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# UNIT 3 CLIMAX

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## Structure

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## 3.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

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This Unit discusses the concept of climax in respect of poetry, with particular reference to lyric poetry.

You will learn that

- the lyric is the most popular kind of poetry, capable of articulating one's musings or in most feelings in such a way as to make everyone feel them as his or her own; requiring the right words, rhythms and images;
- the composition of a poem is not entirely preplanned or spontaneous, implying a poetic phenomenology which suggests incrementality;
- a poem should be characterized by a 'unity of impression'; i.e., it should be 'one, the parts of which mutually support and explain each other';
- the structures of poetry are of two kinds — 'static' and 'dynamic' — with the climax occurring in a dynamic or progression pattern rather than in a static pattern;
- there are different ways of realizing the climax, i.e., that stage in the making of the poem which orchestrates its tense affects to the highest intensity;
- climax, literally meaning a ladder, may spell the occurrence of multiple climaxes which are like smaller peaks to be climbed up to reach the higher peak;
- the climax may be followed by a denouement, since every poem need not end with a climax;
- the lyric, however brief, may have a progression pattern.

At the end of this Unit you will be able to (1) identify the climax in a poem and (2) successfully incorporate climax into your own poem in order to give it shape and meaning.

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## 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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Of the three kinds of poetry — epic, dramatic and lyric — the lyric is probably the youngest and nowadays, the most extensively developed. It has had a long gestation period; but now it can stand on its own feet. The lyric is the direct expression of the human mind, though it many times hides behind different masks — personae. When Shakespeare wrote: 'To be or not to be — That is the question ...', he was dramatising Hamlet's problem; even so, it seems to be Shakespeare's own voice; and every one else's. Thus, one's own intimate musings become everyman's musings. Even a personal voice can be universalised, if deep enough. A lyric, however personal, thus becomes every soul's agony. Hence its appeal.

The lyric is generally short. The reason given by some writers is that deep feelings are short-lived. This is rather an unsatisfactory explanation. But let us not strain the point. For the purpose of this lesson, a lyric is any short poem that can express a poet's personal emotions, does not primarily tell a story, and has the form and musical quality of a song.

Rhyme, rhythm, assonance — no poet consciously 'uses' them, except perhaps in the days of his apprenticeship. More gifted poets find that language is assisting them by words, rhythms and images simultaneously as they sit down to write. They often revise, getting the feel of their earlier draft, and mould a better whole. No less an artist than D.R. Bendre described his very subtle and beautiful rhymes as 'Saha-Ja', born jointly with his poem. And no less an artist than Wallace Stevens described his experience of writing verse as 'passing through sudden rightnesses'. By 'sudden' he means 'unexpected'. All his life he wrote free verse, and yet, he was aware of the unexpected cooperation he got from the language itself.

You may be a beginner, but some day, you too can hope for this experience — of the unsuspected support you get from language.

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### 3.2 COMPOSITION OF POETRY : NEITHER PREPLANNED NOR SPONTANEOUS ENTIRELY

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In the exposition given above, you might have noticed two concepts peeping in. Poets do not write to a pre-planned programme. Nor is the process a 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' (Wordsworth's phrase). Sometimes, poets begin with a certain idea for a poem, but end up with an entirely different poem. Sometimes, the revised versions are altogether different from the original draft. All his life, W. B. Yeats revised his poems. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is one third of what he originally wrote, as revised by Ezra Pound. Poetry might fetch no money; but it is a serious business. The poet does not offload his emotions in the poem. This is the phenomenology of poem. T.S. Eliot makes fun of Sir Philip Sidney's formula: 'Fool, look into thine heart and write'. We have to look deeper into our intestines. Also into our cerebral cortex. Our unconscious mind, the rag-and-bone shop of our inner being, has something to contribute to Yeats's phrase.

The poetic phenomenology suggests incrementality. The poet does not write to a previously chalked out programme. Every word and line he writes suggests to him the word or line which follows. Every word or line provides a context, and suggests the appropriate next line. All these things are part of the poet's mind. Even so, he yields to the context and builds everything from contextuality. Thus is born the music and logic of a poem. The logic of poetry is different from the ordinary logic, exactly as the music of poetry is different from ordinary music.

