looses the control of the ‘falconer’. What this image symbolizes is breakdown of the social order, the destruction of all institutions and moral values that the Christian civilization stood for:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

As the widening gyre widens the contracting gyres narrows up, the widened end of the first gyre is met with the narrowest point of the second gyre, antithetical to the first. The second gyre, also in progress antithetically to the first, is therefore spoken by the poet lying in “twenty centuries of stony sleep.” It is at this point that the second gyreor cycle of history will begin its widening movement producing values antithetical to the Christian civilization. The Western civilization at the contemporary moment, at the widest opening of its historical gyre is the worst where,

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

These lines and the sentiments they convey bring to our mind the poem “No Second Troy” that we have already analyzed:

or that she would of late
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
Had they but courage equal to desire?
The High Modernist, Postmodernist and Recent Poets

The tone of the lines in this stanza is somber as well as cynical. Though tirelessly working for the Irish independence, Yeats detested the violence perpetuated by the radical nationalist groups. By the “best” who “lacked conviction” the poet obviously means the middle class Irish people, who had turned away from the nobility of character represented by the aristocracy, and busying themselves in mercantile activities, had turned a blind eye to the chaos and disorder in Ireland. By the “worst” that are “full of passionate intensity” he refers to the mob driven by frenzy and irrational passion that turned themselves against the true heroes of Irish nationalism like Charles Stewart Parnell, J.M. Synge, and Yeats himself. These lines also present a picture of the World War Europe, of massive violence, bloodshed, and loss of hope in humanity.

The tone of the lines is somber as well. “The blood-dimmed tide” is an intense image symbolizing horrific violence as well as opacity of scene that submerges and overwhelms all innocence of human kind.

In Yeats’s philosophy, these figures do not simply represent movements of history. They also symbolize the subjective and objective forces within the individual. The widening gyre stands for the objective or ‘primary’ force or attribute of an individual as well as civilization. The new world order, which is imminent, would represent the subjective or the ‘antithetical’ force governing the individual or the civilization. The widening spiral of history, as also the individual existing in this history, is scientific, rational, democratic, and mechanical, while values antithetical to these will be associated with the second pattern of history and the individual living in it. Yeats says in his A Vision:

After an age of necessity, truth, goodness, mechanism, science, democracy, abstraction, peace, comes an age of freedom, fiction, evil, kindred, art, aristocracy, particularity, war.

The second stanza sets off an escalation in the tone, as well as takes the theme to a visionary level. It takes the readers to a desert scene to stage the “Second Coming,” not of Christ but of the anti-Christ. This figure symbolizes paganism, destruction, irrationality, passion, evil—in short values that would destroy modernity, or the modern civilization ruined by excessive use of reason and rationality. The term “Spiritus Mundi” is a technical coinage in Yeats’s esoteric philosophy. It refers to the “world spirit.” In a description found in “An Image from a Past Life,” Yeats calls the “Spiritus Mundi” “a general storehouse of images which has ceased to be a property of any personality or spirit.” In the poem, it refers to the inner eye or the creative unconscious out of which evolves the desert scene in which appears that

A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs…

The poet presents a nightmarish spectacle as the horrific man-beast walks its animal thighs slowly towards Bethlehem to herald the onset of the new history and civilization. As it walks above it sway “the indignant desert birds.” This image connects these lines with the first stanza. The solitary falconer, who is noble and gracious, has been replaced by a group of desert birds of prey.
In the final lines, the poem mixes the dark and nightmarish vision of the beast with the Christian myth of the Second Coming of the Christ. As if like Christ, the grotesque beast “its hour come round at last” moves towards Bethlehem to be born. But whereas Christ’s Second Coming is associated with the beginning of the Messianic Age of happiness and peace, the rough beast signals the continuation of violent history and civilization.

The poem has been composed in blank verse. The metre is not regular throughout the poem; however, generally, the poem in iambic pentameter.

**Self-check Exercise IV**

1) What is the significance of the title “The Second Coming”?

2) What makes the poet predict the Apocalypse?

3) Discuss a few images that the poet has used to indicate the world associated with the coming of the anti-Christ.

4) Discuss a metaphor from the poem to suggest Yeats as a modernist.
21.6 LET US SUM UP

Yeats’s life and works represent valuable interfaces between poetry and politics, poetry and mythology, tradition and modernity, life and literature, history, literature and nationhood, as well some specific concerns of the poet living in Ireland at a very crucial juncture of history, especially his cultural politics. We hope that you will read more poems by the poet from anthologies and his collections of verse some of which have been mentioned in this unit.

21.6 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

**Self-check Exercise 1**

1) W.B. Yeats’s father was John Butler Yeats. He was a painter of meager success in Dublin and London.

2) Living with his maternal grandparents and uncles in County Sligo on the West coast of Ireland, Yeats’s personal as well as poetic personality was shaped by his perceptions of the Irish landscape, and the rural life animated by folklore. His early attachment with the Irish countryside, and his reception of the folktales in the Irish cottages influenced the formation of his postcolonial sensibility.

3) In early part of his career, Yeats was influenced by the British romantic poets, especially William Blake, and P.B. Shelley. He later became associated with Ezra Pound as his poetry turned modernist in style.

4) Yeats strongly believed in the strengths of cultural nationalism as an anti-colonial movement. He was instrumental in the establishment of Irish Literary Theatre (1897) with Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn, which later became the Abbey Theatre. It staged plays on nationalistic themes. He also organized public meetings, gave lectures, and wrote pamphlets against the colonial government.

5) By 1912, Yeats’s poetry had entered the modernist phase, and it coincided with his meeting with Ezra Pound in 1913. His poems became suggestive, and complex with esoteric symbols and concrete imageries. His diction became precise, simple, clear and sparse. In short, his poetry became elusive and indirect.

6) Yeats was drawn towards the Indian philosophy and poetry. He had studied Patanjali’s *Yogasutra*-s, and the *Upanishads* with the help of his mentor Purohit Swami. He also greatly admired *The Geetanjali* of Rabindranath Tagore. In the Indian philosophy, he found an alternative to the mechanized, commercialized, and rationalist Western civilization.

**Self-check Exercise 2**

1) The poem is addressed to the ghost of Charles Stewart Parnell, the most prominent Irish politician of the later 19th century. Another Irish hero referred to in the second stanza is Hugh Lane, a painter, and a nationalist, who made efforts to establish Dublin’s Municipal Gallery of Modern Art. Both these personalities earned great respect for Yeats for their contribution to Irish nationalism.
William Butler Yeats

2) It is the selfishness of the middle class Dubliners and their ingratitude that is responsible for the neglect of the memory of these two illustrious Irish heroes. In their lifetime, they become the target of the scheming and intriguing people around them. Parnell met his downfall in the aftermath of the exposure of his affair with a married woman, who had not yet taken divorce. Hugh Lane, on the other hand, who could have inspired generations of Irish children by his art work, fell due to intrigues of certain individuals like William Martin Murphy. If Parnell had continued as a leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, he could have served Ireland far longer.

3) The poet advises the ghost of Parnell to cover his head while returning to its tomb, to save itself from the embarrassment caused by the lack of regard and respect from the people, even when they recognize him.

4) The poem is rendered in a colloquial style. It is characteristic of the Yeatsian talk, a mode Yeats mastered, whereby he would present the speaker in conversation with a persona. Naturally, therefore, the diction is simple and clear. He uses poetic devices such as personification, smile, and alliteration. The phrase “salt breath out of the sea” is an instance of personification. He uses alliteration when he, for example, sets up a repeated pattern of ‘g’ and ‘s.’ His use of smile in the phrase “like gentle blood” intensifies the poet’s feeling for Hugh Lane.

Self-check Exercise 3

1) Helen of Troy was daughter of the Greek god Zeus, and Leda, wife of Tyndareus, the king of Sparta. The seduction of Leda by Zeus in the form of a swan is the subject of Yeats’s poem “Leda and Swan.” Helen was abducted by Paris, the Prince of Troy, which resulted in the Trojan War fought between the Greek states and Troy.

2) The title gives a unity to the thought of the poem. The poem is a comment on the fallen values of the time. Even as Ireland desperately needs a cultural and political revolution against the colonial occupation of Britain, the middle class is too engrossed in its mechanical routine and mercantile ambitions to worry about the country. Comparing Maud Gonne with Helen, Yeats says though she is equally beautiful and noble, Ireland is not the place she deserved, as it would not be truly inspired as Troy was by Helen. There would be ‘no second Troy.’

3) The poet reprimands the Irish people of his age to be a violent mob, lacking the nobility of mind that Gonne possesses; they lack courage and conviction, and are driven by desires. Therefore, the poet says, Maud Gonne is born with a physical beauty and mental nobility “not natural in this age.”

Self-check Exercise 4

1) The title suggests the theme of the poem, the “Second Coming” of the not Christ to announce the beginning of a Messianic Age, but of an anti-Christ, the rough beast, to herald a new world of violence, primitiveness and irrationalism.

2) The all-round violence and anarchy, the wiping out of innocence by bloodshed, the unrestrained fury of the mob, whereas the silence of the people holding positions, have given the poet enough evidence that the end of the word is soon.
3) In the Christian context, the image of the rough beast, human head with the body of a lion, is a grotesque image. This harbinger of the new age walks slowly towards Bethlehem, while the desert birds of prey hover over his head. These images are used as symbols to suggest the grotesqueness and the violence associated with the new world that is about to begin.

4) For example, Yeats’s use of the ‘falconer’ is full of concrete suggestion. Unlike the traditional metaphor, its meaning is not limited merely to a controlling agent, say God. By mixing the image of flying falcon with the spiraling gyre, Yeats could make the metaphor more concrete as well as compressed with associative meanings. the flight of the falcon, symbolize the anarchy of the world, its breaking apart, its loss of spiritual core, while at the same time announcing the end of the world.
UNIT 22  T.S. ELIOT

Structure

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22.3 Thomas Stearns Eliot
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   22.3.2 T.S. Eliot’s Poetry
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22.1 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

• write about T.S. Eliot’s life and work

• understand T.S. Eliot’s poetry with special reference to two of his poems:
  a) The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock and
  b) Gerontion.

22.2 INTRODUCTION

T.S. Eliot is one of the most important poets of 20th century. Born on 25th September 1888 in the United States, he died in London on 4th January 1965. His journey between the United States and England was not only a physical movement but also represents his journey of ideas in many ways. His studies at Harvard University can be divided in two phases. In the first phase between 1906 and 1910, he studied languages and literatures of continental Europe along with English literature. This introduced T.S. Eliot to classics of European literature and also to the various literary trends and movements of 19th century French and German literature. The experiments and literary evolution produced by these trends and movements influenced the literary creativity of T.S. Eliot. He was greatly influenced by many French symbolists who evolved a ‘new language for
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poetry’. To some extent, it can be said that under this influence T.S.Eliot’s poetry became a poetry of suggestions using evocative and alluding images and symbols.

In the second phase at Harvard (1911 to 1913), he studied philosophy and also did courses of Sanskrit studies. This further increased the canvas of his poetic suggestions and imagery for creating a poetry with various layers of meaning. In this unit we will try to understand the poetry of T.S. Eliot (with the help of two selected poems) while studying his poetic style and processes of creation of meaning. For a better understanding of his poetry, we will first go for a general overview of T.S. Eliot’s life and works. Then we will study one of his early poems entitled ‘Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock’. After this we will study ‘Gerontion’ which was written a few years after the ‘Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock’. We hope we will be able to understand & discover the poetic genius of T.S. Eliot in the next few pages.

22.3 THOMAS STEARNS ELIOT

He was a great poet of the English language. We will first study about his life and work.

22.3.1 Life and Work

As mentioned earlier T.S. Eliot was an American citizen by birth who died as an English citizen. He was a brilliant student in school and won a gold medal for Latin. He studied at a boarding school in St. Louis and then at Harvard till 1910. During his studies at Harvard he was influenced by lectures of Irving Babbit and George Santayana. He also studied Arthur Symon’s book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. This introduced him to the new poetic sensibilities of 19th century Europe. With all these ideas in mind he travelled to Paris and studied for some time at Sorbonne University, Paris in 1910-11. He studied many French poets in France and was so influenced by the French poetic movements that he often wrote French in his poems. Two of his famous poems written in French are – (i) “Lune de Miel” and(ii) “Dans le Restaurant”. In his poetic ideas and imagery T.S. Eliot draws heavily from the two famous French poets Charles Baudelaire and Jules Laforgue. In these two French poems of T.S. Eliot the influences of the new language and poetic imagery can be clearly seen.

T.S. Eliot returned to Harvard in 1911 and pursued courses on philosophy. While studying philosophy, he was introduced to the Upanishads of India. This influence can be clearly seen in “the Waste Land” where he uses the ‘datta, dayadhvam, damyata’ concept borrowed from the *Brhadaranyak Upanisad*. Thus T.S. Eliot had a large canvas on which he drew from original sources in German, French, Italian, Latin, English, Sanskrit and from Greek Classics.

Towards the beginning of the first World War in 1914, T.S. Eliot settled down in London and further studied philosophy in Oxford. By this time he received the intellectual company and patronage of Ezra Pound who recognised his talents and helped him establish as a poet and critic. The poems written before 1912 were already published and Eliot was entering into a different phase of creativity. His earlier poems were published in 1917 in a collection entitled *Prufrock and other Observations*. “The Waste Land” was published in 1922 in the magazine
The Criterion which was being edited by T.S. Eliot himself. In 1925 the Collected Poems of T.S. Eliot was published. He continued editing The Criterion till 1939 which closed down due to the beginning of second World War. During his stay in England he was drawn to the Anglican church and wrote a lot drawing ideas from Christianity. His poems like “Journey of the Magi” “Ash Wednesday” etc. fall in this category. In 1939 he published Idea of a Christian Society which was an essay in prose depicting many of the ideas represented in his poems and plays. He received the Noble Prize for literature in 1948.

Self-check Exercise I

1) Which European literary movements influenced T.S. Eliot the most?
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2) Works written in which languages are sources from where T.S. Eliot draws ideas and inspiration? Which are the works source of T.S. Eliot’s ideas and inspiration and in which languages are they written?
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3) Which poem of T.S.Eliot is influenced by a story in Brhadaranyak Upanisad?
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4) Which magazine/journal was edited by T.S.Eliot and why did he stop that magazine/journal?
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22.3.2 T.S. Eliot’s Poetry

Though T.S. Eliot’s poetry evolved over the years, we find some striking features in his poetic style. We always find an epigraph in the beginning of the poems. These epigraphs can be interpreted variously according to the theme and nature of the poem. Mostly these epigraphs provide a context for the poem which helps us understand the poetic idiom and context of the poem. For example, the epigraph of “The Hollow Men” is “Mistah Kurtz he dead/penny for the Old guy”. In this epigraph there are many historical and literary references along with the poetic idiom Eliot wants to create. Mistah Kurtz is a character of “Heart of Darkness” by Joseph Conrad, and the first line of the epigraph refers to that character. In the second line of the epigraph, Eliot (i) refers to a historical event and also to a (ii) popular tradition in England. This is a line often cried out loudly by children on Guy Fawkes Day which falls on November 5. ‘Old guy’ refers to Fawkes who had conspired to blow up both houses of English Parliament in 1605. This event was known as ‘gunpowder’ plot which had failed. So the second line of the epigraph refers the historical event of 1605 and at the same time uses a popular expression from Guy Fawkes Day celebrations.

Another important feature of Eliot’s poetry is the dramatic nature and portrayal of characters in his poetry. We often find Eliot choosing a character like Prufrock, Sweeney, Gerontion and portraying the character with such idiom and diction that he unravels what lies behind the action and beneath the appearance. Eliot enters into the minds and feelings thus creating various layers of meaning in his poems. For this he alludes to many historical and cultural events and characters. Intertextual allusions are often used to achieve a historical sense and for entering into the realm of feelings. For example, in “Love song of J.Alfred Prufrock”, Eliot makes references to Dante, the Bible and Shakespeare among many others. Similarly, you can see “The Waste Land” making allusions and intertextual references to several sources across cultures.
Just like the Symbolist poets of 19th century Europe, T.S. Eliot uses elements of language and nature as symbols and creates special effects often by juxtaposing the grotesque and the normal.

For example look at these lines from “The Hollow Men”:

“The eyes are not here
There are no eyes here
In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley.
This broken jaw of our lost kingdom.”

In the first two lines we find a babbling and repetition of sounds as the lines begin with the similar sounds of ‘The eyes’ and ‘These are’ and then both the lines convey almost similar ideas in such a way as if someone is babbling. This imitation of sound is a feature of symbolists which we find in T.S. Eliot’s poetry.

Then the image of grotesque is created in expression “The broken Jaw” and juxtaposed along with normal poetic expression.

These were some features of T.S. Eliot’s poetry in general. There are some exclusive features of his writing style also. For example, he writes using words and expressions from various languages and literatures and uses them as if they all naturally belong to the English language.