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### 3.3 UNITY OF THE POEM – UNITY OF IMPRESSION

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Imagination is active throughout the process of a poem's creation. The poet judges the 'rightness' of words and lines to accord with the context each word creates. He judges the 'rightness' to accord with what he is wanting to say. Therefore, apart from the dictates of context, his intent also governs the development of the poem. To simplify the process, poets and critics have used phrases like 'expression of the imagination', 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', and 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'; Shelley, Wordsworth and Keats who used such chaotic, portmanteau, summative words were not wrong, but imprecise. More disciplined, philosophic minds have given more precise descriptions. As Coleridge said: A poem should be 'one, the parts of which mutually support and explain each other'.

No description can be adequate; but all uphold the concept of the 'Unity' of the poem. A good poem orchestrates the various parts into a whole to create a distinct state of mind. It works incrementally; and communicates a 'unity of impression', in the words of Edgar Allan Poe.

## 3.4 STRUCTURE AND INCREMENTALITY

Structured incrementality suggests two opposed strains in a poem. Structure suggests discipline to work a poem to its proper climax. Incrementality suggests freedom and a self-regulating mechanism. Climax (or climaxes) is that stage in the making of the poem which orchestrates the tense effects of poem to its highest intensity.

### 3.4.1 Kinds of structures — static and dynamic, static patterns and dynamic or progression patterns

Structures of two kinds are met with in poetry — 'static' and 'dynamic'. Dynamic patterns are technically known as 'progression patterns'. Before we take up progression patterns, let us finish with static patterns.

I strove with none, for none was worth my strife.  
 Nature I loved and, next to Nature, Art:  
 I warmed both hands before the fire of life;  
 It sinks, and I am ready to depart.

Music of poetry includes its meaning. This short poem of W.S. Landor, written at the end of his long life, is intended to be a summation of his life. It begins with his quiet, unquarrelsome life, with contempt for the enemies he did not make. His love for Nature comes first, his love for Art comes next. His failing vitality and his willing resignation to Death come last. It is a brilliant short poem. Its shortness is made inevitable by the opening statement itself. Both the beginning and abrupt, ironic end are rendered inevitable. It promises no climax, because it is summatory. It is a good example of the static structure.

Here is another poem of Landor with tongue-in-cheek humour:

Stand close around, ye Stygian set,  
 With Dirce in one boat conveyed!  
 Or Charon, seeing, may forget  
 That he is old and she a shade.

(Dirce — the name of a dead beautiful girl. Charon — the boatman who ferries the dead souls across the river Lethe, river of Forgetfulness.)

The poet summons the dead spirits of Hell (Hades) to keep watch, lest the seasoned boatman Charon should lay hands on the beautiful temptress Dirce, 'forgetting' that he is old and the boatman of Lethe; and she is no longer in flesh, but already a spirit. The poem is short; but it has a 'progression pattern'. Asking the ghosts of Hell to keep watch is itself suggestive, and we can anticipate some unexpected development in the poem. Note the irony of Charon's 'forgetting' (He is like our Chitragupta, and forgets nothing). Using the Latin legend, Landor has built up an action leading to a climax.

### 3.4.2 Progression pattern and climax

Poems of a progression pattern lead to a climax generally; poems of static pattern do not. Their force is evenly distributed all through the poem. You cannot anticipate the climax. There are no suggestions of expectancy or 'suspense'. Suspense is the prelude to climax.

Let us take a simpler instance of progression pattern:

Jack and Jill went up the Hill  
 To fetch a pail of water  
 Jack fell down and broke his crown  
 And Jill came tumbling after.

This is a favourite nursery rhyme for the kindergarten. But no less a poet than Yeats described it as an immortal poem which will survive for ages. You will catch the explosive irony of the poem if you ask yourself: 'Why did they go up a hill for water?' They should have gone to a well, a stream or a spring if their objective was water. They are lovers and have gone up a hill for a secret meeting, and bluffed their neighbours that they would go up for a pail of water. Once this ironic meaning is built into the beginning

of a poem, the necessary explosion has to follow. Both fall down to inevitable disaster.

However, the finest ironic line in this poem comes earlier; the following lines merely describe the physical disaster. Therefore, it has become a minor poem, fit only for kindergartens. It is anticlimatic in effect. The disaster is not tuned well to the subtle irony of going up the hill for water. This 'up-hill task' has deprived the importance of its progression pattern.