Self-check Exercise II

1) Fill in the blanks:

i) In the beginning of T.S.Eliot’s poems there is always an ............ taken from some historical or literary sources.

ii) Dramatic nature and character portrayal are two important features of T.S.Eliot’s ...........

iii) T.S. Eliot alludes to many .............. in order to achieve a historical sense and for entering into the realm of feelings.

iv) T.S. Eliot uses .............. as symbols and creates special effects often by juxtaposing the grotesque and the normal.

v) Babbling and repetition of sounds are important features of T.S. Eliot’s poetry which shows the influence of ........

22.4 THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK

This is a poem written by T.S. Eliot early in his life.

22.4.1 Introduction

This is a poem of about 132 lines and an epigraph of 6 lines taken from the “Inferno” section of Divine Comedy written by the great Italian poet Dante. This is also referred only as “Prufrock” and is one of the earliest poems of T.S. Eliot by which his poetic talent was widely recognised. It was first published in 1915 and is often described as a “drama of literary anguish”. The poem was most probably written in 1910 and 1911.
22.4.2 The Text

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

S’io credesse che mia risposta fosse
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.
Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo
Non torno vivo alcun, s’i’odo il vero,
Senza tema d’infamia ti rispondo.

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question…. 10
Oh, do not ask, “What is it?”
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
Rubbing its back upon the window panes; 25
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go 35
Talking of Michelangelo.
And indeed there will be time
To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?”
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—
(They will say: “How his hair is growing thin!”)
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—
(They will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!”)

Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.
For I have known them all already, known them all:
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all—
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare
(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)
Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
And should I then presume?
And how should I begin?

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?...

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
Smoothed by long fingers,
Asleep … tired … or it malingers,
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,  
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,  
I am no prophet – and here’s no great matter;  
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,  
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,  
And in short, I was afraid.  

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,  
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,  
Would it have been worth while,  
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  
To have squeezed the universe into a ball  
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,  
To say: “I am Lazarus, come from the dead,  
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all”-  
If one, settling a pillow by her head,  
Should say: “That is not what I meant at all;  
That is not it, at all.”

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
Would it have been worth while,  
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,  
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor—  
And this, and so much more? -  
It is impossible to say just what I mean!  
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:  
Would it have been worth while

If one, setting a pillow or throwing off a shawl,  
And turning toward the window, should say:  
“That is not it at all,  
That is not what I meant, at all.”

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord, one that will do  
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,  
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,  
Deferential, glad to be of use,  
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;  
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;  
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—-  
Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old…. I grow old…….  
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?  
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.  
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.
I do not think that they will sing to me.
I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

22.4.3 Analysis

The title of the poem has two parts “The love song of” and “Prufrock”. The first part “The love Song of “has apparently come from Rudyard Kipling’s poem entitled “The Love Song of Hardyal”.

“Prufrock” comes from the name of company of furniture “Prufrock-Litton company” which existed in the area where Eliot lived during early years of his life. “J” and “Alfred” in the title are inventions of the poet. With these inputs the full name “J. Alfred Prufrock” appears to be an attempt to mimick his own name which he spelt in his initial years as T. Stearns Eliot. If we understand the title in this way then to some extent the poem would appear a biographical poem in which T.S. Eliot expresses his own feelings about the “love” or more specifically about the “lack of love” in his own life during the years when he was composing this poem. The use of the words “Love song” in the title is appropriate as a refrain, which has rhymes and particular rhythm. There is a refrain in the poem:

“In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo”

Also just like “Love song”, this is a narrative poem in the form of a dramatic monologue. A dramatic monologue is a discourse in which the narrator or the speaker intentionally or unintentionally reveals personal information and feelings. As we have seen earlier, this is a typical feature of T.S. Eliot’s poems.

The epigraph of the poem, originally written by Dante in Italian, can be translated as follows: “If I thought that my reply would be to someone who would ever return to earth, this flame would remain without further movement; but as no one has ever returned alive from this gulf, if what I hear is true, I can answer you with no fear of infamy”. (translation taken from SOUTHAM, B.C., 1965, Fourth Edn. 1981, A students’ guide to the selected Poems of T.S. Eliot, Faber & Falws. London-Bost)

In these lines there is pessimism that the narrator will not be able to come out of his present state and in fact is able to speak only because he feels that he can confide in the listener with no fear of being shamed. And then the poet speaks in the style of a dramatic monologue. The mood of pessimism follows in the ensuing lines of the poem. The first two lines create a lovely atmosphere but the third line destroys it with the grotesque imagery of a “patient etherized upon a table”.

Then the poet goes through the town passing by shabby and unkempt streets and hotels. The streets are as lonely as the evening was lifeless. And this is a long drawn situation which continues like an unending argument presented with
unhealthy intentions. In this hopeless situation, the poet does not even question anything. He simply tries to move ahead. But all that he could see further is the aimless movement of women who talk of someone far away in history though very important with his contributions in painting and architecture. This is the refrain in the poem. This refrain refers directly to the lines by Jules Laforgue whose related French lines can be roughly translated as:

“In the room the women go and come
While talking of the masters of Sienne”
[The original French lines are:
 “Dans la piece les femmes vont et viennent
En parlant des maitres de Sienne”]

Sienne is a place in Italy known for its contribution to art and architecture. It is worth noting here that Michelangelo was also an Italian painter and artist. In the lines from 15 to 22 we again find “yellow fog” and “yellow smoke” created as an image to express the hopelessness in the life around him which is stifled in the din and bustle of an industrialised city. It is worth recalling here that T.S. Eliot spent his childhood in an industrial suburban town of St. Louis. This imagery of ‘yellow fog’ and ‘yellow smoke’ behaving like a timid cat finally sleeping outside the house is very much like the symbolists of French literature and further enhances the pessimistic feelings in the poem. In the next stanza (lines from 22 to 34), Prufrock assures himself that there will be time to sit and talk with his beloved but the possibility of this meeting is further postponed as the hope for this time is in future. This is expressed by the use of ‘will’ in the verses. Also the time is for “indecisions”, “visions” and revisions which all delay the meeting. And when there is time, it will be for “murder and create”. So there is simultaneously pessimism and hope.

In these lines there appear to be two allusions also, ‘There will be time’ alludes to the poem “To his Coy Mistress” by Andrew Marvell (a poet of 17th century) but the situation is completely different. While in Andrew Marvell’s poem the speaker asks his beloved not to be shy, Eliot’s Prufrock delays the meeting with combination of hope and despair.

The other allusion is “works and days” (line 29) which is a poem of Hesiod, a Greek poet of 7th century B.C. Hesiod uses these words in order to emphasise hard work, righteous living and being guarded against moral decay. Eliot also appears to use them with the same purpose but in a gloomy mood with pessimistic feelings.

The refrain comes again and this repetition is suggestive of the dullness and repetitive nature of events in life.

Then again in the next stanza Prufrock becomes unsure of himself as contrasted to the faith in future of the previous stanza. Prufrock is not sure if he may dare to approach a woman and if at all he dares to do so, he is unsure and afraid of the consequences.

In the ensuing three stanzas Prufrock again emphasizes on the dull and boring situation. He says that he knows all of them; they are the same people with the same decor and demeanour. And in this boring and dull situation, should he take any initiatives? Even the time which appears to be passing in terms of evenings,
mornings and afternoons is all measured as one unit in the coffee spoons (which are very small in size). Here T.S. Eliot appears to allude to the philosophy of French thinker Henry Bergson (1859-1941) who proposes that thought time is calculated in series of measurable units, actually our consciousness perceives them in a continuum without any succession of measurable duration. Thus past and present are equally real and the entire life of Prufrock is one continuum not consisted of disjoint time units. His past, present and future are real before him.

Another allusion in line 52 is “dying fall” which refers to Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*.

Shakespeare writes:

“If music be the food of love, play on;
Give me excess of it, that, surfetting,
The appetite may sicken and so die.
That strain again! It had a **dying fall**.
O, it came over my ear like the sweet sound,
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odour!
T.S. Eliot alludes to the above in the following two lines:
“I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.”

The gloomy mood in Shakespeare’s line, “The appetite may sicken, and so die” reverberates in the above two lines of T.S. Eliot.

In the line 70 to 73, there is a description of people who resemble Prufrock in terms of dullness and boredom in life. This is further depicted in lines 74 & 75 as he feels like a “pair of ragged claws” sunken in the sea.

In the lines from 75 to 80, the time passes peacefully and then Prufrock becomes unsure of himself again as he questions “Should I ………. Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis”.

In lines 80 to 85, there is an allusion to John the Baptist by “head brought in upon a platter”. Prufrock imagines that he has lived to a mature age and grown bald and his life remains dull. Then he is dead and that is again of no consequence because he is not a prophet like John the Baptist.

The use of the word “Footman” alludes to death as “Footman” is supposed to be a servant who helps us in the afterlife.

T.S. Eliot continues in the same style depicting the gloominess and dullness in the life of Prufrock whose love song will never be sung as there will hardly be any love in his life. The title of the poem is very satirical in this way and T.S. Eliot continues to describe the life of Prufrock in a style which is characteristically typical to his poetry. We also may draw our attention to the music and babbling in “And how should I presume” (line 61) and “And should I then presume? And how should I begin?” (line 68 & 69). It appears as if the narrator of the dramatic monologue is muttering and babbling to himself. We notice, thus, that in the very first significant poem of his career T.S. Eliot exhibits the stylistic maturity and depth of content which continue to be prominent features of his later poems.
In the stanza lines 87 to 98, the poet questions whether it would be worth interacting with the women of his choice. In the process he again alludes to Marvell’s poem “To his coy Mistress” in the line 92 – “To have squeezed the universe into a ball”. The second allusion is in line 94. The poet mentions Lazarus who according to the story of the Bible, had come back from the dead. There are two Biblical references alluded here. First, from the Gospel of John chapter 11- according to this Lazarus was raised from the dead by Jesus. The other Biblical reference is from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 16. According to this, Lazarus, a leprous beggar, went to the heaven after his death whereas Dives, a rich man, was taken to hell. Dives requested that Lazarus be sent to the earth to tell his brothers about the horror of hell and the consequences of their deeds. The request of Dives was denied. Eliot alludes to the Biblical story and conveys his uncertainties in the situation.

The next stanza (line 99 to 110) conveys the same uncertainties while describing the settings around and the movements of women. Then farther in the next stanza, the poet alludes to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to convey Prufrock’s coyness and uncertainties and indecisiveness. Prufrock is afraid of being considered a ‘Fool’ – here ‘F’ is in capital as the poet means a ‘court jester’ by this word. Prufrock is compared to the character in *Hamlet* named Pollonius who speaks high language. Prufrock, by using similar language, may be considered a joker like the ‘Fool’ of the English royal court.

In the lines 120 to 132, the poet expresses the realization of the character Prufrock that he is growing old and accordingly there will be changes in his life. There is an allusion to Homer’s *Odyssey* in which Odysseus heard the songs of Sirens who are not singing to him. By this allusion again Eliot refers to Prufrock’s situation in which he hears the women and pays attention to them but the women are not talking to him. Towards the end, the poet refers to the satire in the title. The ‘Love Song’ is being sung but not for Prufrock. This meaning is conveyed by alluding to the Sirens (the mythical women who sing to the sailors in the Greek mythology) who are singing but not for Prufrock.

### 22.4.4 Style in the Poem

Throughout the poem Eliot uses the conversational language with variation in the length of verses and a lot of repetitions. There are continuous shifts in the train of thoughts, with the help of allusions and varied expressions of feelings. The metaphors used are often novel and show the influence of symbolists.

### Glossary

1. **Etherized** (in line 3): The old way of putting a patient on anesthesia was called ‘etherization’. ‘Etherized’ means a person who has been made unconscious by this method.
2. **Tedious** (argument) (in line 9): ‘Tedious’ is used for something which is not interesting and continues for long.
3. **Insidious** (intent) (in line 10): It is an adjective which means something which spreads gradually and causes great harm.
4. **Sprinkled streets** (in line 101): refers to a practice of sprinkling the streets so that the dust of the streets remains settled down.
4) Identify one example of grotesque in the poem.

5) What is the main theme of the poem studied above.
22.5 GERONTION

It is an important poem of T.S. Eliot representing his feelings and the contemporary disgust over World War I.

22.5.1 Introduction

Gerontion is a poem by T.S. Eliot written with the background of the first World War. This poem was first published in 1920. This is a dramatic monologue of an elderly man through which Eliot views the first World War in the perspective of the 19th century and other developments before World War-?I in 20th century. The Title ‘Gerontion’ comes from a Greek word which means ‘a little old man’. Like Prufrock in the poem discussed earlier, Gerontion is a character. Through this character, the poet reveals the psychological dilemma of being unable to make efforts towards change for betterment. The last line of the poem aptly sums up this dilemma of the apparent futility of our existence and struggle for existence. This feeling represents the hopelessness of the World War years and their aftermath.

22.5.2 The Text

Thou hast nor youth nor age
But as it were an after dinner sleep
Dreaming of both.

HERE I am, an old man in a day month,
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.
I was neither at the gates
Nor fought in the warm rain
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,
Bitten by flies, fought.
My house is a decayed house,
And the jew squats on the window sill, the owner,
Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,
Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.
The goat coughs at night in the field overhead;
Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds.
The woman keeps the kitchen, makes tea,
Sneezes at evening, poking the peevish gutter.

I an old man,
A dull head among windy spaces.
Signs are taken for wonders. “We would see a sign”:
The word within a word, unable to speak a word,
Swaddled with darkness. In the juvescence of the year
Came Christ the tiger

In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas,
To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk
Among whispers; by Mr. Silvero
With caressing hands, at Limoges
Who walked all night in the next room;
By Hakagawa, bowing among the Titians;
By Madame de Tornquist, in the dark room
Shifting the candles; Fraulein von Kulp
Who turned in the hall, one hand on the door. Vacant shuttles
Weave the wind. I have no ghosts,
An old man in a draughty house
Under a windy knob.
After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now
History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities, Think now
She gives when our attention is distracted
And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions
That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late
What’s not believed in, or if still believed,
In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon
Into weak hands, what’s thought can be dispensed with
Till the refusal propagates a fear. Think
Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices
Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues
Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.
These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree.
The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours. Think at last
We have not reached conclusion, when I
Stiffen in a rented house. Think at last
I have not made this show purposelessly
And it is not by any concitation
Of the backward devils
I would meet you upon this honestly.
I that was near your heart was removed therefrom
To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.
I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it
Since what is kept must be adulterated?
I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:
How should I use it for your closer contact?
These with a thousand small deliberations
Protract the profit of their chilled delirium,
Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled,
With pungent sauces, multiply variety
In a wilderness of mirrors. What will the spider do,
Suspend its operations, will the weevil
Delay? De Bailhache, Fresca, Mr. Cammel, whirled
Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear
In fractured atoms. Gull against the wind, in the windy straits
Of Belle Isle, or running on the Horn,
White feathers in the snow, The Gulf claims,
And an old man driven by the Trades
To a sleepy corner.
Tenants of the house,
Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season.
22.5.3 Analysis

Typical to T.S. Eliot’s style the poem begins with an epigraph taken from Shakespeare’s play *Measure for Measure*, Act III, Scene I:

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Thou hast no youth nor age
But as it were an after dinner sleep
Dreaming of both”.
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The Duke speaks these lines to Claudio who is a young man sentenced to death. The Duke advises Claudio not to value life highly because life is only conflict, insecurity and cowardice. Eliot uses these lines to describe the feelings of disgust due to the World War. Gerontion exists in a civilisation which is bereft of all human values and is constituted only by conflict and valueless rationalism. The world around Gerontion has no sense of community and is spiritually dry. And death is only a sleep after dinner which will rejuvenate us.

The first two lines of the poem depict the stage of Gerontion. These lines are supposed to have been taken from A.C. Benson’s biography of Edward Fitzgerald. The third line refers to ‘hot gates’ which is a literal translation of the name of a place in ancient Greece-Thermopylae. This place was a strategically important place in ancient Greece which was the scene of many battles. This is a reference to the World War again and till line six, the warlike situation has been described.

The disgust over the contemporary situation in Europe continues in the following lines as the poet talks of the “decayed house” and talks of the important towns of Belgium and England. Brussels and Antwerp are two important towns which had trade relation with London. ‘Estaminet’ is a French word for café – used in English by soldiers who came back from France and Belgium during the first World War.

The poet describes the life during the War years and expresses his disgust again through words like ‘peevish gutter’ (lines 11 to 15). ‘Gutter’ is a splattering fire-this imagery evokes the situation of war.

In the lines 17-20 there is a reference to the Bible. In *Matthew XII*, 38, Pharisses cry to Jesus Christ, “Master, we would see a sign from thee” and Jesus Christ replies, “An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign”. The poet says that only in ‘the present evil situation, “Signs are taken for wonders”. Here ‘signs’ means ‘miracles’ as found in the Biblical story and Eliot uses the word ‘wonders’ with the same meaning. He wishes in these lines that religious humane values prevailed in society. Compare the lines 18 & 19 with the following text from the Bible: “And this shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the Baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger…..”

The use of the ‘word’ in the line 18 is also in reference to the Biblical use of ‘word’ which means ‘logos’. This is a logocentric world and yet there is no ‘word’ to represent God. The Bible says: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God”.

In the lines 21-25, the poet expresses the degradation of human values in society. ‘Depraved’ means corrupted. ‘May’ represents the resurgence of life as happens after the winter. The ‘dogwood’ and ‘chestnut’ are flowers which convey the idea
of sensuality. ‘Judas’ is a name of plant which has the same name as the Biblical character Judas who is known for ‘treachery’. So the expression ‘flowering Judas’ symbolises the increased treacherous situation in society. Thus the line 21 expresses that in the civilisation created as a consequence of Renaissance (represented by ‘May’), there is only corruption and treachery. Here the idea of ‘Renaissance’ is evoked in order to express the disgust for the Renaissance and Modernist ideas which resulted in the World War.

In the lines 22 and 22, we have to first take the following:

‘To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk
Among whispers;’

The words which follow in the 22nd line are ‘by Mr. Silvero’. These three words will have to be read with the next line till the end of line 25 which ends with a semi-colon.

Line 22 along with half of line 22 alludes to the Christian ceremony of Eucharist in which the people at the ceremony eat pieces of bread which symbolise Christ’s body and drink wine which symbolises Christ’s blood. Thus people are supposed to draw nourishment from Christ. In the context of the poem, people in contemporary society are taking nourishment from the corruption and treachery in society.

Mr. Silvero is an imagined man from the surroundings who gets nourishment from vulgarity and treachery in society. Even if Mr. Silvero visits a place like Limoges, a French town known for its porcelain ware, enamels on copper and oak barrels for the production of cognac, he fails to appreciate the beauty and with his ‘caressing hands’ only feels the sensuality of the objects around.

In the line 26, there is another imagined foreign figure named Hakagawa who is amidst the Titians. Here the word ‘Titians’ refers to an Italian painter. Titian is a famous Italian painter who is known for his ‘idealised portraits’ of beautiful women. Thus Titian symbolises the portrayal of sensual beauty and Hakagawa is among the likes of Titian (the plural form of ‘Titians’ would symbolise the ‘likes of Titian’). Hakagawa is among those who portray beauty but Hakagawa seems only to bow to them thus socialising with them without any appreciation for the beauty and its portrayal.

Madame de Tornquist is another imagined character in the line 26. She is only shifting candles in the dark room thus not getting anything from the ‘illumination’ of the candle light nor getting involved in a churchlike religious surrounding where one lights and places the candles for receiving the Grace (lines 26-27). In the line 27, Fraulein von Kulp is another imagined female character with a Germanic name who rejects faith. ‘Who turned in the hall’ in the line 22 represents turning away from the faith of religion. Further, ‘vacant shuttles weave the wind’ means that nothing productive is happening and there is no substance in anything that is happening around.

In line 30 the words ‘I have no ghosts’ signify the disbelief in everything that is supernatural. It symbolises the establishment of rationalism with no space for religious faith and values. But this situation leaves Gerontion in a ‘house’ with no protection as the poet describes in the lines 31-32. ‘Draught’ means here ‘a gust of wind’ and the ‘draughty house’ is the one that is exposed to the ‘gust of wind’.
And even the knob of the door is ‘windy’, that means, the door also is exposed and does not stop the rushing wind.

In the lines from 21 to 31, four characters are introduced Mr. Silvero appears to be a man from Portuguese or Spanish or Italian descent. Hakagawa may be a man or a woman from Japanese origin- certainly a foreigner. Madame de Tornquist appears to be a woman of French origin according to the name. And Fraulien Von Kulp is a woman from Germanic origins. All these characters of foreign origin represent an isolated identity and appear to be inheritors of desolation. All these characters are stuck in such a social and historical situation in which they have nothing to communicate and they seem to be vulnerable like Gerontion who is living in a house which has no protection from the winds. These four characters from various lands appear to symbolise the isolation and desolation in the American land where people from various origins live. They have lost their faith and tradition. And they have no protection from values and tradition in a society which is rational but so bereft of values that the entire rationalism resulted in the World War. And then in the line 33 the poet questions the rationalism and all the knowledge gained in the process by saying, “After such knowledge what forgiveness?”. And with all this rationalist knowledge, man has turned away from God and so cannot expect any mercy. And the poet mocks at the knowledge gained from history as history is nothing but a record of all that guides our vanities. The poet expresses these ideas in the lines 33 to 36. Then in the line 36 the poet again starts expressing his disbelief in the knowledge given to us by history. Finally history leaves us in a confused state starving for solutions to our problems. The word ‘she’ in the line 38 stands for history. This disgust for the rationalist knowledge gained through historical processes and their study continues all through till line 46. In the line 47, the poet alludes to the tree from which Adam and Eve ate an apple by the words ‘the wrath bearing tree’. As a consequence of eating the apple, Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise. So the attempt to get knowledge is similar to that attempt to eat fruit from that tree. Knowledge results in tears, wars and suffering.

In the line 48, the poet hopes that ‘Christ the tiger’ will come and devour us all, as all of us are sinners. Gerontion further says in the lines 49 to 54 that he has not yet completed his understanding of the situation while living in the ‘rented accommodation’ owned by the Jew. Earlier in line 8, the poet has informed about it through the words, “And the Jew squats on the window sill, the owner …………” And the poet, through Gerontion, continues to question the contemporary knowledge and historical processes through which we have got this knowledge which has led to the decay of faith and loss of fear to God. This feeling continues till the line 59 and then in the line 60, the poet expresses his uncertainty over the use of all this knowledge to establish faith and the order of Christ. In the lines 61 to 66 and till the first word of the line 67, the poet, through various images, expresses that there appears to be no way out of this disgusting situation. The pessimism seems to have engulfed us world wide- and that is the pessimism which was a consequence of the World War. The proper names used in the line 67 represent the world - almost in the same way as happened earlier in the poem between the lines 21 to 30. And the same pessimistic feeling continues from lines 67 till 73 as the poet refers to various geographical places which contributed a lot in world history since the times of the Great Discoveries by the Europeans. But finally Gerontion, as an old man representing faith and human values, is driven to a corner and lies there in a sleepy sombre state. In the line
74, Gerontion is put along with all the tenants of the ‘house’ i.e. the world. And in the last line, the poet, through Gerontion expresses his pessimism as the ‘thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season’.

### 22.5.4 Style and Theme

Characteristic to his style, Eliot begins with an epigraph and continues in free verse which has rhythm. He keeps alluding to various thoughts and writings that appeared earlier in his writings. In Gerontion, we can easily identify all the characteristics of Eliot’s poetic style as we have studied earlier in this unit.

The central theme of the poem is the pessimism arising out of the World War which happened as a consequence of all the knowledge man acquired since the Renaissance period. In the context the poet desires that the humane religious faith and values which have been lost in historical process of acquiring material wealth and mundane knowledge be established again.

### Glossary

1. **hot gates**: symbolises the Greek place Thermopylae. The name of this city literally means ‘hot gates’. Many wars were fought in this place.
2. **cutlass**: a small sword
3. **spawned**: conceived and born
4. **estaminet**: a word of French language meaning a café
5. **stonecrop**: a moss-like plant (supposed to evoke disgust)
6. **Merds**: a French word which means ‘human or animal excreta’
7. **Gutter**: Spluttering fire
8. **Depraved**: Morally unacceptable; Evil
9. **Dogwood**: Name of a flower
10. **Chestnut**: Name of a flower (also a tree known for its tasty nuts)
11. **Judas**: Name of a flower and also a character in the Bible
12. **Draughty**: ‘Draught’ is a gust of wind. ‘Draughty’ is the adjective from this word.
13. **Weevil**: An insect which damages the crops
14. **Bear**: Here it means a constellation of stars also known as The Great Bear
15. **gull**: Name of a sea-bird
16. **Belle Isle**: Name of an island in North Atlantic
17. **Horn**: refers to Cape Horn or Horn of Africa.
18. **Gulf**: A system of currents in the North Atlantic
19. **Trades**: Trade winds
Self-check Exercise IV

1) Identify some important stylistic features of T.S.Eliot’s poetry by giving examples from “Gerontion”.

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2) Identify 5 references from the poem studied above taken from various sources in history and literature.

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3) Study the significance of the title of the poem above.

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4) Identify one example of babbling in the poem.

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5) What is the central theme of the poem studied above.

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22.6  LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have read about an important poet in the English language who was born in the U.S. and died in England. He is equally an American and English poet who evolved his own poetic style while amalgamating stylistic features, thoughts and imagery from various sources in French, German, English, Indian and Greek among many others.

We studied two of his poems entitled “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “Gerontion” and have identified the stylistic and the thematic characteristics of Eliot’s poetry in these two poems. This has helped us understand the work and contribution of T.S. Eliot in the English literature with concrete references and examples. We should be now able to study and appreciate Eliot’s poetry in general in terms of theme and style very specific to Eliot’s poetic canvass.

22.7  ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise 1

1) Symbolism
2) German, French, Italian, Latin, English, Sanskrit and from Greek Classics.
3) The Waste Land
4) The Criterion. This journal was closed down in 1939 by T.S.Eliot himself due to the problems created by the Second World War.
5) Ezra Pound
6) Idea of a Christian Society

Self-check Exercise 2

1) Epigraph
2) Poetry
3) Historical and cultural events and characters
4) Elements of language and nature
5) French Symbolists

Self-check Exercise 3

(Kindly note that the answers provided here are merely points for the sake of better comprehension. You can elaborate each point and add upon them on the basis of the Analysis of the poem and your own reading of the poem. Discuss your points during the Counselling sessions.):

1) Identify the important stylistic features of T.S.Eliot’s poetry by giving examples from “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”.

Answer: Characteristic to the style of T.S.Eliot, in this poem there is:
   i) an Epigraph taken from Dante’s Divine Comedy.
   ii) Allusions from various historical and literary sources.
   iii) The use of metaphors and imagery which help explain the feelings of the character of Prufrock.
iv) Selection of a character, Prufrock, for describing the feelings of the poet. This is the dramatic style of narration in the poetry of T.S. Eliot.

v) A sequence of events in the narration but there is no time sequence in the narration of events.

vi) Use of irony in the poem for depicting the pessimism of the theme.

vii) Uncertainty of action amidst the mood of hope and despair.

2) Identify 5 references from the poem studied above taken from various sources in history and literature. We can identify the following five references in the poem:

i) The epigraph is from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

ii) The refrain is taken from Jule Laforgue.

iii) Michelangelo is an important painter from Italy who is mentioned in the poem. This is a reference from history.

iv) “There will be time” (between lines 24 to 30) alludes to Andrew Marvell’s poem “To His Coy Mistress”.

v) “Dying fall” in line 52 alludes to Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*.

3) In which year was the poem above published? Do you think it is important information for understanding the poem above.

The poem entitled “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” was first published in a *Poetry* magazine in 1915 and then later in a collection of his poems *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917.

This date is important as by this we know this poem was written in the formative years of the poet and thus describes his feelings during his growing years. This helps us understand the feelings and imagery in the poem. Even the word “Prufrock” in the title represents a company in the surroundings of the poet. So, the date of the poem helps us locate the poem in specific contexts thus helping us understand the feelings in the poem.

4) Identify one example of grotesque in the poem.

The third line ‘like a patient etherized upon the table’ for an ‘evening spread out against the sky’ is an example of the grotesque imagery which describes the disgust in the poem.

5) What is the main theme of the poem studied above.

The main themes of the poem are as follows:

i) Feeling of loneliness and alienation from the surroundings

ii) Indecision, uncertainty in the mind of Prufrock and disgust

iii) Pessimism (Prufrock can only see the negative aspect of himself as well of others around him)

Self-check Exercise 4

(Kindly note that the answers provided here are merely points for the sake of better comprehension. You can elaborate each point and add upon them on the basis of the Analysis and your own reading of the poem. Discuss your points during the Counselling sessions.) :
1) Identify some important stylistic features of T.S. Eliot’s poetry by giving examples from “Gerontion”.

**Answer:** We can identify:

i) Epigraph of Gerontion. We have seen that this type of epigraph which has been taken from Shakespeare’s play *Measure for Measure* is typical in T.S. Eliot’s style.

ii) Use of French words like ‘estaminet’ and ‘merds’. T.S. Eliot often uses words from foreign origin, especially French, in his poems. There are many names of foreign origin in the poem.

iii) Lots of references from historical sources, though these references have been used often in an obscure way. As for example, ‘hot gates’ refers to Thermopylae. [There are many other references of this type as explained while analysing this poem. Kindly collect them here and present them in a systematic manner.] There are many references from texts like the Bible. This is also very typical of T.S. Eliot’s style as he alludes to the historical and literary sources to convey his ideas and feelings.

iv) The blank verse which is taken from the earlier writings of European and English poets. He often breaks the flow of ideas in the line by putting semi-colons. For example, in the line 28, we can see that the semi-colon breaks the verse in the line. [Find out similar other examples in the text – in lines 41, 43, 44, 45 and many others]. Discuss this technique during your counselling sessions.

v) The flow of language through the obscure imageries and intertextual imagery in a narrative to describe the feelings of Gerontion in the poem.

2) Identify 5 references from the poem studied above taken from various sources in history and literature. Collect information on the following references and systematically present them:

i) Hot gates

ii) Estaminet of Antwerp

iii) ‘We would see a sign’

iv) Judas

v) Wrath-bearing tree

[There are many such references. Study them systematically.]

3) Study the significance of the title of the above poem.

The title ‘Gerontion’ is a Greek word which literally means ‘a little old man’. The title signifies the main theme of the poem. The poem describes the disgust in Europe after World War I through the eyes of an old man who symbolises the knowledge acquired through centuries since the Renaissance.

4) Identify one example of babbling in the poem.

Look at this line (line no. 40): ‘What’s not believed in, or if still believed’. There is an expression of uncertainty and confusion in this line. This is an example of the kind of ‘babbling’ which is typical in T.S. Eliot’s style.
5) What is the central theme of the poem studied above?

The central theme of the poem is the description of the pessimism resulting from the situation created by the first World War. The entire story of scientific and rationalist growth since the Renaissance period in Europe has resulted in this valueless society which has resulted in the inhuman World War. The poet expresses his feelings of disgust, pessimism and cynicism through the narrative of Gerontion in the poem. [You can find many examples in the poem to elaborate these ideas. Elaborate these ideas by citing appropriate examples from the text of ‘Gerontion’. Discuss them during your Counselling sessions with your peers.]
UNIT 23  PHILIP LARKIN

Structure

23.0  Objectives
23.1  Introduction
23.2  Philip Larkin
   23.2.1  The Movement
23.3  Church Going (1954) (p.1955)
   23.3.1  Introduction
   23.3.2  The Text
   23.3.3  Analysis of the Poem
23.4  The Whitsun Weddings (1964) (p.1967)
   23.4.1  Introduction
   23.4.2  The Text
   23.4.3  A Discussion
23.5  Let Us Sum Up
23.6  Answers to Self-Check Exercises

23.0  OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

• Talk about Philip Larkin the poet, his life and work.
• Situate Larkin, the poet, within the poetic group called Movement.
• Appreciate Larkin’s poem ‘Church Going’
• Analyze the thematic as well as technical aspects of ‘Whitsun Weddings’

23.1  INTRODUCTION

In this unit you will be introduced to Philip Larkin, one of the major British poets of the post war era. Larkin was one of the most prominent poets of a group called the Movement. In the previous units you were introduced to Modernism and the Modernist poets like T.S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats and W. H. Auden. You have also tasted the complex, obscure, ironic and highly allusive poetry that is intellectually stimulating, which is the hallmark of modernism.

In this unit we will see that the poets who emerged during the 1950s deliberately broke away from the experimental poetry of this tradition, and tried to resurrect a poetry that had traditional cadences and formal features of native British poetry. Instead of the cosmopolitan concerns and metaphysical philosophies which governed the writers of the early 20th century, the poets of the fifties and sixties brought in more parochial issues and themes and accessible meaning of everyday experience of middle class England into their poetry.

We will introduce you to the group called the Movement which determined the aesthetics as well as the bend of thematic content of British poetry in the 50s and
The first poem ‘Church Going’ is a monologue written in 1954 which refers to the erosion of the church as an institution. Written in an unsentimental, anti-romantic tone, the poem reveals the agnostic bend of Larkin’s mind. ‘Whitsun Weddings’, written in 1964, is the second poem chosen for intensive study. It describes a train journey undertaken by the poet, during which he comes across boisterous marriage parties whom he observes in a detached and somewhat disdainful manner, but becoming rather meditative towards the end.

It would help you to read through the unit section by section. Do the exercises as you finish reading. After finishing a major chunk, give yourself a break, before you tackle the next part.

23.2 PHILIP LARKIN

[b. 9 August 1922 Coventry, Warwickshire - d. 2 December 1985 Hull, Humberside, England]

Philip Larkin (1922-85) was the most eminent writer of post-war Britain, whose capabilities ranged into the spheres of poetry, novel and criticism. His influence was so strong that he was referred to as “England’s other Poet Laureate”, a position which he had turned down when it was offered to him at the demise of John Betjeman, who was then, the poet laureate. Critic Alan Brownjohn notes in his book Philip Larkin that he produced “the most technically brilliant and resonantly beautiful, profoundly disturbing yet appealing and approachable, body of verse” and was considered an “artist of the first rank” by reviewer John Press.