**Activity 1**

i) Distinguish between static and dynamic patterns giving illustrations from your reading. (70 words)

ii) Consider the importance of 'climax' to a poem. (70 words)

(Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit)

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**3.5 CLIMAX : DIFFERENT APPROACHES**

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The climax should be preserved for a later phase of the poem's progression. Of course, there are exceptions. Donne started his poem: 'The Canonization' with the memorable line: 'For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love'. The rest of the poem is an elaboration of the theme in a series of climatic lines, one better than the other; there is a progression of sorts. Donne had a quick mind and he could not put down his exquisite creativity in anything less than climaxes. He used his metaphysical faculty to elaborate his simplest emotions which were so tense that they could withstand this overloading. More conscious artists introduce a deliberate flatness in earlier lines to slowly work up an inevitable climax. Shelley, a passionate poet, begins with:

The sun is warm: the sky is clear,  
a line factual and descriptive; but works up an intensity which tires him to say:

I could lie down like a tired child.  
So, too, his 'Ozymandias' which begins with the flattest lines ever:

I met a traveller from an antique land

But slowly, the poem develops strength. The traveller tells him of a broken statue with a face that the sculptor had depicted so well: 'The wrinkled lip', 'the sneer of cold command', 'the frown'; there lies a broken hand detached from the statue, so realistically carved: 'The hand that mocked them (the subjects) and the heart that fed'. Obviously the king is a benevolent tyrant. Then comes the double-edged climax: on the pedestal are carved these words: 'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!' What the king meant was, 'The mightiest cannot achieve more glory than I did!' but in the present condition of the statue, it means, even the mightiest are ruined like this monument. The second sense is reinforced in the last three lines: 'Nothing beside remains. Round the decay/Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare/The lone and level sands stretch far away.' That is a fine rounding off, re-emphasising the desolation or futility of worldly glory.

Shelley had had his more impetuous moods too, as in 'Ode to the West Wind'. In this poem, he leaps from peak to peak as Donne does. The meaning is not such an essential element in the poem as the rhythm and word music. The poem has a progression pattern, though it is drowned in the tumultuous music of the upheaval:

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,  
Pestilence-stricken multitudes....

The pounding beat of the first line dribbles into the equally striking but different music of the following line. After feeding us on the impetuositities of this variety, the poem is rounded off with a fine epigram. 'If winter comes, can spring be far behind?' The strategy is reserved. After leaping from peak to peak, Shelley ends with a deliberately quiet line in which is its flattened climax. Climax it is, in contrast to the restless tumult of the previous stanzas, as if Shelley, finally found a plateau worth his rest. Shelley does not appeal to modern taste precisely for his restlessness and lack of conscious artistry. But learners should study his poetry.

Keats is a more self-conscious artist and his four long poems are perfect instances of the progression pattern. He consciously flattens and launders his effects for the more impressive line to follow. He flattens so as to fill the next climax with more sophisticated tension. Let us study the climaxes in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' which begins with.

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,  
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,

Time does not flow with the scenes carved on the Grecian urn. It has frozen. Figures of gods and men carved are in their memorable attitudes — girls pursued by gods; the girls struggling to free themselves. The next moment, the postures would have changed. But the artist has caught an intense moment in the flux of the story and held them in their most memorable posture of beauty, held them in perpetual arrest. Time has slowed down. What pose they will assume the next moment is of no interest to the artist who carved them. This is a sufficient payload for the series of musings which follow.

The first climax comes at the beginning of the next stanza:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter; therefore, Ye soft pipes, play on;

Some pipers are making music on their pipes, or are so depicted. Keats does not hear the music. But the way they bend or hold aloft their pipes is music enough for the poet — it is sweeter still. What is music? In Mysore, wood carvers make Krishna figures in sandal wood. The triple-bent figure of Krishna playing on a flute and the cow standing at his back with its fond, lofted head as though in fascination, show complete absorption in the music; that is as much music as the eye can see. Because the music is in the lines of the figurine it is not to be heard but only seen.

This epigram helps Keats to further his musings on decay and fatigue generated by the tensions of life and love which are the effects of the rapidly moving time. Then, inevitably comes a perfect conclusion — both musical and meaningful:

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty', — that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all you need to know.

Much has been written on the philosophy of these mysterious lines. Our only concern is with the perfect climax which rounds off with a bang the uncertain philosophy of the poem. The perfect paradox which arises from the whole context of its argument takes the poem to its proper climax. Minor peaks such as 'those unheard are sweeter' prepare the reader for the finale. We get a feeling that we are climbing up smaller peaks to reach a peak; and the minor peaks are deliberately moderated to lead to the climax. 'Climax' literally means a ladder.