Philip Larkin was born in Coventry into a middle class family, as the younger of two children. His father, Sydney Larkin, was a lover of literature and a Nazi sympathizer, while his mother Eva Emily Day, to whom he was ‘claustrophobically attached’, was a nervous woman dominated by her husband. His sister Catherine, known as Kitty, was 10 years older than he was. His father, who was the Coventry City Treasurer, instilled a love for books and poems in him from an early age, by introducing poets like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence and W.B. Yeats to him. Poor eyesight and stuttering plagued Larkin as a youth; he retreated into solitude, read widely, and began to write poetry as a nightly routine. He was educated at home till the age of eight – these early days
are described as ‘unspent’ and ‘boring’ – and then joined King Henry VIII Junior School at Coventry, where he made long standing friendships. His love for jazz music was fostered by his parents and this grooming helped him at a later age to contribute extensively to The Daily Telegraph as its jazz critic, which were complied in the book All That Jazz: A Record Diary 1961–71 (1985).

After his School Certificate Examination from King Henry VIII Senior School, he joined St. John’s College, Oxford to read English and at the completion of the course was awarded a First Class Honours Degree. During the colourful period at Oxford, a vital stage in his personal and literary development, Larkin commenced his lifelong friendship with Kingsley Amis and John Wain, other important members of the Movement, a relationship that proved intensely symbiotic to them.

Larkin took up the position of librarian in the small Shropshire town of Wellington after his graduation, where he wrote his two novels, Jill (1946) and A Girl in Winter (1947) and published his first volume of poetry, The North Ship (1945). As a qualified librarian, he worked in several libraries. This became his wage-earning career for the rest of his life, taking him to university libraries in Leicester, Belfast and finally Hull, where he stayed on for thirty years, creating settings for his poetic meditations. In the post-war years, the University of Hull underwent significant expansion and a new university library named Brynmor Jones Library was established, of which Larkin was the chief librarian. He was a significant figure in post-war British librarianship, making major structural emendations, computerizing the library stock and automating the circulation system.

Though Larkin had first written novels, he switched over to poetry as the muse of novel failed him later. Larkin’s first poetic influences were modernists like T. S. Eliot and W.H. Auden, but he shed these off as he evolved a more individual tone. Larkin’s first collection of poetry The North Ship shows remarkable influence of W.B. Yeats, but does not yet present the voice for which he later became famous.

His next collection, The Less Deceived (1955), containing poems like ‘Church Going’ and ‘Toads’, came a decade later, and bears the stamp of his mature genius: that of the detached, sometimes mournful, sometimes tender observer of “ordinary people doing ordinary things”. Coinciding with this development of a mature poetic identity was his increasing fascination for the poetry of Thomas Hardy. When Larkin was invited to edit the 1973 volume of The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse, he used to opportunity to reevaluate and reinstate Hardy as a major contributor to English Poetry. Hardy with his provincial and pessimistic outlook and traditional style suited Larkin better than his earlier contemporaries had. He disparaged poems that relied on shared classical and literary allusions. In a statement he made to D. J. Enright, Larkin stated that he had “no belief in ‘tradition’ or a common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets”.

Larkin’s poetry has been characterized as combining “an ordinary, colloquial style, clarity, a quiet, reflective tone, ironic understatement and a direct engagement with commonplace experiences”. His publisher and long time friend Jean Hartley summed his style up as a “piquant mixture of lyricism and
discontent”. According to the critic Terence Hawkes, Larkin’s poetry revolves around two losses: the Loss of Modernism and the Loss of England. The latter is best observed in the famous poem “Going Going”:

“And that will be England gone,
The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,
The guildhalls, the carved choirs.
There’ll be books; it will linger on
In galleries; but all that remains
For us will be concrete and tyres.”

The collection *The Whitsun Weddings*, published in 1964, contains his very popular poems like ‘An Arundel Tomb’, ‘Here’ and the titular poem, which cemented his reputation as one of Britain’s most eminent living poets. He was awarded a Fellowship of Royal Society of Literature, soon after. In the years that followed, he wrote some of his major poems like the ‘Aubade’, which were collected and published in the volume *High Windows* (1974). The poems had turned more stark, gloomy and fatalistic. The dwindling of the mighty empire of Britain into a third rate power, his preoccupation with death, are all mirrored in these.

Larkin remained a bachelor throughout his life, despite longstanding relationships with several women, most of them inspiring enough for him to write poetry. He also preferred to keep a low profile, turning down most of the titles and honours including that of OBE (Order of the British Empire) and the Poet Laureateship that came his way. Nevertheless he later accepted the titles of CBE (*Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire*) and CE (*Companion of Honour*) and FRSL (*Fellow of Royal Society of Literature*). The public persona of Philip Larkin is that of a dour, non-nonsense Englishman, reserved and private, turning down fame, and viewing the world with gloomy and critical spectacles.

In 1985, at the age of 63, Larkin was diagnosed with oesophageal cancer, and died after hospitalization. He was buried at the Cottingham Municipal Cemetery near Hull.

Let us now take a look at the movement poetry of which Larkin was the leading spirit.

*The Movement* was a term coined in 1954 by Jay D. Scott, literary editor of *The Spectator*, to describe a group of writers essentially English in character. They included Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, D.J. Enright, John Wain, Elizabeth Jennings, Ted Hughes, Thom Gunn, and Robert Conquest. They were a group of like-minded English poets, loosely associated together in the mid-1950s. Movement poetry was a journey back to the purity of English verse, which manifested a preference for provincial values and importance to ordinary objects and experiences. Two anthologies, *Poets of the 1950s* (1955) edited by D.J. Enright and *New Lines* (1956) by Robert Conquest, are considered to be the polemic volumes that established the reputation of the group. Of the poets, Philip Larkin emerged as the most popular. His poetry did a good deal to re-engage poetry with a more popular audience. The Movement poets were considered anti-romantic, but we find many romantic elements in Larkin and Hughes. We may
call *The Movement*, the revival of the importance of form. To these poets, good
poetry means simple, sensuous content, traditional, conventional and dignified
form. Once the Movement was accepted into the mainstream, the group became
less exclusive. Many of the group were academics, and their critical writings
helped shape the course of British literature for the next two decades.

Now that you have been introduced to the life and times of Philip Larkin, try
doing these exercises. After doing them, you may check the answers with the
Answer Key given at the back of the unit.

**Self-check Exercise I**

1) Which are the four anthologies of poems written by Philip Larkin?

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2) Where did Larkin spend the greater part of his life as librarian?

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3) Which poet exerted the biggest singular influence on Larkin?

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4) Which book contains the articles written by Larkin on jazz music?

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5) Which anthology by Robert Conquest helped launch the Movement?

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23.3 CHURCH GOING (1954)

Outside of a Church  Interior of the church with pews

23.3.1 Introduction

‘Church Going’ is a poem from the anthology, *The Less Deceived*. The title of the anthology inversely mirrors the remark made by Ophelia in the play *Hamlet* by Shakespeare: “I was the more deceived”. Larkin chose this title to impress upon the reader that one should be less deceived by the reality of life. ‘Church Going’ is one of the most read and most anthologized poems by Larkin, in which he tries to make us less deceived regarding the present state of the church and its influence in the lives of the people.

In India, we may never envisage a religious institution going derelict. But in the western world, after the two World Wars, and after the spread of existentialist philosophies, there was a widespread prevalence of atheistic and agnostic attitudes and a rapid decline of belief in any religion. As a result, the attendance in churches dwindled sharply. Many of the churches remained empty shells of their former glory. ‘Church Going’ is a monologue which discusses the futility as well as utility of going to the church.

The great American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson has remarked in his essay, ‘Self Reliance’: “I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching.” The beginning of the poem makes us sharply recall these words as the poet enters the old church which is silent and vacant. The poet ponders about the future of churches and wonders about the reason for people still gravitating to the church. The poem refers both to the erosion of the Church as an institution and to the perpetuation of some kind of ritual observance.

Now let us read the poem. You will see that the nine-lined poem, containing seven stanzas, is rhythmic, as Larkin is giving due importance to form. The poet uses the traditional iambic pentameter lines, where unstressed and stressed syllables alternate: e.g.: “*For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff*” (the stressed syllables are highlighted). It also rhymes *ababcadd*. Read the poem once and then read it yet again with the help of the glossary given after the poem. It will be also good to read the poem aloud and feel the cadence of the lines.
Once I am sure there’s nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence.

Move forward, run my hand around the font.
From where I stand, the roof looks almost new -
Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know: I don’t.
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce
‘Here endeth’ much more loudly than I’d meant.
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always end much at a loss like this,
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
When churches will fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show,
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come
To make their children touch a particular stone;
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some
Advised night see walking a dead one?
Power of some sort will go on
In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;
But superstition, like belief, must die,
And what remains when disbelief has gone?
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

A shape less recognisable each week,
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who
Will be the last, the very last, to seek
This place for what it was; one of the crew
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
Or will he be my representative,
Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt
So long and equably what since is found
Only in separation - marriage, and birth,
And death, and thoughts of these - for which was built
This special shell? For, though I’ve no idea
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

Glossary

“Another church” : A statement emanating from boredom little books: books of verses or scriptural readings kept in the pews brass: may be church artifacts like the chalice, pyx, candelabra and so on; can also be monumental brass found in English churches, used for sepulchral memorial

Organ : Also called pipe organ is a musical instrument used in churches (see picture)

musty : stale and dank smell

cycle-clips : These are worn around pants to keep them from catching in a bicycle chain. (see picture)

font : stone basin containing holy water to baptize people. (see picture)

lectern : decorated podium or stand used by the priest to place the bible and deliver the sermon (see picture)

peruse : read carefully

hectoring : talk in a bullying way

large-scale : verses printed in large sizes

here endeth : the last lines which usually signify the ending of the sermon or the mass. Here it may ironically refer to the ending of the church.

snigger : laugh in a half-suppressed, scornful way

Irish six pence : a small coin of Ireland; here it is a useless donation because it is foreign currency as well as small change (see picture)

parchment : writing material made of animal skin (see picture)
plate: metal plate made of precious metal, which is used to pass to collect donation in the church. Also called Collection Plate (see picture)

pyx: a small round container used in the Catholic and Anglican Churches to carry the consecrated host. (see picture)

Let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep: Church falling to disuse and ruin that it leaks when it rains and becomes a shelter to wandering sheep. Irony lies in the fact that believers are considered to be the sheep and the priest, the shepherd.

dubious women: an ambiguous expression. 1. May refer to women who are doubtful of church and its benefits and yet are lured by a possibility of cure. 2. May refer to women of questionable character

simples: medicinal herbs collected to cure an ailment

walking a dead one: seeing a ghost haunting the place

brambles: weeds; prickly scrambling shrub of the rose family, especially a blackberry (see picture)

Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky: Notice the manner in which Larkin starts from the ground and moves skywards.

taps and jots: reference to the crew who opens the cask of wine and writes down the mount of wine sold

rood-lofts: a gallery on top of the rood screen of a church. Rood is a crucifix, especially over the entrance. (see picture)

ruin-bibber: one who loves or is addicted to ruins [a bibber is a one who is addicted to drinks]

randy: excited, [often sexually]; here, excited to possess antiques

Christmas addict: one who loves Christmas celebrations
counting on a whiff . . . : counting on a small amount of joy obtainable through Christmas celebrations with gowns, bands, organ pipes and myrrh

myrrh : aromatic resin used as incense in church (see picture)
silt : fine sand or clay deposited as sediment
scrub : a growth of stunted vegetation
accoutred : adorned, decorated
frowsty : warm, stuffy, close
blent : blended (archaic)

23.3.3 Analysis of the Poem

‘Church Going’ is a poem in which the speaker analyses the raison d’être (the reason for the existence) of the church. He wants to examine the futility and the utility of churches. The discussion is half-mocking and half-serious. The speaker scoffs at the church and its equipment; and he scoffs at church-going, though at the end of the poem he finds that the churches, or at least some of them, would continue to render some service to the people even after they have ceased to be places of worship. According to the speaker, a time is coming when people would stop going to churches altogether, because they would have lost their faith in God and in divine worship. Then a time is also coming when people’s disbelief in God and their superstitions would come to an end too. Eventually, however, some people might still visit the decayed and disused church buildings on account of some inner compulsion or to derive some wisdom from the sight of the many graves in the churchyard.

At the outset, the speaker, the persona of the poet, enters the vacant church after first ensuring that it is unoccupied. He is a casual wayfarer, who is drawn to the silent building on one of his various cycling trips. He closes the door with a thud, which gesture speaks of his brashness and irreverence. The words which are
uttered next, “Another church, matting, seats and stone, / And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut / For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff / Up at the holy end . . .” sound like an inventory of church artifacts and are dipped in impiety and callous disregard. The holy scriptures become ‘little books’ and the glorious candelabra, chalice and other articles used in the tabernacle during the holy mass become ‘brass and stuff’. The atmosphere is permeated with mustiness which is a result of its dereliction. The flippant observation about silence “brewed God knows how long” continues in the same vein of irreverence.

Unfamiliar with the ways of the church, he makes an allowance to the hallowed ground by removing the bicycle clips in ‘awkward reverence’.

Then comes the gingery fiddling with things. He runs his hand around the font, inspects the roof and pronounces that it looks new or restored; he mounts the pulpit and peruses a few overawing verses printed in large-scale font, and then mimicking a priest, pronounces ‘here endeth’ with greater vehemence than he intended. The sounds echo his sniggering. On the way back he signs the register and donates a useless Irish sixpence, and thinks that the place was not worth stopping for.

Then comes the admission that inspite of this disregard for churches, he often stops to look at one. He wonders what would be done, when churches fall into disuse. Whether they would be turned into museums, with all their precious articles like parchment, plate and pyx displayed in locked cases, or would they fall into ruin, letting the place vacant for rain and sheep. He asks whether we would avoid them as unlucky places.

He wonders whether women, not sure about the sanctity of the church, would come with their children to pray at the grave of a dear departed soul or pick herbs to cure cancer from the churchyard. Would they see the church being haunted by ghosts on special nights? Power of this sort would go on in games and riddles, creating stories about the church. But ultimately, like belief, superstition must also die. And when both belief and superstition die, nothing will remain but a tottering edifice, with grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress and sky.

In this stanza the narrator is isolated and meditative, and appears to be less deceived by religion. The church becomes more and more unrecognizable each week as the trees and plants overtake the structure. The building’s original purpose and the purpose for visiting it has become more and more obscure as well. Larkin wonders how many will come seeking the church for the purpose it was erected. Some will come to tap and jot and find out the condition of the rood-loft under which the sacred space in the church rests. Or they may be visited by a person with a love for antiques and ruins; or a person addicted to Christmas festivities, who loves the song, spectacle and smell. Or will he be a representative of the poet, who despite being bored and uninformed, comes back again and yet again through the suburban woods to this cross of ground – the church, because it had held unspilt and sanctified, for so long and equably, those relationships – marriage, birth and death – which are now found only in separation. Church which is now an empty shell was originally built for the rites which sanctified these life processes. He does not know what this barn is worth, but it nevertheless pleases him to stand in silence there.

He considers the church a serious house on this serious earth. All human compulsions meet in the blended air of the church, which are recognised and
The poem starts as an agnostic’s or even an atheist’s take on church. But the end shows some sort of change which leaves him ambivalent regarding the spiritual significance of the church. The title itself retains the ambiguity and can be interpreted in several ways: the act of going to church, the customs that keep the church alive, visiting the church as one would a theatre, and the disappearance of the church. The pronouncing of “here endeth” in the poem underscores the irony. It may be that in the narrator’s opinion, religion is on a decline; so when he says “here endeth” he is not only talking about his sermon ending, he is also talking about religion ending; he may be also hinting that he will be the last person to recite those words in that church. Certain critics have seen Church Going presenting the binaries of inside-outside. Church and what it represents within with all the trappings of the church are manmade, which is slowly being claimed by Nature. Larkin often makes a sharp distinction between Nature outside and man’s enclosure inside a building, a scene which dramatizes man’s separation from Nature. The poet begins his encounter with the church building by describing the contents of the building; but the distinctions between what is outside in Nature, and what is inside in man’s architectural dominion, begin to blur. The building is seen by the poet as surrounded by the forces of Nature and perhaps soon to be merged with them. He imagines the decaying edifice being eventually let “rent-free to rain and sheep”; thus Nature itself will enter the church and become part of it, or will simply take over the church completely. The destructive forces of Nature are even now merging with the elements of the building: “grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky”—all these coalesce.

The language of the poem is conversational, and the narrator poses many interrogatives (questions). Larkin uses a lot of religious imagery and words, some are used as they are intended, but others are used in a blasphemous way. The subtle movement from the first person singular (I) to the first person plural (we or our) is a characteristic device in Larkin’s poetry, and one which is predicated upon the assent of its readers. Larkin uses this strategy in ‘Whitsun Weddings’ too.

The poem is not a veiled message in support of Christianity, but it shrewdly and accurately defines the multiple sides of the dilemma of redundant churches and what they represent, namely a religious tradition in decline. There is seriousness, wisdom, and comfort to be derived or not from an empty church building. The church’s main function as a place for worship is long gone, though it still has its value as a historical relic.

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**Self-check Exercise II**

1) What does the poet do on his entry into the church?

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2) How would you describe the narrator’s attitude towards the church?
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3) What future does the poet envisage for the church?
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4) What is the ambiguity in the title ‘Church Going’?
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23.4 WHITSUN WEDDINGS (1964)

23.4.1 Introduction

‘The Whitsun Weddings’ appeared in the anthology of the same name, in 1964. It is a poem inspired by a train journey from the Paragon station at Kinston-upon-Hull in the North of England to Petersborough, London in the South, on a Whitsun Saturday, in 1955. A quarter of a century later, Larkin recalled the genesis of the poem:

“I caught a very slow train that stopped at every station and I hadn’t realised that, of course, this was the train that all the wedding couples would get on and go to London for their honeymoon: it was an eye-opener to me. Every part was different but the same somehow. They all looked different but they were all doing the same things and sort of feeling the same things. I suppose the train stopped at about four, five, six stations between Hull and London and there was a sense of gathering emotional momentum. Every time you stopped fresh emotion climbed aboard. And finally between Peterborough and London when you hurtle on, you felt the whole thing was being aimed like a bullet - at the heart of things, you know. All this fresh, open life. Incredible experience. I’ve never forgotten it.”
Whitsun being the marriage season, the train and the railway stations were thronged by gay, boisterous wedding parties. Larkin, the bachelor, leans back as the placid observer, viewing the newlyweds board the train for their honeymoon, making droll comments which are at times witty and humorous, at times acrid and pungent. The poem is considered the finest example of Larkin’s temper, tone and technique.

‘The Whitsun Weddings’ consists of eight verses, each ten lines long making it one of his longest poems and rhyming a b a b c d e c d e a rhyme scheme used in various of Keats’ odes. This rhyme pattern captures the rhythmic sound of a steam-engine as it gathers momentum every time it leaves a station. The truncated second line in each stanza adds to the special rhythm of poem. The use of enjambement or run-on lines and run-on verses creates a sense of relentless, onward movement as the train with several linked carriages makes its way southward by a ‘slow and stopping curve’. ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ is Larkin’s longest poem, narrated in a slow, unhurried, leisurely fashion which re-enacts a sense of the long, leisurely train journey from Hull to London. In literature a journey frequently functions as a metaphor for life itself. Larkin uses the unifying frame of a train-journey to observe the young couples who, as a result of a ‘frail Travelling coincidence’ briefly share one hour at a similar point in their lives before they alight from the train at its destination and continue separately on the longer journey which will take up the remainder of their lives.

23.4.2 The Text

That Whitsun, I was late getting away:
Not till about
One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday
Did my three-quarters-empty train pull out,
All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense
Of being in a hurry gone. We ran
Behind the backs of houses, crossed a street
Of blinding windscreens, smelt the fish-dock; thence
The river’s level drifting breadth began,
Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet.

All afternoon, through the tall heat that slept
For miles inland,
A slow and stopping curve southwards we kept.
Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and
Canals with floatings of industrial froth;
A hothouse flashed uniquely: hedges dipped
And rose: and now and then a smell of grass
Displaced the reek of buttoned carriage-cloth
Until the next town, new and nondescript,
Approached with acres of dismantled cars.

At first, I didn’t notice what a noise
The weddings made
Each station that we stopped at: sun destroys
The interest of what’s happening in the shade,
And down the long cool platforms whoops and skirls
I took for porters larking with the mails,
And went on reading. Once we started, though,
We passed them, grinning and pomaded, girls
In parodies of fashion, heels and veils,
All posed irresolutely, watching us go,

As if out on the end of an event
Waving goodbye
To something that survived it. Struck, I leant
More promptly out next time, more curiously,
And saw it all again in different terms:
The fathers with broad belts under their suits
And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;
An uncle shouting smut; and then the perms,
The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes,
The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres that

Marked off the girls unreally from the rest.
Yes, from cafés
And banquet-halls up yards, and bunting-dressed
Coach-party annexes, the wedding-days
Were coming to an end. All down the line
Fresh couples climbed aboard: the rest stood round;
The last confetti and advice were thrown,
And, as we moved, each face seemed to define
Just what it saw departing: children frowned
At something dull; fathers had never known

Success so huge and wholly farcical;
The women shared
The secret like a happy funeral;
While girls, gripping their handbags tighter, stared
At a religious wounding. Free at last,
And loaded with the sum of all they saw,
We hurried towards London, shuffling gouts of steam.
Now fields were building-plots, and poplars cast
Long shadows over major roads, and for
Some fifty minutes, that in time would seem

Just long enough to settle hats and say
_I nearly died,_
A dozen marriages got under way.
They watched the landscape, sitting side by side
—An Odeon went past, a cooling tower,
And someone running up to bowl—and none
Thought of the others they would never meet
Or how their lives would all contain this hour.
I thought of London spread out in the sun,
Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat:
There we were aimed. And as we raced across
Bright knots of rail
Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss
Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail
Travelling coincidence; and what it held
Stood ready to be loosed with all the power
That being changed can give. We slowed again,
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

Glossary

**Whitsun**: (White Sunday). Also called Whitsunday or Whitsuntide is the feast of the Pentecost, which falls on the 7th day after Easter, commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles of Christ. In England it was mixed up with pagan festivities celebrating the summer’s day. Considered to be very auspicious for weddings. During the 50s it was a favoured time for marriage and honeymoon due to the long weekend. Whit Saturday is the Saturday before it. The following day is also a holiday, called Whit Monday.

**blinding windscreens**: refers to the cars waiting at the level crossing in the scorching heat

**fish-dock**: harbours or piers for fishing (see picture)

**Lincolnshire**: historic county in the east of England

**A slow and stopping curve southwards we kept**: the consistent curve of the railway as the train moves southwards and stops at stations.

**short shadowed cattle**: the cattle cast short shadows due to the time of the day, probably early afternoon.

**industrial froth**: layer of dirt or scum spread on top of the canal, due to the industrial effluents cast from the factories nearby.

**Canals of industrial froth**: Larkin points out at the deleterious effect of technological advancement on the urban areas. Demonstrative of his powers of observation. In the poem *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot had made a similar remark: “River sweats/Oil and tar.”

**Hothouse**: a heated building used for growing plants. (see picture)

**reek**: (n) smell

**nondescript**: lacking distinctive characteristics

**dismantle**: take to pieces, pull down

**skirl**: a shrill cry or shriek (Scots dialect)

**whoops and skirls**: shouts and shrieks

**larking**: cavorting; enjoy oneself by behaving in a playful and mischievous way.
pomaded : wearing scented hair-dressing
irresolutely : hesitantly

Confetti Fish Dock Perm

seamy : sordid, disreputable, sleazy

smut : obscenity; here the uncle is cracking indecent jokes at the expense of the newlyweds.

perms : a term in hair dressing; permanent wave (see picture)

lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres: different colours or shades; mostly pastels. Lemon is yellow, mauve is light violet or purple and olives are green and ochres are brick red.

Bunting dressed : dressed with cloth flags, drapery or streamers for festive decoration (see picture)

confetti and advice : a figure of speech named ‘zeugma’ or ‘syllepsis’ is used here, in which one single phrase or word joins different parts of a sentence, which may actually befit only one part. Zeugma means ‘yoking’.

farcical : extremely ludicrous

happy funeral : is an oxymoron, where contraries are yoked together to describe the indescribable. Ironic comment about marriage which may begin in joy and happiness but may end in tears and sorrow.

religious wounding: the tense girls cannot make out their mothers laughing at a shared secret. The ritual of marriage seems to be
sanctioning a ‘deflowering’ of the virgins, ratified by the society.

**hurried towards**: notice the shift in the scenery as they near urban habitation.

**shuffling gouts of steam**: the steam pouring from the spout of the engine (see picture)

**Poplar**: A tall tree found in the North Temperate Zone. It is called Chinar in North India (see picture)

**Odeon**: a movie theatre chain, popular in Britain (see picture)

**Cooling Tower**: heat removal devices used to transfer process waste heat to the atmosphere (see picture)

**Pullman**: a railway carriage with special amenities, designed by George M. Pullman of America. During Larkin’s times, these had gone out of fashion. The image adds to the poem’s sense of an idyllic, static Old England (see picture)

**This frail travelling**: being co-travellers in a journey. ‘Coincidenza’ in Italian, is a transfer station in railroad travel. Larkin’s “coincidence” may be an interlingual pun. Like both “frail” and “traveling,” it may just be a way of naming the brief encounter that the poem stages, between the speaker and those he observes.

**There swelled / A sense of falling, like an arrow**: Larkin passes on from the particular to the universal; loaded with meanings and significations. Falling is a sensation that accompanies when the brake is applied to a moving train. Sense of falling may be ‘Felix Culpa’, a happy fall – a reference to the married couples’ future life. Larkin creates a complex symbolic image into which we might read overtones of fertility, aggression, joy, sadness, and delayed consequences—all things often associated with marriage. Highly sexualized image.
The poem begins in a conversational mode by the poem’s narrator, by commenting about his late start. He describes the scenery and smells of the countryside and towns through which the largely empty train passes. The first stanza is rich in alliteration used in phrases like sunlit Saturday, behind the backs of houses etc. Images of excessive heat and smell also can be seen throughout. The heat of the sultry afternoon is personified

“All afternoon, through the tall heat that slept
For miles inland,
A slow and stopping curve southwards we kept.”

In the second verse the train keeps a slow rhythmical movement towards the South and inland; and the rural landscape of Lincolnshire is vividly described: “Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle.” The adjective ‘short-shadowed’ subtly reminds us that it is still early afternoon and the sun is high in the sky. By contrast the man-made polluted waterways are described in terms of disgust: “Canals with floatings of industrial froth”. There is a further contrast between the euphony of the ‘smell of grass’ and the cacophony of the ‘reek of buttoned carriage cloth’. The train now reaches the outskirts of the town where it will make its first stop. It is one of the ‘new’ towns built in post-war England. Larkin dismisses it contemptuously as ‘nondescript’. Man’s pollution of the rural environment is again harshly described in the phrase: “acres of dismantled cars”.

The train’s windows are open because of the heat, and he gradually becomes aware of bustle on the platforms at each station, eventually realising that this is the noise and actions of wedding parties that are seeing off couples who are boarding the train.

Larkin is the detached observer who is at times sneering and mocking, especially at the lurid and garish display of the wedding parties. He is initially scornful of the wedding guests in their loud costumes; “girls in parodies of fashion”; he lampoons the typical family; “mothers loud and fat and uncles shouting smut”. He seems to itemize these sights to make them seem ridiculous and pitiable. The cynical attitude of the poet is visible in the almost unkind description of the young women. As a bachelor, he does not show any enthusiasm in the costume and the colour scheme; he finds it rather offensive.

Telling phrases hint at his attitude to marriage calling it; “success so huge and wholly farcical”; where ‘wholly’ could be substituted phonetically for “holy” and this is perhaps deliberate. Oxymoronic phrases like “happy funeral” and “religious wounding” support this idea.

Larkin offsets this view of landscape with the couples, fresh from their dramatic day. They too contemplate the lives and the places they are soon to inhabit. It is
as if Larkin can’t decide whether he loves the landscape or fears its crushing blandness, and this must be what the couples are thinking too. This *leitmotif* manipulates the reader’s view of the marriages.

At the end of the poem he sums up his thoughts on the newly married couples, the “frail travelling coincidence and what it held stood ready to be loosed with all the power being changed can give.” He gives a sense of impending destiny. He seems to think that this day is the sum total of the glory of marriage, by imposing his own world view on what has been missed out. This is backed by the regrets he invokes against marriage: “the others they never meet”, or “how their lives would all contain this hour.”

The poem climaxes with a powerful enigmatic image: “a sense of falling, like an arrow shower; sent out of sight somewhere becoming rain”. There is a twin motif about love at work here, with the image of Cupid’s arrows contrasted against the battleground of arrows being fired against Love itself. The rain belongs to London and the hints at the bland reality of day to day life; it may also be a symbol of fertility too.

The poem is bound to the here and now while longing for transcendent release. There is a real paradox between the reality presented by the landscape and the ideals represented by the couples and the final image. Larkin longs for the abstraction of romance and perfect love, but he sees around him the oncoming city splurge which counters the romanticism of the train environment he is experiencing. The climax at the end seems to work against the surface cynicism of Larkin’s tone as he experiences a tug for something more due to the mesmerising occasion he witnesses.

**Self-check Exercise III**

1) Do you think that Larkin is critical about the appearance of the wedding parties? Substantiate your answer.

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2) Describe the English landscape as Larkin describes it.

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3) Technical brilliance of Philip Larkin in ‘Whitsun Weddings’.

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23.5 LET US SUM UP

So in this unit we have discussed Philip Larkin and two of his poems, ‘Church Going’ and ‘Whitsun Weddings’. We have situated Philip Larkin as a representative of postwar British society and also as an exponent of Movement Poetry. We have seen how his poetry eschews the vagueness and complexities of earlier Modernist writings and espouses rhythmic cadence and clarity of traditional provincial poetry. We have seen his attitudes towards Church and marriage as institutions. Larkin’s poems teach us the necessity of looking at things not through rosy glasses of romanticism, but with wide open eyes of realism. It tells us to be ‘less deceived’. It will be good for you to look around and identify dead conventions which need to be eradicated from the society. After all, the ultimate purpose of reading literature it to observe and be aware of our surroundings. It will be good to read other poems of Larkin, which are easily available as they are anthologized extensively in several volumes of poetry; they are also available on the web. Recordings of Larkin’s readings of his poems are available on the You Tube, and are a pleasure to listen to.

23.6 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise I

1) *The North Ship; The Less Deceived; Whitsun Weddings; High Windows.*

2) At the Brynmor Jones Library in the University of Hull.

3) Thomas Hardy

4) *All That Jazz: A Record Diary 1961–71*

5) *New Lines Anthology* (1956)

Self-check Exercise II

1) He lets the door thud shut, looks around, takes off the cycle-clips in awkward reverence, runs the hand around the font, mounts the lectern and reads from the scriptures and pronounces ‘here endeth’ louder than he intended; signs the book and donates an Irish sixpence and reflects that the place is not worth stopping for.

2) Narrator’s attitude is one of irreverence and scepticism. He does not understand the allure of the church. He is bored and disinterested at times. He is questioning, blasphemous, and mocks at certain practices. He is unimpressed and ignorant.

3) He sees a rather bleak future for church. “A shape less recognisable each week. A purpose more obscure.” The people who seek church in future might be those who come for maintenance, or people who love ruins and antiques, or Christmas addicts who love a season of gaiety and mirth. Or they will be like the poet himself, bored or uninformed, coming there because of their curiosity and because the silence of the place renders them solace.

4) The title is ambiguous and can be interpreted in several ways: the act of going to church, the customs that keep the church alive, visiting the church as one would a theatre, and the disappearance of the church.
Self-check Exercise III

1) Yes, Larkin is critical about the appearance of the wedding parties. The references to the grinning pomaded girls in parodies of fashion, heels and veils; fathers with seamy foreheads wearing broad belts under their suits; mothers loud and fat, uncle shouting smut, perms, nylon gloves and jewellery substitutes which indicate the tawdry cheapness of the affair, the lemons, mauves and olive-ochres, presenting jarring colour schemes, all substantiate this.

2) Larkin describes both urban and rural landscapes and contrasts the sordid with the idyllic. The backs of houses, blinding windscreens, smelly fish-docks, canals floating with industrial froth, new and nondescript next town, acres of dismantled cars, fields with building plots and Odeons are contrasted with the river’s level drifting, wide farms, short-shadowed cattle, uniquely flashing hothouse, hedges dipped with rose, smell of grass, and poplars.

3) ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ is an ode consisting of eight verses, each ten lines long making it one of his longest poems and rhyming a b a b c d e c d e. This rhyme pattern captures the rhythmic sound of a steam-engine as it gathers momentum every time it leaves a station. The truncated second line in each stanza adds to the special rhythm of poem. The use of *enjambement* or run-on lines and run-on verses creates a sense of relentless, onward movement as the train with several linked carriages makes its way southward by a ‘slow and stopping curve’.
UNIT 24 TED HUGHES

24.0 OBJECTIVES

Having read the units you will be able to:

- discuss Ted Hughes the poet
- demonstrate how Hughes is a nature poet of a different kind than the romantic poets
- examine “Hawk Roosting”
- analyze “The Thought-Fox”
- analyze “How to Paint a Water Lily”

24.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit we will discuss Ted Hughes’s life in short, because Hughes’s life experiences particularly his association with nature and world of animals and birds in the rural England shaped his poetic sensibility. We will examine to what extent this claim could find evidence in his poems.

The first poem is “Hawk Roosting.” It is a dramatic monologue spoken by the hawk. The speaking voice uses precise imagery and a deliberate arrangement of sounds to convey a sense of absolute dominion that bird of prey holds over the world. You may read the poem slowly to discover the connection between the words, imagery, sound and the consciousness of the speaking voice.
The second poem is the celebrated “The Thought-Fox.” It is a poem about the writing of a poem. The poet imagines a fox in the darkness of a cold night outside, which becomes a metaphor for the poetic stirrings in the poet’s imagination. You will discover in the poem the poet’s great felicity with creating a moving image of the fox, and to leave an impression that the poem moves towards its finality as the fox moves inside the mind of the poet. You will also discover in this poem the exactness of imagery, and the relationship between the movement of the thoughts and the movement of sound pattern.