Note that Keats succeeded every time.

### 3.6 CLIMAX AND DENOUEMENT

Climax is the tensest moment in a poem (which is after all mental action).

Climax could be followed by a *denouement*. Every poem need not end with a climax. The climber of a ladder finds it uncomfortable to perch on the highest rung of the ladder, so too the reader. The climax often is followed by a denouement — a partial descent, appropriate to the thrust of the poem.

Keats provides an admirable instance in his 'Ode to a Nightingale': The poet hears a nightingale: his heart sinks in ecstasy. He wants to 'fade away' and 'fly to thee' far away from his world-weariness and this earth's worries. With some initial hesitation, he gets into a moon-lit bush on the 'viewless wings of Poesie'. He cannot see flowers around him, but guesses each by smell. All along, he has desired death as cessation of world's aches and pains; but, 'Thou was not born for death, immortal Bird!' (Note that 'Bird' is spelt with capital B). Already the bird has become symbol. To arrive at this transfiguration, Keats has written (struggled) with sixty exquisite lines. Now he has crowned the bird with a capital B. Symbols are not inherent in objects. Our perception makes them symbols. We have to work objects to symbolise intensity. 'Symbolic of what?' I shall not answer the question. Song in the heart of the world, 'Pleasure Principle' (to borrow from Freud), 'Eros', Krishna's Flute, 'Beauty' to borrow from Keats' ... call it what you may. But immortal because it symbolises the Ecstasy which makes the world move and keeps up its will to live. In spite of his own misery, Keats was aware of this positive force; he was an optimist. The nightingale's melody, perhaps, kept up the sinking life and hope of Ruth (in the Bible) from a deep depression. The same melody kept ancient ruins intact amidst roaring seas:

The same that oft-times hath  
Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

That memorable line marks the climax of the poem by its intensity. The last rung of the ladder is climbed and there is nothing further to go. Inevitably, Keats climbed down, on hearing the word 'forlorn', he himself wrote:

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell  
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!  
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well

Then follows the nightingale's plaintive anthem from treetop to treetop, across the meadow, over the stream, up the hillside; and finally buried deep in the next valley-glades. This is a perfect denouement, — the resolution of the tense moment. Keats climbs down, but not so fast straight to ground level.

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?  
Fled is that music: — Do I wake or sleep?

Still dazed, still remembering the intensity of the dream. If a real climax is reached, the poet will do well to keep the dying intensity for a while before he goes silent. It is risky for both the poet and the reader to abruptly collapse to ground without a denouement, a gradual unwinding.

Let us conclude this lesson on climax with a more personal utterance: Milton's 'On his Blindness':

When I consider how my light is spent  
 Ere half my days in this dark world and wide  
 And that one talent which is death to hide  
 Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent  
 To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
 My true account, lest He returning chide  
 'Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?'  
 I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent  
 That murmur, soon replies, 'God doth not need  
 Either man's work or his own gifts/Who best  
 Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best/His state  
 Is kingly: thousands at his bidding sped  
 And post o'er land and ocean without rest;  
 They also serve who only stand and wait.

Milton went stone-blind sometime in the middle of his eventful career. He was a profoundly religious thinker. The English Revolution led by Cromwell (which was a religious revolt) was already on the decline. Milton was itching to revitalise it, when he went blind. 'My God! Still half my life to live, in this darkness! At a time when I am eager to serve my God. What a waste! What self-defending betrayal by God!..' Such a thought might appear comic to us. But not to Milton, who is aware of the 'fondness' of the thought (foolishness) The only 'Talent' he has makes severe demands on the poet's labour: but is God such a tyrant to 'exact day-labour, light denied?' is his murmur (mild complaint). This awareness of the paradox (a lot of tasks to do; having the right talent for work; and disability to do anything owing to his blindness) is the first concern. Desire to give a worthy account of the talent God has given, (the line contains a double meaning, based on a parable from the Bible) motivates that 'fond' (foolish) question. The meaning is complete.

What Patience tells him is the next minor climax. Does God need Milton's service? Or the return of His own gift? (Gift is what is given; also talent.) God, at his back, has hundreds of angels to do his bidding. God is not so poor. Milton is keenly made aware of the 'Fondness' of his own protest.