The third poem in this Unit is “How to Paint a Water lily.” The poem is about the painting of water lily although on the page of poetry. In this poem again, you will discover the contrary aspects of nature symbolized by the water lily.

It is advised that you read the poems first, and then read the parts of the Unit.

### 24.2 TED HUGHES (17 AUGUST 1930 - 28 OCTOBER 1998)

Edward James Ted Hughes was one of the most influential English poets of the second half of the 20th century. He remained the poet laureate of England from 1984 till his death. He was also a writer of the books for children.

Ted Hughes was born on August 17, 1930 in Mytholmroyd, a small mill town in West Yorkshire. For the first seven years of his life, he lived on the moorland of that county. His early experiences of wind, rain, and hard stony hills shaped his impressions about a harsh world of nature. From a very early age, he was drawn to animals, and related to them. He observed in them tendencies of both being a predator and a prey, and it is this respect that he used animals as symbols in his poems such as “The Hawk Roosting.” He viewed birds and animals as having unscrupulous instincts and menacing nature. In his poems, he associated the human nature with the ferocious nature of animals and predatory birds.

Hughes’s father, who was a carpenter and a shopkeeper, had been a soldier in the First World War. The memories of the war remained vivid to the poet since his early life. His experience of Yorkshire was also governed by his consciousness of the war, as he would later say that it was never possible for him to “escape the impression that the whole region is in mourning for the First World War.”

Hughes studied English literature, Archaeology, and Anthropology at Pembroke College, Cambridge, and graduated in 1954.

He had been writing poetry since his school days, but the university years came as a long period of hibernation in his creative life. In 1955 though he came across a Penguin book of contemporary American poets that left him greatly influenced, and inspired to write verse seriously. In this anthology he admired the works of John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Lowell among others. Some of his early influences were Yeats, Hopkins, T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas.

In 1956, he came across Sylvia Plath who was studying at Cambridge on a Fulbright scholarship. She fell in love with him, and thus began a very critical fellowship in poetry between the two distinguished poets. They shared their works, and encouraged each other. Soon they got married. In the same year, his
finished composing *The Hawk in the Rain* that Plath sent to a contest, the prize was publication by Harper. The judges were W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and Marianne Moore. Hughes won the first prize, and the manuscript was published in 1957.

Hughes and Plath moved to the United States, and lived there for the next two years. They involved themselves in teaching and writing. In 1959, they returned to London. Their daughter Frieda was born on 1 April 1960. Their son Nicholas was born in January 1962. In June 1962, Plath met with a car accident, which was one of the many suicide attempts she tried, as she had been suffering from severe depression. The couple separated in 1962 over Hughes affair with Assia Wevill. In 1963, Plath committed suicide.

Hughes devoted himself to writing for children in different genres, translations, short stories, as well as poems.

Hughes published *Wodwo* in 1967. The poems were conspicuous for their precise and simple diction, and his use of free verse. *Crow* got published in 1970. The poems in this collection present a violent and a bloodier aspects of nature and animal life. The poems produce a surreal impression of the wildness of the predatory world of birds and animals in a language that is remarkably simple and direct. Hughes later said that the poems were resulted from his thoughts about the style of singing by a crow. He wondered that if a crow had to sing a song, its song will be without any music, it would be purely simple and starkly ugly. The poems present a world in which the moral universe has been subverted. The express physical pain, torture and suffering as a result of the murderous instinct inherent in the animals portrayed. But there is no moral dilemma. The murderousness of the world is accepted as a bare fact, as something necessary and responsive to basic instincts.

*Moortown* (1979) continue his poetic obsession with describing the life of animals in their true physical aspects. The poem “Birth of a Rainbow,” for example delineates the birth of a calf on a cold ridge in “razorish” wind. There is a hail storm, and the poor calf suffers the cold while draped in the blood of afterbirth.

Ted Hughes continued to describe the harsh and violent nature in his later volumes.

**Self-check Exercise I**

1) How did Hughes’s childhood in West Yorkshire shape his poetry?
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Ted Hughes
24.3 THE THOUGHT-FOX

24.3.1 Introduction

“The Thought-Fox” appeared in the first collection of verse by Ted Hughes *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957). The poems in this collection were typed by Sylvia Plath, who thereafter entered the poems in a contest. The judges were W.H. Auden, Stephan Spender, and Marianne Moore. Hughes’s manuscript won the award, and the poet attained instant acclaim as the most original and exciting young voice in contemporary British poetry. “The Thought-Fox”, however, has been the most anthologized of not only the poems of this collection but of all his poems. The poem’s success lies in the simplicity of voice, imagery and diction, with which it unravels the secrets of poetic creation. In a brief moment of the creative process, the poem tracks the movement of the imaginary fox from nature into the mind of the poet, and then its impression on the printed page as a poem. In its unification of the human and animal, the poem presents the oneness of man and nature, human and animal, ferociousness and tenderness.
I imagine this midnight moment’s forest:
Something else is alive
Beside the clock’s loneliness
And this blank page where my fingers move

Through the window I see no star:
Something more near
Though deeper within darkness
Is entering loneliness

Cold, delicately as the dark snow
A fox’s nose touches twig, leaf;
Two eyes serve a movement, that now
And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow
Between tress, and warily a lame
Shadow lags by stump and in hollow
Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,
A widening deepening greenness
Brilliantly, concentratedly
Coming about its own business

Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox
It enters the dark hole of the head
The window is starless still; the clock ticks
The page is printed.

The setting of the poem is a room, and the time is midnight. The poet sits at his writing desk by the open window; outside lies the starless and dark night. The poet looks into the darkness into the forest beyond the clearings. This act of looking into the external darkness propels the dark interiors of his imagination, which in degrees of imaginative clarity fashions forth a fox. It is as sensual, instinctual and bodily alive as the real fox. The fox of his mind, ‘the thought-fox,’ finally appears as the poem itself. The poem is about the writing of the poem itself.

In a 1961 BBC broadcast, Hughes talks about the writing process as “the special kind of excitement, the slightly mesmerized and quite involuntary concentration with which you make out the stirrings of a new poem in your mind…. This is hunting and the poem is a new species of creature, a new specimen of life outside your own.” In this poem, it is the fox that the poet pursues; he starts with a vague apprehension of its presence, but gradually there arrives clearer perceptions of its figure and movements, till it transfers itself as a whole creature into the mind of the poet, and appears on the page of the poem.
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The poem opens in darkness on a “midnight’s moment.” There is utmost silence and loneliness all around, and is enhanced by the clock’s ticking. The poet sits moving his fingers on a blank piece of paper searching for a poem in his mind. The setting presents two contrary spaces. The poet sits inside his room, while outside his window lies the forest defined by darkness. The darkness symbolizes the inactivity of imagination before the beginning of the creative process. The poetic creation takes its root in the natural landscape outside the mind of the poet, somewhere in the forest, where the poet feels something is present.

However, as it becomes subsequently clear in the poem, the fox takes its shape and movement inside the mind of the poet.

In the second stanza, the poet sees no star in the sky, the traditional symbol of heavenly guidance:

Through the window I see no star:
Something more near
Though deeper within darkness
Entering loneliness

The poet has to search inwards for appropriate words to clearly realize the figure and movement of being still unidentified in the poem. However, there is more clarity compared to the first stanza. From “something else is alive” in the first stanza, the speaker notes the imagined animal as “something more near.” The word “something” in the two stanzas connotes both creative inspiration as well as the imagined animal. The unclear movement of the animal that the poet visualizes in the outside works as correlative of the vague stirrings of a poem not yet clearly formed. The poet avoids naming the animal at this stage, as wants to retain the vagueness of the inspiration, until a true discovery of the poetic form.

In the third stanza, the figure of the fox is still not clearly seen. Its presence is, however, more acutely felt:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow
A fox’s nose touches twig, leaf;

The simile contains a visual and kinesthetic image. The poet has only see its dark nose touching the twig and the leaf as snow looking dark in darkness of the night falls touching them on the ground. The sense of coldness contained in this image suggests metaphoric coldness of the world of nature and animal. Next the poet sees the two eyes of the animal, now little clearer. The third and the fourth stanzas are syntactically joined by the eye movements of the fox that make the body of the fox appear more distinct:

Two eyes serve a movement, that now
And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow
Between tress, and warily a lame
Shadow lags by stump and in hollow
Of a body that is bold to come

The appearance of the two eyes within the deep darkness of the snow and trees communicate an eerie feeling. The image serves to suddenly unfold the scary reality of the animal lurking in darkness. The vagueness about it is turning into
exactness of a fox. The last two lines of the third stanza and the first line of the fourth stanza convey through rapidness of rhythm the nervous movements of the fox, and sudden excitement felt by the poet as he perceives the fox setting its paw’s prints on the snow in between the trees. There is sudden twist to the rhyme, rhythm and sound pattern to convey the discovery of the fox. The word ‘now’ appears twice as end rhyme suggests an attainment of clarity in the poet’s consciousness about the fox. It also serves to introduce an element of surprise involved in discovery the first true signs of the fox. The repetition of the phrase “and now” provides speed to the rhythm of the poem as the poet almost correctly the animal. The poet is almost certain of its figure as it lurks there in darkness. The line

Sets neat prints into the snow

suggests by its short half-rhyming sounds of the first three words a suspense that achieves clarity as the line settles finally in the vowel prominent sound of “snow.” The phrase “lame shadow” in the next line provides the first fuller picture of the fox, and “bold to come” suggests that the fox is lurking on the outer edges of the forest ready to leap inside.

The phrase “across clearing” in the first line of the fifth stanza serves as a definite breaking point in the poem as well as the scene outside imagined by the poet. The fox breaks through to full realization with its leap and descends on the imagination of the poet as well as the reader:

Across clearings, an eye,
A widening deepening greenness
Brilliantly, concentratedly
Coming about its own business

The lengthening of diction “widening, deepening, greenness” suggests how close the fox stands to the poet and the reader. The two eyes of the previous stanzas have merged into single “greenness” that has grown wider and deeper as the fox comes near us as well as the poet.

The last stanza presents such close perception of the fox. It appears so close that we along with the poet can smell its “sudden sharp stink.” Its sensuality is so fully realized in us; its smell affects our consciousness. The fox almost literally enters the head of the poet as if it was entering its den. And thereafter appears on the page as poem. The fox is the poem. The long line of the poem finally finds a full stop in the last line, as the picture of the fox becomes real in the page of the poem.

The poem is about poetry, how the perception of the fox attained with powerful immediacy attains its language, its form. The fox is in the mind of the poet rather than outside it. The gap between the external and internal dissolves in the consciousness of the poet. Ted Hughes wrote about this poem, “…long after I am gone, as long as a copy of the poem exists, every time any one reads it, the fox will get up somewhere out of the darkness, and come walking towards them” *(Poetry in the Making 1967)*
24.4 HAWK ROOSTING

24.4.1 Introduction

The poem is a dramatic monologue delivered by the hawk, a bird of prey, who remorselessly reveals its violent instinct and character in an arrogant tone. A dramatic monologue is a form of poetry, in which a single speaker, who is not the poet, presents the whole poem in the form of his speech. He speaks in a specific context at a critical moment. The person who is spoken to in the poem is not revealed. The reader can infer the responses of the listener from the speech of the single speaker. The main interest of the poem lies in the fact that during the course of his speech, the speaker reveals his character, behavior and attitude.
The best practitioner of dramatic monologue in English poetry was the Victorian poet, Robert Browning, who wrote some memorable poems in this form such as “My Last Duchess,” “Fra Lippo Lippi,” “Porphyria’s Lover” etc.

“Hawk Roosting” is one of the most celebrated poems of Ted Hughes, in which the poet has used dramatic monologue to expose a despotic and murderous nature symbolized by the hawk. The poem was first published in 1960. It is from the volume *Lupercal* (1960).

24.4.2 The Text

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.
Inaction, no falsifying dream
Between my hooked head and hooked feet:
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

The convenience of the high trees!
The air’s buoyancy and the sun’s ray
Are of advantage to me;
And the earth’s face upward for my inspection.

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.
It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly -
I kill where I please because it is all mine.
There is no sophistry in my body:
My manners are tearing off heads -

The allotment of death.
For the one path of my flight is direct
Through the bones of the living.
No arguments assert my right:

The sun is behind me.
Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this.

24.4.3 Analysis

As you will observe in the all three poems by Hughes, the experience contained in the poems is spoken with a directness that surprises due to morally complex nature of the content. In this poem, the hawk expresses no guilt about its murderous instinct. It is proudly rapacious. Given its superior physical abilities, it kills at will.

The first stanza begins the Hawk’s monologue in a plain voice. He is perched on the top of the forest feeling self-possessed with his eyes closed in contemplation of his absolute control of the world of birds and animals he preys upon. The
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The hawk indulges in no false dream; it kills with precision and at will and eats his prey. The visual imagery in the third line links the precision to kill which is inherent in the instinct of the hawk with the precise make up of his body that makes it possible to transform the instinct into murderous action:

Inaction, no falsifying dream

Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat

…… no falsifying dream

Between my hooked head and hooked feet:

The use of the words “head” and “feet” makes personification implicit in the poem, and so the poem may also be read as reflecting the guiltless murderous instinct in the humans. The hawk uses its “hooked head and hooked feet”

In the second stanza, the hawk speaks about his firm grip over the earth; it can choose to kill at will, as it possesses both the advantage of the height of the trees as well as its natural power of menacing flight that can utilize both the “air’s buoyancy” and “the sun’s ray” to glide down and kill its victims. The stanza uses a polysyllabic word in each line: “convenience,” “buoyancy,” “advantage,” and “inspection.” As an abstract diction, these words convey ruthless ferocity of the hawk beyond rational and moral constraint. He symbolizes nature in its full nakedness of an urge to kill. The words also convey a militaristic attitude, as the hawk exudes:

And the earth’s face upward for my inspection

The pride of the hawk attains its apotheosis in the third stanza, as it feels godlike control over the earth. The first line of this stanza still presents the hawk perched the tree like the first lines of the previous stanzas. The power of its “hooked feet” is evident in their ability to be “locked upon the rough bark.” There is a rhetorical declaration of supremacy, as the hawk declares:

It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot

The hawk exudes with pride at being a special creation of Nature. In its coming to being, in the making of its “foot” and “feather,” as if the whole “Creation” participated. There is no hyperbole intended in this assertion of the hawk. There is no ambiguity in its voice that it holds the Creation under subjection.

In stanzas fourth and fifth, the most pernicious aspect its power is unfolded. It holds its sway over all creation, and kills at will, because all its own. There is no refinement, not hint of civilization about the body and the behavior of the hawk:

There is no sophistry in my body
My manners are tearing off heads

The two stanzas are syntactically linked. The physical brutishness expressed in the last line of the fourth stanza “tearing off heads” settles with the godlike
decision of fate of the victim uttered in the first line of the fifth stanza:

The allotment of death

The last three lines of the fifth stanza complete the merciless killing instinct of the hawk:

For the one path of my flight is direct
Through the bones of the living.
No arguments assert my right:

The hawk is beyond the arguments of reason or moral law. It lives a life of predation, and symbolizes the Darwinian law. It lives by killing in the most brutal fashion.

The sixth stanza shifts the scene from the brutal killing to that of self-definition, although the whole poem can be read as long self-definition. However, the last stanza brings back the calm declarative tone of the first stanza. The sun is reduced to play the background to the hawk. It rules the world with scary calmness that hides its menacing and death-giving instinct. Since its creation, it has not hold of the creation through the power of its ‘eye’:

Nothing has changed since I began.
My eyes has permitted no change.
I am going to keep thing like this.

The poem uses the same vocabulary as that of a typical nature poem. It contains references to ‘wood,’ ‘trees,’ ‘air,’ ‘sun’ etc. It also refers to God, the creator of nature. However, the poem is anything but a nature poem you can associate with a romantic poet like Wordsworth or Keats. The poem presents a world of nature shockingly antithetical to the benign image of nature expected in such a poem. It’s a nature ruled over by the predatory power of the hawk, whose chief instinct is to brutally kill and eat its prey, while subduing each aspect of nature to its design as a God, although a god who allots death.

Self-check Exercise III

1) What does the hawk symbolize in this poem?
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2) What is the form of the poem?
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3) How is Hughes’s “Hawk Roosting” a nature poem?

4) Write some of the features of the hawk as described by Hughe in this poem?

24.5 HOW TO PAINT A WATER LILY

24.5.1 Introduction

The poem “How to Paint a Water Lily” was published in the year 1960. It is also titled as “To Paint a Water Lily.” Both the titles express an artist’s struggle to transmute nature, natural objects, birds and animals on to the page of a poem. This struggle is central to so many of Hughes’s poem, such as the poem “The Thought-Fox” that you have already read in this unit. The first title “How to Paint a Water Lily,” the title that we have retained, reads as if the poet is advising “how to pant a water lily.”

24.5.2 The Text

A green level of lily leaves
Roofs the pond’s chamber and paves

The flies’ furious arena: study
These, the two minds of this lady.

First observe the air’s dragonfly
That eats meat, that bullets by

Or stands in space to take aim;
Others as dangerous comb the hum

Under the trees. There are battle-shouts
And death-cries everywhere hereabouts

But inaudible, so the eyes praise
To see the colours of these flies
Rainbow their arcs, spark, or settle
Cooling like beads of molten metal

Through the spectrum. Think what worse
Is the pond-bed’s matter of course;

Prehistoric bedragoned times
Crawl that darkness with Latin names,

Have evolved no improvements there,
Jaws for heads, the set stare,

Ignorant of age as of hour-
Now paint the long-necked lily-flower

Which, deep in both worlds, can be still
As a painting, trembling hardly at all

Though the dragonfly alight,
Whatever horror nudge her root.

24.5.3 Glossary

**Spectrum**: rays of color such as seen in a rainbow, but produced by separating the components of light by their different degrees of refraction determined by wavelength.

24.5.4 Analysis

The poem presents a set of pictures that evoke the beauty of nature both in its violent activity and in calmness. Hughes’s main philosophy as a poet is not simply to describe the outer beauty of nature, not even to uncover its life within that corresponds with the human feelings, as the romantic poets such as Wordsworth do in their poems. For him nature is as complex in its possession of both beauty and terror, as a human being is deep within, and he seeks to portray this essential duality of existence in his poems.

The speaking voice in the poem attempts to capture the visual image of a water lily on a canvas, even as he encounters the wildness and violence of nature surrounding the lily in the form of swift and warring flights and activities of the dragonfly and other flies. The water lily suggests two contrary aspects of nature—the surface of the pond on which a cluster of lily flower floats appears quiet, soothing and peaceful, but beneath this quietness lie the disturbing activities of nature symbolized by the battling flies. This duality of the nature is shown by the division between the life associated with the lily flowers, and the strife involving the flies surrounding them as well as under the water surface of the pond.

The poet is an artist, and is charmed about the beauty and serenity symbolized by the water lily. However, his mind is distracted by the striking complexities and ‘war-like’ situation making the atmosphere that surround the water lily.

The poem contains thirteen two line-stanzas with irregular rhymes. The shortness of stanzas suggests that the poem is a record of momentous thoughts as the poet
observes the water lily and the ambience around it. The irregularity of the rhyme suggests the diversity of experience marked by beauty and violence seen in nature.

The poem begins with a precise visual image so characteristic of the style of Hughes. The precision of the image produces a painting-like effect:

A green level of lily leaves
Roofs the pond’s chamber and paves

The flies’ furious arena: study
These, the two minds of this lady.

In these two stanzas, the poet perceives the water lily in splendor and beauty, however soon intervened by observation of the “flies’ furious arena.” The poet is so arrested by the beauty of a cluster of lily flowers that he sees them as one “green level” roofing the surface of the pond, as if they were sheltering “the pond’s chamber.” The water lily in itself symbolizes nature in its beautiful and nurturing aspect. However, the mention of the ‘furious arena’ of the flies that the water lilies help build introduce the terrifying aspect of nature that the poet will develop subsequently.

What is remarkable here is the use of personification. The fourth line of the poem personifies the water lily as a ‘lady’ with two minds. These “two minds” refer to the two opposite aspects of nature as a creator as well as a destroyer.

The third stanza justifies the title of the poem. The use of the imperative “first observe” serves as a direction for a painter:

First observe the air’s dragonfly
That eats meat, that bullets by
Or stands in space to take aim;

There is a similar direction suggesting “how to paint a water lily” in the eighth stanza:

Think what worse
Is the pond-bed’s matter of course;

Though the poet is writing a verse and not making a painting; his poetry is known for translating the images from the world of nature directly on to the page of poetry. It is the complexity of nature that would make it extremely challenging to achieve that end.

The next three stanzas make clearer why painting the water lily is going to be a difficult task. The darker side of nature becomes more evident, and poses the challenging of presenting a simple picture of nature as that of human beings. Naturally, the abrupt change in thought is accompanied by a change in the tone of the poem. The poet leaves behind the serene and gentle images of lilies, and turns to the violent pictures of the dragonfly which “eats meat” and aims at insects to kill them for its food. Like the hawk in the poem “Hawk Roosting,” the dragonfly is a predator targeting victims. In these stanzas there is no description of the water lily. The poem focuses entirely on war like activities of nature. Violence is
aptly suggested by the poem’s diction. The poet’s brilliant use of the compound words such as death-cries’, ‘battle-shout’ as well as the use of nouns as verb such as “bullets by” suggest rapid action of the battle-fields and the horror that they evoke.

The cries and shouts of the battlefield of flies may be inaudible, yet the heightened sensibility of the poet is able to perceive the activity produced by and producing the violence prevalent in nature. Again, as if advising a painter, he recommends seeing the changing colors of the flies forming the rainbow arcs and sparkling- actions suggestive of violent activity. The poet employs juxtaposition of images reminiscent of the metaphysical poets like Donne in the following simile:

...or settle
    Cooling like beads of molten metal

The juxtaposition of ‘molten’ and ‘metal’, fluid and hard metal again symbolizes the dual aspects of nature- soothing and harsh.

The poet next suggests the even more sinister aspect of nature by indicating the ruthless violence that takes place below the surface of the pond, which gets linked to the mindless killings and wars across human history right from the prehistoric times, marked by the Roman times, and continuing up to the present moment in history- violence has been universal.

Prehistoric bedragoned times
    Crawl that darkness with Latin names,

    Have evolved no improvements there,
    Jaws for heads, the set stare,

However, as art itself, the water lily has been oblivious of the moral distinction between good and evil, the benign and malevolent. It exists symbolizing both aspects of existence across time and history:

    Ignorant of age as of hour-
    Now paint the long-necked lily-flower

    Which, deep in both worlds, can be still
    As a painting, trembling hardly at all

The use of hyphenation in ‘long-necked lily-flower’ is suggestive of coexistence of the two worlds-the world of beauty and fragility and that of violence. As nature exists in its timelessness, so the water lily will exists in poem without any fear of ‘trembling’.

The poem ends in duality as it had begun.

As you must have observed during your reading of the poem, and this analysis, the poem makes good use of visual and auditory images. The sound pattern is very rhythmic throughout, though there are necessary variations. The contrast inherent in the very essence of the nature is very thoughtfully and imaginatively captured by the poet in the image of the water lily, and presented in his arrangement of words and sounds in the poem.
Self-check Exercise IV

1) How does the poet describe nature in its simplicity and calmness?
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2) How does the poet depict nature in its violence?
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3) How does the poet portray the two worlds of the water lily?
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4) How do you find the language and the structure of the poem?
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24.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you read about the life and works of Ted Hughes, and analyzed three of his poems. All the three poems, “Thought-Fox,” “Hawk Roosting,” and “How to Paint a Water Lily” suggest a definite break in the post-World War English poetry. They suggest a return to nature and the rural life as subjects of poetry. But they also introduce a new perspective. They present nature as violent, merciless, and destructive echoing the baseness of human instincts. They also introduce simplicity and directness to English poetry.

We hope you will more of Ted Hughes from anthologies of modern poetry or the various collections of his poetry.
Self-check Exercise I

1) Growing up in the rural Yorkshire, as a young boy Hughes was fascinated with the birds, animals, and the natural landscape, which shaped his poetic sensibility. He was drawn towards the wild and predatory habits and instincts of the animals, and the poet saw in them a reflection of the deeper psychic realities of the human beings.

2) Among the American poets to influence to Ted Hughes were John Crowe Ransom and Robert Lowell.

3) Sylvia Plath was a major American poet, who was married to Ted Hughes. She played a major role in the making of Ted Hughes, especially in his formative years. She typed the poems of his first collection *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), and made useful suggestions to improve his verse. She was also instrumental in getting this work published.

4) Ted Hughes wrote literature for children, radio plays, as well as some translations.

Self-Check Exercise II

1) The fox symbolizes the poem itself. It takes birth as a formless intuition in the consciousness of the poet, but this consciousness is reflected in the darkness of the night in the forest outside his room. Initially, the thought or the idea of the fox appears formless and vague, but as the poem proceeds it slowly starts taking shape and structure, and attains full and immediate clarity in the last stanza.

2) The darkness of the forest outside the room of the poet stands for the inactive state of the poetic imagination, just before the beginning of the creative process. It suggests the potential stage of creative imagination.

3) The theme of the poem is coming into being of a poem itself. The poem captures the moments of creative process by suggesting an analogy of the ‘thought-fox’- the idea of fox that stirs in the mind of the poet reflected in the dark night outside the room of the poet. As the fox becomes clear in the forest outside, the poem attains clarity in the poet’s mind, till it is finally printed on the paper. The dark world outside and the poet’s room suggest a connection between nature and man.

4) The poem is composed in a simple diction with directness of tone. The poet has used common words such as ‘room’, ‘paper’, ‘forest’, ‘fox’, ‘tree’ etc., but they generate evocative meanings. The images are sharp and precise, for example, the fox taking shape in the darkness, and the ‘eyes’ of the fox staring in the dark that suggest beauty and terror at the same time.

Self-Check Exercise III

1) The hawk symbolizes nature in its savagery and brutality. The hawk is an animal which is known for its predatory instinct. The hawk is proud of his control over the lives of its preys, which makes him very superior and arrogant.
2) The poem is written in the form of a dramatic monologue. The use of this poetic form coheres well with the subject of the poem, which is to show the authoritative and self-centered attitude of the hawk. Since dramatic monologue is narrated by a single speaker, it gives the power of control to the speaker who holds full command over his thoughts and ideas, as well as the silent listener.

3) “Hawk Roosting” is a nature poem. The poem is full of natural imagery and diction. Use of words like, ‘wood’, ‘tree’, ‘earth’, ‘sky’, ‘perch’, ‘air’, ‘god’, ‘creation’ all convey the naturalistic diction, tone and mood of the poem. However, the poem is about nature in a very different way than the romantic poems of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. It portrays nature in its savagery and violence.

4) Hughes portrays the hawk as arrogant, self-centered, and proud. Expressions such as “I hold creation in my food”, “allotment of death”, “my eyes has permitted no change” convey the despotic attitude of the Hawk. It is violent, brutal, and merciless.

Self-Check Exercise IV

1) The poet describes the nature in its simplicity and calmness in the very first stanza of the poem in the image of the ‘green lily leaves’ that provide shade to the open surface of the pond’s water. The very use of the color ‘green’ indicates the nurturing and productive aspect of the nature.

2) The violent aspect of the nature is portrayed in the image of the dragonfly as a predator running after its victims. The use of phrases such as ‘bullets by’, ‘battle-shouts’, and ‘death-cries’ shows nature as a battleground- very gloomy, dark and furious.

3) The two worlds of the water lily is portrayed by the poet in the form of the life above and below the water surface of the pond in which the water lily grows, as well as the atmosphere surrounding it. On the surface everything appears very quiet and calm, suggesting the outward simplicity of the nature at first sight. On the other hand, beneath the water surface, as well as in area around the flowers, things are very chaotic and menacing, suggesting the destructive aspect of the nature.

4) The language as well as the structure of the poem reflects its content. Hughes’s language is very sensitive in terms of its auditory and visual effect. The use of new linguistic devices and punctuations brilliantly sets the tone and the mood of the poem. Flooded with evocative images, symbols and metaphors, the poem conveys the duality of nature in a very appealing and thoughtful way. As far as the structure is concerned, the poem consists of 13 couplets with a regular rhyme, though with some exceptions to introduce variations in meaning in tandem with the variation in the rhythm of the poem.
UNIT 25  SEAMUS HEANEY

Structure
25.0  Objectives
25.1  Introduction
25.2  Seamus Heaney (13 April 1939- 30 August 2013)
25.3  Death of a Naturalist
   25.3.1  Introduction
   25.3.2  The Text
   25.3.3  Analysis
25.4  Let Us Sum Up
25.5  Answers to Self-Check Exercises

25.0  OBJECTIVES

After you have read this unit, you will be able to:

• Critically respond to Seamus Heaney’s life and works
• Understand the Irish contexts of his poetry
• Examine the poem ‘Death of a Naturalist’- its artistic blending of form and theme, word/sound and meaning.
• Write about blank verse
• Appreciate poetic devices such as personification, pathetic fallacy, assonance, oxymoron alliteration, onomatopoeia etc.

25.1  INTRODUCTION

In this unit you will read about the life and works of Seamus Heaney. Heaney’s reputation as a contemporary poet far exceeds any other poet. As an Irish poet, he is regarded as the most able inheritor of W.B. Yeats. Reading about his life and works, you would be able to appreciate his growth as a poet.

The poem we are reading in this unit is the title poem from Heaney’s first collection called Death of a Naturalist (1966). The poet expresses a disillusionment with nature felt by a young school boy, who had a scientific interest in nature prior to the experience described in the poem.

Read the poem carefully, and then read the other sections.

25.2  SEAMUS HEANEY (13 APRIL 1939- 30 AUGUST 2013)

Seamus Heaney was a translator, academician and a prose writer of great merit, but he is chiefly known for his poetry, which ranks among the best in the contemporary era. Heaney was born in 1939 into a Roman Catholic farming
family in Mossbawn, County Derry in Northern Ireland. Being a Roman Catholic in Northern Ireland meant living on the wrong side of the political divide. Ireland had been colonized since the 12th century by Britain. However, in 1800 by the Act of Union passed by the parliament in Westminster, Ireland was legally annexed by Britain and made a part of the United Kingdom. This resulted into a series of ant-colonial struggles mostly violent such as the one commemorated by W.B.Yeats in his poem “Easter Rising” (1916). Ireland got independence in 1922, but, like India, it was partitioned on religious grounds. Northern Ireland, which consisted of the province of Ulster, had a majority Protestant population, and chose to remain with the United Kingdom, because historically the Protestants descended from the Nobility, who were planted from Britain to control the Irish land and trade. Religiously, they had affinity with Britain, and therefore, they were not in favour of an independent Ireland fearing the dominance of the Catholic population, who were the majority people taken as a whole. The Republic of Ireland which was dominated by the Catholics attained freedom.

Born in a Catholic family in Northern Ireland made Heaney a member of the minority community, a fact that molded his poetic sensibility to a great extent. Though he came from a peasant’s family, Heaney was bright in studies from childhood and was destined for intellectual and creative vocation. However, his rural roots shaped his poetry with as much intensity as his Catholic faith. In his poem ‘Digging,’ the first poem in his first collection *Death of a Naturalist* he recollects his father digging potatoes, and his grandfather cutting “more turf in a day,” and then says

But I’ve no spade to follow men like them  
Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I’ll dig with it.

Having won a scholarship to Queen’s University, Belfast, Heaney left Derry for higher studies. He pursued degree in English language and literature, and graduated with a First class in 1961. Philip Hobsbaum, one of the teachers at the university arranged regular workshops for poets and critics. Some of the students who came to participate in these workshops were those who later became leading Irish poets such as Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, and Heaney himself. These poets were casually referred to as the Group, and wrote poetry generally in imitation of the Movement poets of England like Philip Larkin, though Heaney would admit other influences as well such as those of Yeats, Hopkins, and Hughes. Like the poems of the Movement group, their poetry also followed the traditional forms and modes, and depicted usual and routine events in casual, matter-of-fact manner. Heaney’s first collection of verse was published in 1966, and it was called *Death of a Naturalist* (1966). The poems in this collection bear the imprint of the Group, and are composed in the traditional modes.

*Death of a Naturalist* (1966), as well as his second volume of poetry *Door into the Dark* (1969), consists of poems that present Heaney’s childhood experiences in his village, those related to the life of the farmers. The poem resounds with sensitive and colorful images of the nature blended with poet’s narrative about certain experiences. It is his vivid and sensuous description of nature that got Heaney the title of a “bucolic poet” in the early part of his career. However, nature and natural objects in these poems appear more like they do in the poetry
of Ted Hughes, whose influence is clearly evident. Nature comes in these poems as the objective other, often a stranger, though with a powerful presence, often targeted as also targeting the human observer.

Apart from “Death of a Naturalist” that you will read in detail later, another poem from his first collection which became very popular was “Mid-Term Break,” a poem he wrote remembering the death of his four year old brother. The title derives from the fact that he was called back home in the middle of the term from his school to be present at the funeral of his brother:

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
He lay in the four foot box as in his cot.
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

The year 1966 was remarkable in Heaney’s life for another reason. He accepted a teaching position at the School of English at Queen’s University, and remained there till 1972.

In late 1960s violence erupted in Northern Ireland, which was to last for three decades, the 1970s being most violent. In 1972 came his third collection of poetry called Wintering Out (1972), which expressed his calm and considered response to the conflict between the Protestants and the Catholics in Northern Ireland. He dealt with the subject from a distance, often suggesting that animosity and violence was pointless, no matter which faction one belonged to.