The real climax rounds off the poem. The first telling epigram takes the poem to an exquisite diapason (the peak point). 'Who best bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best.' This peak point is reached with telling dignity. The final epigram which is a complete answer to Milton's plaint, returning him to his personal theme: an equally dignified denouement: 'They also serve who only stand and wait'. Since these words are directly addressed to Milton, this could be a minor peak to which Milton descends from the highest climax he had reached — a denouement.

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### 3.7 LYRIC AND ITS DISTINCTIVENESS

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A lyric, however brief, if it has a progression pattern, has its Aristotelian structure: Payload, the first spark, explosion, and the gathering together to reconciliation. If you hear a great Khayal singer, you can discern these phases of exposition complication, crisis, denouement, climax, reversal, rounding-off. Lyric, being a short composition, may not use all these phases; sometimes, the lyric may be poorer, or richer by the omission. But it is a whole. All one can do is to discern the obvious phases and enrich one's own reading.

This lesson has not taken into account poems with a twist at the end; much excellent modern verse; free verse; comic verse; etc. They have their own structures; and some have an conventional a structure as any earlier verse. The aim was to illustrate climax, not represent schools of poetry.

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### 3.8 SUMMING UP

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The lyric, the most extensively developed form of poetry is capable of articulating your musings or intimate feelings in such a way as to make every reader feel them as his or her

own. Though the term, ‘lyric’ is derived from ‘lyre’; it goes by the music of language and realises itself through the ‘right’ words and rhythms. Climax can be best illustrated in the lyric form of poetry.

- The poem, the work of creative imagination, is neither a pre-planned one nor ‘a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’, since the poetic phenomenology suggests incrementality, the poem shaping itself as it progresses.
- The poem realises its value and effect through its unity; i.e. by being or becoming ‘one, the parts of which mutually support and explain each other’.
- Poetry has two kinds of structures — static and dynamic and the climax occurs in a dynamic or progression pattern rather than in a static pattern in which the force is evenly distributed with no suggestion of expectancy or suspense needed for ‘climax’.
- There are different approaches to, and diverse ways of, realising the climax which — being the tensest moment — usually occurs in a later phase of the poem’s progression.
- There may be more than one climax (which literally means a ladder) in a poem. i.e. minor peaks preceding a major peak.
- The climax may be followed by a denouement (an unwinding) since every poem need not end with a climax.

The next Unit will deal with the end or the denouement of a poem.

**Activity 2**

- i) Read the following poem by Lankesh and locate the climax in it.
- ii) Are there more than one climaxes? (50 words)

**Mother**

My mother, black, prolific earth,  
green leaf, a festival of white flowers,  
with every burn, the earthier; with every pang  
more fruit and petal.

Spending all youth in a tatter of sarees,  
She died, she did;  
What’s the age of a hag bent double?

A wild bear  
bearing a litter of little ones,  
she reared a husband, saved coins  
in knots of cloth; like a hurt bitch  
She snarled, grumbled and fought.  
A wild bear has no need of your Gita  
My mother lived  
for stick and grain, labour and babies;  
for rafter overhead, rice, bread, a blanket;  
to walk upright among equals.

Living in mud and soil, and  
for leaving as she did, as if  
leaving home for the fields,  
cool, in the middle of small talk.

(Check your answer with those given at the end of the Unit)

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## 3.9 ACTIVITIES : AIDS TO ANSWERS

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### Activity 1

#### Hints

- i) Re-read 3.4.1 before attempting the activity.
- ii) The climax is important in that it gathers into itself the full force (in a sense raising the poem's tense effects to the highest intensity) in a poem having a progression pattern and thereby representing its tensest moment. In the case of a poem having a static pattern, there are tense moments occurring at different stages, i.e. the force is evenly distributed throughout the poem, which may be equally effective.

### Activity 2

#### Hints

Where did you get the main emotional response — was it not at the point where you learnt the reason why the poem was written at all? 'She died, she did'. Perhaps the second could be where the poem ends 'and/for leaving as she did'?

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## 3.10 GLOSSARY

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You will find in the glossary a short list of the words used in this Unit

**Aristotelian structure** loosely means a composition that has a beginning, a middle and an end.

**Climax** is the turning point in the action or the point at which the poem gets the maximum emotional response from the reader.

**Incrementality** means structured growth. Thus the process by which the self-regulating mechanism, free though it may seem, takes the poem to the climax is incrementality.