The Troubles, as the ethnic conflict in Northern Ireland came to be called, made the life of the Catholic minority extremely oppressive. Heaney and his family decided to move to the Republic of Ireland, when an offer came their way of a house in County Wicklow. His next volume of poetry called North (1975) was published in 1975, which chose for its subject the countless people murdered in Ireland over the ages as a result of the colonial invasion of Britain. In poems such as “The Tollund Man,” with brilliant imagination he envisions bodies taken out of the bogs, bodies that were murdered, their throat slit or strangulated. He had read in a book called Bog People (1969) by P.V.Glob about the archaeological finding of the Iron Age bodies in Denmark, which were subsequently preserved. Heaney associates the ancient ritual sacrifices of the Iron Age with the political murder and martyrdom of the Irish people for centuries. In another poem from this collection, “Act of Union” Heaney does a brilliant interlocking of the geographical and political positions of England and Ireland through a narrative of sexual invasion and control. He presents Ireland as feminine, and England as masculine, and shows how the masculine England had encircled and sexually invaded and assaulted the feminine Ireland.


In 1981, Heaney was invited by the English department of Harvard University, and he remained associated with the university till 1996, spending his time
between Boston and Dublin. He was elected the Oxford Professor of Poetry in 1989, and in 1995 he was conferred the Noble Prize for literature. These awards and recognitions suggest the towering influence of Heaney as a poet in the second half of the twentieth century. He has wielded a great influence among the public, and his opinion on the political events in Ireland has been constantly sought by both national and international media. His status as a public poet had considerably influenced his poetry. There is always a consciousness running through his poems that they might be taken as statements on the political developments in Ireland, especially the factional strife and the violent struggle between the British forces and the Irish revolutionaries. However, for Heaney, a poem is not a political propaganda; it uses the political experiences to perfect the artistic purpose rather than being exploited by a particular ideology. It is for this reason that the Irish nationalists nursed a grudge against him for not directly voicing the atrocities committed by the British forces on the Catholic minority of Northern Ireland.

Seamus Heaney died at the age of 74 on 30 August 2013.

As you have read this note on the life and works of Seamus Heaney, evaluate your understanding of the poet by answering the questions given below as part of the first exercise of this unit.

Self-check Exercise I

1) Where was Seamus Heaney born, and to which nationality did he belong?
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2) What did his father and grandfather do for living? How did it shape Heaney’s poetic sensibility?
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3) When Ireland was made a part of the United Kingdom? How did Ireland’s colonization by England affect Heaney as a person and as a poet?
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4) Why did Seamus Heaney move from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland?
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5) What came to be called Troubles about Northern Ireland?
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6) How did Heaney respond in his poetry to the violence in Northern Ireland?
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7) When Heaney was awarded the Noble Prize for literature?
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8) Who were the poets who influenced Seamus Heaney?
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25.3 DEATH OF A NATURALIST

25.3.1 Introduction

A naturalist is a person who studies nature, especially plants and animals in the natural surroundings. The poem that you are about to read is about the metaphorical death of the naturalist in the young speaker of the poem, a school boy, presumably the poet himself in his young age. The poem presents in two stanzas an experience on a particular hot day with the frogspawn, tadpoles, and the frogs at a flax-dam, which resulted into the death of the naturalist in him. However, the poem also recollects that phase of innocent naturalist in him, which made him perceive, collect, and observe the frogspawn break into tadpoles in the jar at home and school. The poem explores an event and young naturalist’s response to it that changed him from being a naturalist to somebody who developed revulsion towards naturalism. The poem also connotes a trespass committed by the innocent boy by taking away the frogspawn from the male frogs. In the second stanza, you will get a sense of impending punishment coming the young poet’s way. The atmospheres of “the flax-dam” gets threatening as the male frogs become warring contingents, and make the place noisy with their angry croaking; the spawn seem to be preparing to clutch his hands, as the poet escapes.

25.3.2 The Text

All year the flax-dam festered in the heart
Of the townland; green and heavy headed
Flax had rotted there, weighted down by huge sods.
Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun.
Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles
Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.
There were dragon-flies, spotted butterflies,
But best of all was the warm thick slobber
Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water
In the shade of the banks. Here, every spring
I would fill jampotfuls of the jellied
Specks to range on window-sills at home,
On shelves at school, and wait and watch until
The fattening dots burst into nimble-
Swimming tadpoles. Miss Walls would tell us how
The daddy frog was called a bullfrog
And how he croaked and how the mammy frog
Laid hundreds of little eggs and this was
Frogspawn. You could tell the weather by frogs too
For they were yellow in the sun and brown
In rain.

Then one hot day when fields were rank
With cowdung in the grass the angry frogs
Invaded the flax-dam; I ducked through hedges
To a coarse croaking that I had not heard
Before. The air was thick with a bass chorus.
Right down the dam gross-bellied frogs were cocked
On sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails. Some hopped:
The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat
Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.
I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings
Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.

Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>flax</td>
<td>a plant having blue flowers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flax-dam</td>
<td>not a dam, buta pool or natural pond in Northern Ireland. In order to extract fiber out of flax to be used in clothe making, bunches of flax are kept for a few weeks so that their stems become soft. As they gradually decompose, the flax give a very unpleasant smell as is evident in the poem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fester</td>
<td>to become decay or rot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>townland</td>
<td>a small administrative region in Ireland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sod</td>
<td>turf or grassy ground.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>swelter</td>
<td>to sweat or suffer from extreme heat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slobber</td>
<td>to drop saliva from the mouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frogspawn</td>
<td>frog egg covered by translucent jelly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plop</td>
<td>to drop with a sound similarly produced when an object falls into water</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

25.3.3 Analysis

The title of the poem is an ironic exaggeration. As a scientist, a naturalist would not be bothered about the “coarse croaking” of the “angry frogs.” But it provides the much needed humour to the poem; the young poet’s initial fascination with the frogspawn and the frogs is described as that of a naturalist. However, he does collect and observe the frogspawn in a jar; so the poet would like to makes us believe that the boy was a naturalist in the making, and the incident on “one hot day,” which holds the key to the thematic and tonal transformation of the poem results in the death of the naturalist in him.

The poem is composed in a blank verse. A blank verse consists of unrhymed iambic pentameter lines. An iambic is an arrangement of sound in poetry, in which an unaccented or unstressed syllable is followed by an accented or stressed one. The word pentameter suggests a rhythmic pattern in poetry in which there are five stressed syllables in a line. So, in other words, the poem is composed in unrhymed lines that create a certain rhythm due to having five unstressed syllable each followed by five stressed syllables. The following extract from the poem illustrate the blank verse:

Then one hot day when fields were rank
With cowdung in the grass the angry frogs
Invaded the flax-dam; I ducked through hedges
To a coarse croaking that I had not heard
Before. The air was thick with a bass chorus
The poem is arranged into two stanzas of unequal length. The first stanza consists of 21 lines, whereas the second stanza has only 12 lines. The first stanza takes a much longer space, because it has to develop the setting, mood, atmosphere, and set the tone of the poem. It has also to introduce the speaking voice of the poem, a young boy, still innocent, but eager to know the natural phenomenon, who regularly visits “the flax-dam” with inquisitive amusement, and a genuine interest bordering on pleasure and knowledge about the natural objects, especially frogspawn, and frogs in this case.

The setting of the poem is “the flax-dam.” Since it constitutes the defining experience of the poem, its setting is developed elaborately till the 10th line of the poem. The young poet understandably visits this place quite often, and “every spring” he “would fill jampotfuls” of the frogspawn to keep at home and school. The poem adopts a neutral tone even though a sense of decaying atmosphere of “flax-dam” is being conveyed, which is appropriate of course considering the fact that the young poet is a naturalist, a biologist, a detached observer till the first stanza of the poem. Yet this neutrality is not an absolute one, as that of an adult but is interspersed with the inquisitiveness of a child.

As the poem concentrates on the setting, Heaney’s talent with creating sensuous description becomes evident. The poem is descriptive no doubt in this part, but words and sounds are so chosen to lend music to the description of the pool, the natural beings and objects living in and around it. The first line itself presents an interlocking of assonance and alliteration in the phrase “the flax-dam festered in the heart:” and so does the second line: “green and heavy-headed.” It is an excellent demonstration of how alliterative and assonant sound patterns are used to suggest the decaying state of the place. It takes only three words, all verbs, in a space of three lines, to suggest decay and decomposition. The words “festered” and “rotted,” and “weighted produce an alliterative resonance to suggest this decaying atmosphere:

All year the flax-dam festered in the heart
Of the townland; green and heavy headed
Flax had rotted there,

Bunches of flax are traditionally kept in a pool in Northern Ireland to soften their stems so that fiber could be extracted from them. The young poet visits this pool all through the year, and observes the decaying flax under the weight of the “huge sods.” It rots and “festers” in the water of the pool, and then becomes hot in the extreme heat of the sun. The poet uses personification and pathetic fallacy, as he gives human attributes to both the flax as well as the sun:

Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun
Another poetic device that blends sound and sense in the poem is onomatopoeia. Among the developments in the pool, including the presence and the sounds of various kinds of flies such as “bluebottles,” “dragon-flies,” and “spotted butterflies,” the one that catches the attention of the young poet most is the drooling saliva of the frogspawn:

But best of all was the warm thick slobber
Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water
In the shade of the banks.
The sounds produced by “warm thick slobber” suggests repulsive feel of the object if touched, so does the sound “clotted water,” the bed of the frogspawn. The fact such a sight only increases the curiosity of the young poet for “jellied specks” confirms his claim to the status of a budding naturalist.

Another figure of speech which suggests the sense of repulsion and decay about the place is oxymoron, which occurs in the phrase “Bubbles gargles delicately.” The gargling of the festering bubbles cannot be “delicate” in a normal perception; its use here again connotes the curiosity and inquisitiveness of the young naturalist. The young poet watches with curiosity jellied frogspawn develop into “fattening dots” in the jar, and then into “swimming tadpoles.” The structure of the last 7 lines of the poem conveys the innocence of the young boy, especially in the use of “and” to relate every fact about “the daddy frog” and the “mammy frog.” The tone of the poem becomes mild, suggestive of the innocent curiosity of the poet. The teacher at school uses the language of the children:

The daddy frog was called a bullfrog
And how he croaked and how the mammy frog
Laid hundreds of little eggs and this was
Frogspawn.

The fact that one could forecast the weather by looking whether the frogs were yellow or brown is also related to suggest the innocence as well as the confident curiosity of the young boy.

The first phrase of the second stanza introduces an abrupt break in thought with the expression “The one hot day,” suggesting a radical reversal of the condition. Hereafter, the poem follows an entirely different movement. The frogs in the pool gear for revenge against the young poet for intrusion and forceful evacuation of the frogspawn.

The young naturalist, by filling “jampotfuls of the jellied/Specks to range of window-sills at home, /On shelves at school” intruded in the territory of the frogs, and forced a separation of the frogspawn from the frogs. The setting in the second stanza has transformed into that of a battlefield:

Then one hot day when fields were rank
With cowdung in the grass the angry frogs
Invaded the flax-dam;

The frogs assume a menacing posture with their “coarse croaking” which the poet had not been used to. As an inferior enemy, the poet “ducked through the hedges.” The place smelled unpleasant, of the cow dung, and the croaking sounded coarse as well. The poet uses the language of metaphor followed by a simile to suggest the sense of disgusting sound, and sight of the place as well as the frogs.

The air was thick with a bass chorus
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…; their loose necks pulsed like sails.

The poet again uses onomatopoeia to communicate the young boy’s perception of the immediate threat from the frogs. The sounds ‘slap’ and ‘plop’ in the 8th line of
the second stanza suggest a sense of assault from the frogs. The poet experiences fear as well as repulsion. His observation of the “gross-bellied frogs” whose “loose necks pulsed like sails” do not suggest the objective response of a naturalist but the disgust experienced by a fearful boy. The frogs pose threats as they “sat/Poised like mud grenades,” but they also fill him with loathing, as he sees “their blunt heads farting.” The poet is overcome by a sense of nausea; he turns away from “the fax-dam” and runs knowing that the frogs, “the great slime kings” had invaded the place, and wanted revenge for his intrusion. The same spawn that he so earnestly held up in his hand to put into his jar seem to be ready to “clutch” his hand if he “dipped” it in the spawn.

The poem is so typical of the early poems of Seamus Heaney, as it vividly captures an experience of the natural world with immediacy of sounds, sights, and smells. One of the greatest qualities of the poet has been his ability to let meaning emerge from sounds, and he has successfully demonstrated that in this poem, as in all of his poems.

Glossary

assonance : repetition of similar vowel sounds in adjacent words.

alliteration : repetition of similar sounds, especially consonantal, at the beginning of the words or in a pattern of stressed syllables.

personification : a figure of speech wherein inanimate objects or abstractions are addressed as human beings.

pathetic fallacy : a literary device whereby human feelings are attributed to inanimate objects or nature.

onomatopoeia : words so formed or used that their sounds relate to the object or meaning they refer to.

oxymoron : a figure of speech in which obviously contradictory terms appear together.

Self-check Exercise II

1) Who is the speaker of the poem? How does his voice change through the poem?

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2) With reference to an image each from the first and the second stanza describe Heaney’s style as a nature poet. How different is he from William Wordsworth?

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3) What does the title “Death of a Naturalist” imply?
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4) In the first stanza, the poet uses synesthesia, or a poetic device whereby the poet associates impressions produced by one sense with the ones produced by another sense. Discuss the lines where it occurs.
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5) How does the poem create associative patterns of sound and sense?
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25.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you read about the Irish poet Seamus Heaney. You were given a brief biographical note about his life as well as his works. Thereafter, we read his poem “Death of a Naturalist,” as well as its analysis. You also answered the questions put to you in Exercise 1 and Exercise 2. Now you should be able to form a critical judgment on the Seamus Heaney and his early poetry, as well as develop a perspective on his later poetry that you may yourself like to read.

25.5 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercises I

1) Seamus Heaney was born in County Derry in Northern Ireland, which is a part of United Kingdom. In 1972, however, he moved Glanmore, County Wicklow, in the Republic of Ireland. Heaney always maintained that he was an Irish by nationality, and not British though he was born in Northern Ireland.

2) Heaney’s grandfather and father were farmers. His early childhood at his farms and his experience of rural life amidst natural surroundings influenced
the poetic sensibility of the poet. It gave him themes, images, characters, situations, as well as a certain music that resulted by blending the Irish and English speech rhythms.

3) Ireland was forcefully made part of the United Kingdom by an act passed by the colonial parliament in Westminster in 1800 called the Act of Union. Heaney wrote his poetry with a deep sense of Irishness in him. Several of his poems such as “Act of Union” deal with Britain’s colonization of Ireland. The poems invoke the physical suffering and mutilation as well as mental trauma faced by the Irish, as well as their anti-colonial struggles.

4) Seamus Heaney moved from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland, because of the Troubles, the ethnic conflict which ravaged Northern Ireland from late 1960s to the 1990s.

5) The Troubles refers to the political conflict between the Protestant and Catholics in Northern Ireland, though it was a national conflict rather than religious. The Protestants who were the majority population in the region were called the loyalists or unionists, because they wanted Northern Ireland to be a part of the United Kingdom, whereas the Catholics demanded freedom of Northern Ireland from the British and its merger with the Republic of Ireland. This contentious issue spilled over into three decades of violence since the late 1960s.

6) Heaney responded to the violence in Northern in an oblique and restrained manner. Though he lamented the loss of the innocent Irish at the hands of the British colonial forces, he also avoided speaking for the violent Irish revolutionaries, the member of the IRA.

7) Heaney won the Noble Prize for literature in 1995.

8) The poets who influenced Heaney were Ted Hughes, W.B. Yeats, Robert Lowell and W.B. Yeats.

Self-check Exercises II

1) The speaker of the poem is a young boy. His voice in the poem undergoes a change as the poem moves from the first stanza to the second stanza. The innocent curiosity and inquisitive delight in the boy while observing “the flax-dam,” the plants, flies and frogspawn is related in a relaxed, neutral, as well positive tone. In the second stanza, however, the speaker becomes fearful, circumspect, and disgusted, as the frogs invade the pool, and threaten him with the “coarse croaking.” The tone, therefore, becomes grave and serious.

2) Heaney as a nature poet is different from Wordsworth in his observation of natural objects. Unlike in Wordsworth’s poetry, the speaker or poet’s inner feelings do not influence the character of the objects that are observed in their full strangeness from the speaker. The image “the flax-dam festered” in the first stanza or “the slap and plop” in the second stanza communicates almost an unemotional portrayal of nature, which, however, grows upon the minds of the readers with its alien intensity.
3) The title of the poem implies a radical transformation in the young speaker’s attitude to natural and natural beings. From being an ardent lover and student of the nature in the first stanza, in the second stanza he undergoes a complete loss of naturalism. His intrusion and forceful removal of the frogspawn in the first stanza provoke the frogs to invade “the flax-dam” in the second and croak hoarsely in unison as if to militarily threaten the boy with punishment. This experience produces an altered perception in the boy as he now finds the pool with frogs and frogspawn sickening and repulsive. That is the death of a naturalist in him.

4) The lines “… bluebottles/ Wove a strong gauze of sound around smell” is an instance of synaesthesia. The poet blends the sense of sound and smell to enhance the feeling of decaying atmosphere of the pool.

5) The poem creates associative patterns of sound and sense by using poetic devices such as alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia.