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## UNIT 3 DESCRIPTIVE PROSE-2

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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In the previous unit, you read two prose passage which are examples of descriptive writing. In this unit, you will further examine the nature of descriptive writing by reading two more passages. In these passages you will study the different devices used by the writers so that at the end of this unit you will be able to :

- analyse the stylistic features of descriptive writing;
- describe the effective use of simile and metaphor.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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Descriptive writing on the whole, as we have been observing, tends to 'freeze' objects, places and people in space and time. Description is thus essentially frozen time held in suspense before it merges into the current of the narrative, the irreversible momentum of present time flowing into past time. 'Here is the moment, grasp it, hold it, concentrate on it, perceive its essence, make it part of your memory, before it vanishes for ever', the writer seems to be urging us. Descriptive writing which lacks this sense of immediacy, its sudden flash of illumination of intense revelation, whether it is of the nature of things or events, insight into the character of individuals, or whatever it is holding up for our examination, fails to capture our attention if it does not justify the 'freezing' of the moment.

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### 3.2 PASSAGE FROM SEAN O'CASEY'S *INISHFALLEN, FARE THEE WELL*

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Let us look at the following brief passage by Sean O'Casey, taken from his book *Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well* (1949). Here he is describing a street full of decaying houses, an area in Dublin which had once known respectability,

happiness and prosperity, but had been reduced to squalor, abject poverty and utter misery. Now read the passage carefully a few times. Wherever necessary, use your dictionary, to find out the exact meanings of the words and phrases in the context in which they are used by the writer. The glossary at the end of the passage will be useful.

### 3.2.1 Text

There were the houses, too – a long, **lurching** row of discontented incurables, **smirched** with the age-long marks of **ague**, fevers, cancer, and consumption, the soured tears of little children, and the sighs of disappointed newly-married girls. The doors were scarred with time's spit and anger's hasty knocking; the pillars by their sides were shaky, their **stuccoed** bloom long since peeled away, and they looked like crutches keeping the trembling doors standing on their **palsied** feet. The gummy-eyed windows blinked dimly out, **lacquered** by a year's tired dust from the troubled street below. Dirt and disease were the big **sacraments** here – outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual disgrace. The people bought the cheapest things in food they could find in order to live, to work, to worship: the cheapest **spuds**, the cheapest tea, the cheapest meat, the cheapest fat; and waited for unsold bread to grow stale that they might buy that cheaper, too. Here they gathered up the fragments so that nothing would be lost. The streets were long **haggard** corridors of rottenness and ruin. What wonderful mind or memory could link this shrinking wretchedness with the **flaunting gorgeousness** of silk and satin; with bloom of rose and scent of **lavender**? A thousand years must have passed since the last lavender lady was carried out feet first from the last surviving one of them. Even the sun shudders now when she touches a roof, for she feels some evil has chilled the glow of her garment. The flower that here once bloomed is dead forever. No wallflower here has crept into a favoured cranny; sight and sign of the primrose were far away; no room here for a dance of daffodils; no swallow twittering under a shady eave; and it was sad to see an odd sparrow seeking a yellow grain from the mocking dust; not even a spiky-headed thistle, purple **mitred**, could find a corner here for a sturdy life. No Wordsworth here wandered about as lonely as a cloud.

### 3.2.2 Glossary

<b>lurching:</b>	sudden movement forward or sideways, as though without control like a drunken person
<b>smirched:</b>	blotted; disfigured by marks
<b>ague:</b>	fever that causes uncontrollable trembling, like malaria, for example
<b>stuccoed:</b>	plastered, ornamented with plaster designs
<b>palsied:</b>	affected by paralysis, or disease causing trembling of the limbs
<b>lacquered:</b>	covered as though with lacquer or polish
<b>sacraments:</b>	Christian ceremonies performed in the church
<b>spuds:</b>	potatoes
<b>haggard:</b>	tired, worn out, having lines and hollows around the eyes and cheeks
<b>flaunting:</b>	to exhibit or show off something in a proud and haughty way.
<b>gorgeousness:</b>	extremely beautiful appearance



- ii) Pick out words and phrases from the passage that can be equally applicable to human beings as well as the house described. What does the author accomplish by choosing these expressions?

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- iii) To what extent do you think the rhetorical device of personification is justified and effective in this passage?

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- iv) Which of these expressions in the passage do you think are powerfully charged with emotion? Give reasons for your choice.

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### **3.3 PASSAGE FROM D.H. LAWRENCE'S *MORNINGS IN MEXICO***

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The next descriptive passage we shall take up for study is by D.H. Lawrence. It is about market day on the last Saturday before Christmas when countless Mexican Indians riding donkeys, travelling in ox carts and on foot converge on the covered market, bringing their supplies: wood and charcoal, farm produce, flowers to sell, barter or exchange.

With his eye for detail, Lawrence describes the flowers and trees, the landscape, the hills, the different tribes of Indians, their dress and styles of walking, the all-enveloping dust, and the merchandise.

This is the last Saturday before Christmas. The next year will be **momentous**, one feels. This year is nearly gone. Dawn was windy, shaking the leaves, and the rising sun shone under a gap of yellow cloud. But at once it touched the yellow flowers that rise above the **patio** wall, and the swaying, growing **magenta** of the **bougainvillea**, and the fierce red outbursts of the **poinsettia**. The poinsettia is very splendid, the flowers very big, and of a sure stainless red. They call them Noche Buenas, flowers of Christmas Eve. These tufts throw out their scarlet sharply, like red birds **ruffling** in the wind of dawn as if going to bathe, all their feathers alert. This for Christmas, instead of **holly-berries**. Christmas seems to need a red **herald**.

The **yucca** is tall, higher than the house. It is, too, in flower, hanging an arm's length of soft creamy bells, like a yard-long grape-cluster of foam. And the waxy bells break on their stems in the wind, fall noiselessly from the long creamy bunch, that hardly sways.

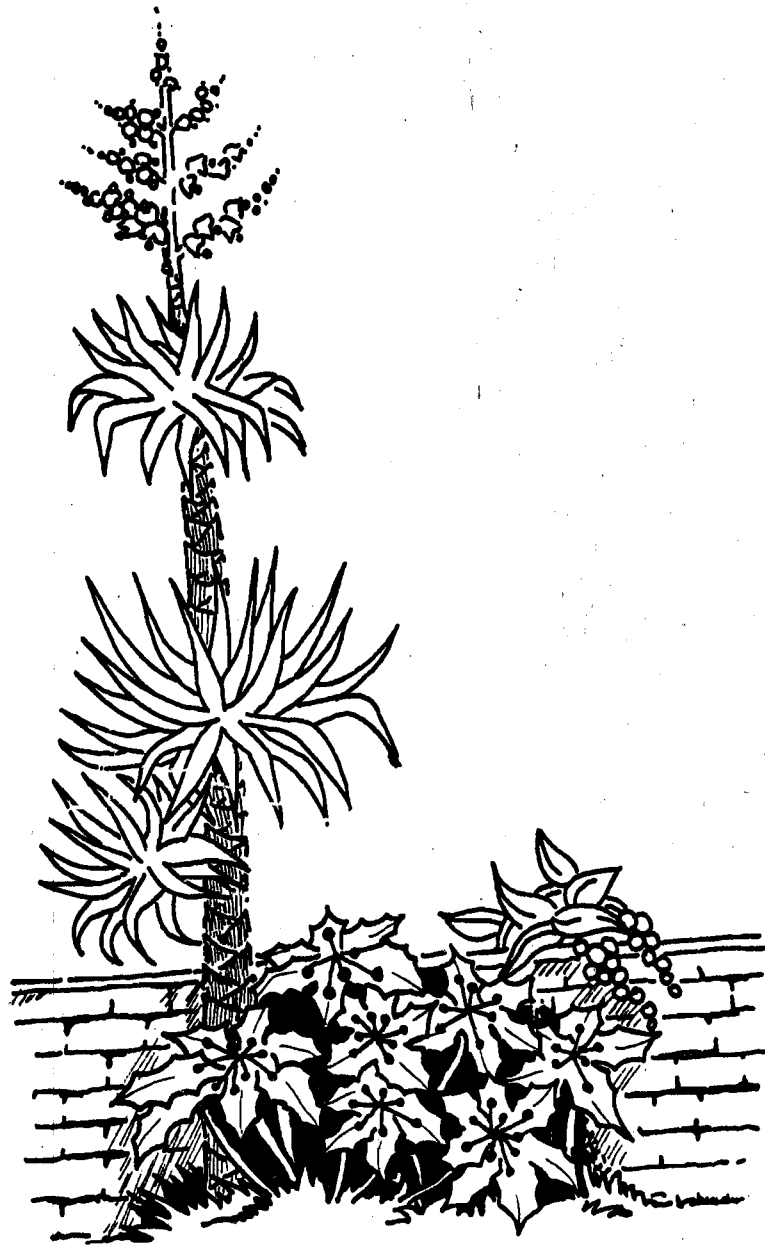
The coffee-berries are turning red. The **hibiscus** flowers, rose coloured, sway at the tips of the thin branches, in **rosettes** of soft red. In the second patio, there is a tall tree of the flimsy **acacia** sort. Above itself it puts up whitish fingers of flowers, naked in the blue sky. And in the wind these fingers of flowers in the blue sky, sway, sway with the reeling, roundward motion of tree-tips in a wind.

A restless morning, with clouds lower down, moving also with a larger roundward motion. Everything moving. Best to go out in motion too, the slow roundward motion like the hawks.

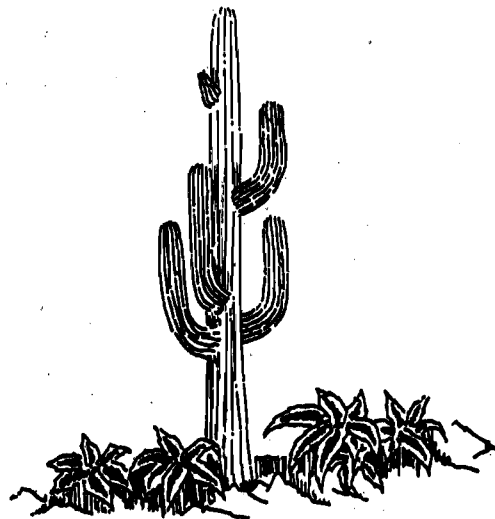
Everything seems slowly to circle and hover towards a central point, the clouds, the mountains round the valley, the dust that rises, the big, beautiful, white-barred hawks, *gabilanes*, and even the snow-white flakes of flowers upon the dim palo blanco tree. Even the **organ cactus**, rising in **stock-straight clumps**, and the **candelabrum** cactus, seems to be slowly wheeling and pivoting upon a centre, close upon it.

Strange that we should think in straight lines, when there are none, and talk of straight courses, when every course, sooner or later, is seen to be making the sweep round, swooping upon the centre. When space is curved, and the cosmos is sphere within sphere, and the way from any one point to any other point is round the bend of the inevitable, that turns as the tips of the broad wings of the hawk turn upwards, leaning upon the air like invisible half of the ellipse. If I have a way to go, it will be round the swoop of a bend **impinging centripetal** towards the centre. The straight course is hacked out in rounds, against the will of the world.

Yet the dust advances like a ghost along the road, down the valley plain. The dry turn of the valley-bed gleams like soft skin, sunlit and pinkish ochre spreading wide between the mountains that seem to emit their own darkness, a dark-blue vapor **translucent**, **sombering** them from the humped crests downwards. The many-**pleated**, noiseless mountains of Mexico.



The Yucca is tall.....



The Candelabrum cactus

And away from the footslope lie the white specks of Huayapa, among its lake of trees. It is Saturday, and the white dots of men are threading down the trail over the bare humps to the plain, following the dark twinkle-movement of asses, the dark nodding of the woman's head as she rides between the baskets. Saturday and market-day, and morning, so the white specks of men, like seagulls on plough-land, come ebbing like sparks from the palo blanco, over the fawn undulating of the valley slope.

They are dressed in snow-white cotton, and they lift their knees in the Indian trot, following the ass where the woman sits perched between the huge baskets, her child tight in the **rebozo**, at the brown breast. And girls in long, full, soiled cotton skirts running, trotting, ebbing along after the twinkle-movement of the ass. Down they come in families, in clusters, in solitary ones, threading with ebbing, running, barefoot movement noiseless towards the town, that blows the bubbles of its church-domes above the stagnant green of trees, away under the opposite fawn-skin hills.

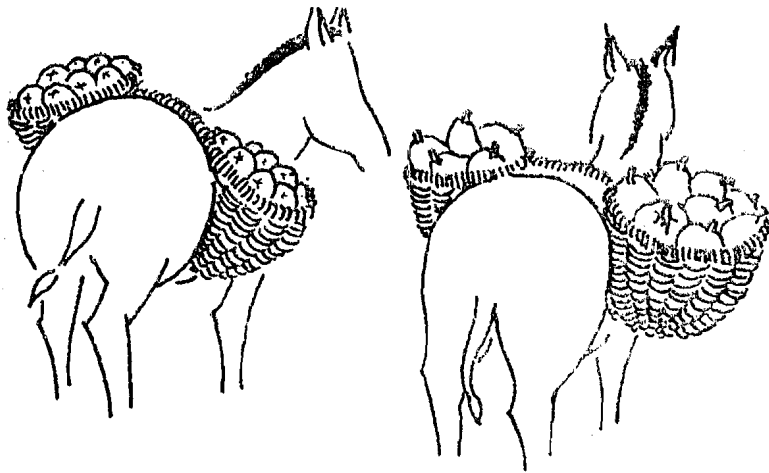
But down the valley middle comes the big road, almost straight. You will know it by the tall walking of the dust, that hastens also towards the town, overtaking, overpassing everybody. Overpassing all the dark little figures and the white specks that thread tinily, in a sort of underworld, to the town.

From the valley villagers and from the mountains the peasants and the Indians are coming in with supplies, the road is like a pilgrimage, with the dust in greatest haste, dashing for town. Dark-eared asses and running men, running women, running girls, running lads, twinkling donkeys ambling on fine little feet, under twin great baskets with tomatoes and gourds, twin great nets of bubble-shaped jars, twin bundles of neat-cut **faggots** of wood, neat as bunches of cigarettes, and twin net-sacks of charcoal. Donkeys, mules, on they come, great **pannier** baskets making a rhythm under the perched woman, great bundles bouncing against the sides of the slim-footed animals. A baby donkey trotting naked after its piled-up dam, a white, sandal-footed man following with the silent Indian haste, and a girl running again on light feet.

Onwards, on a strange current of haste, and slowly rowing among the foot-travel, the ox-wagons rolling solid wheels below the high net of the body. Slow oxen, with heads pressed down nosing to the earth, swaying, swaying their great horns as a snake sways itself, the shovel-shaped collar of solid wood pressing down on their necks like a scoop. On, on between the burnt-up turn and the solid, monumental green of the organ cactus. Past the rocks and the floating palo blanco flowers, past the **tousled** dust of the **mesquite** bushes.

While the dust once more, in a greater haste than anyone, comes tall and rapid down the road, overpowering and obscuring all the little people, as in a **cataclysm**.

They are mostly small people, of the Zapotech race: small men with lifted chests and quick, lifted knees, advancing with heavy energy in the midst of dust. And quiet, small round-headed women running barefoot, tightening their blue rebozos round their shoulders, so often with a baby in the fold. The white cotton clothes of the men so white that their faces are invisible places of darkness under their big hats. Clothed darkness, faces of night, quickly, silently, with inexhaustible energy advancing to the town.



great pannier baskets making a rhythm....

And many of the Serranos, the Indians from the hills, wearing their little conical black felt hats, seem capped with night, above the straight white shoulders. Some have come far, walking all yesterday in their little black hats and black-sheathed sandals. Tomorrow they will walk back. And their eyes will be just the same, black and bright and wild, in the dark faces. They have no goal, any more than the hawks in the air, and no course to run, any more than the clouds.

The market is a huge roofed-in place. Most extraordinary is the noise that comes out, as you pass along the adjacent street. It is a huge noise, yet you may never notice it. It sounds as if all the ghosts in the world were talking to one another, in ghost-voices, within the darkness of the market structure. It is a noise something like rain, or banana leaves in a wind. The market, full of Indians, dark-faced, silent-footed, hush-spoken, but pressing in countless numbers. The queer hissing murmurs of the Zapotech *idioma*, among the sound of Spanish, the quiet aside-voices of the Mixtecas.

### 3.3.2 Glossary

<b>momentous:</b>	of great importance
<b>patio:</b>	an inner roofless courtyard of a Spanish house
<b>magenta:</b>	dark purplish red colour
<b>poinsettia:</b>	a tropical plant with flower-like groups of large red leaves
<b>bougainvillea:</b>	a tropical climbing plant with bright flowers
<b>ruffling:</b>	making uneven movements like birds moving their feathers when bathing or preening
<b>holly-berries:</b>	red coloured berries of a short green tree with shiny green prickly leaves found in cold countries
<b>herald:</b>	a messenger or sign of something to come
<b>yucca:</b>	the state flower of Mexico, having pointed leaves and clusters of white waxy flowers
<b>hibiscus:</b>	tropical plant with large bright flowers
<b>rosettes:</b>	shaped like roses
<b>acacia:</b>	group of tropical trees which give gum



<b>organ cactus:</b>	a tree-like cactus found in Mexico
<b>stock-straight:</b>	straight stem or trunk
<b>clump:</b>	cluster of trees or plants growing close together
<b>candelabrum:</b>	an ornamental holder for several candles or lamps; resembling it
<b>impinging:</b>	having an effect upon
<b>centripetal:</b>	tending to move towards the centre
<b>ochre:</b>	yellow colour
<b>translucent:</b>	allowing light to pass through, without being transparent
<b>sombering:</b>	casting shadows
<b>pleated:</b>	with flattened narrow folds, usually in cloth
<b>rebozo:</b>	a long shawl or scarf of fine material worn by Mexican women over the head and shoulders
<b>faggots:</b>	a bunch of small sticks for burning
<b>pannier:</b>	pairs of baskets carried by a horse or donkey
<b>tousled:</b>	made untidy, disarranged
<b>mesquite:</b>	a tree or shrub bearing green bean-like pods, found in Mexico
<b>cataclysm:</b>	sudden and violent event like an earthquake or a flood.

### 3.3.3 Discussion

The first thing that strikes us about this passage is the active nature of the verbs found in it. Everything seems to be doing something, and not just passively 'being'. The year is 'nearly gone', the dawn 'windy shaking the leaves,' the 'rising sun... touched the yellow flowers that rose above the patio wall'. The 'tufts throw out their scarlet sharply', the 'waxy bells break on their stems in the wind, fall noiselessly', the hibiscus flowers 'sway', the tall tree 'puts up whitish fingers of flowers'. Everything seems to be in motion, caught in the act of doing something, not merely existing. The same active feeling of participation is imparted to the clouds, the mountains, the dust, the hawks, even the cactus, the vegetation 'slowly wheeling and pivoting upon a centre, close upon it'. The mountains 'seem to emit their own darkness'.

Throughout the passage the dust is an active participant: 'it advances like a ghost', 'down the valley middle comes the road..... you will know it by the tall walking of the dust, that hastens also towards the town, overtaking, passing everybody'. Further in paragraph 11, 'the road is like a pilgrimage, with the dust in greatest haste dashing for town'. In paragraph 13, 'the dust once more in a greater haste than anyone, comes tall and rapid down the road, overpowering and obscuring all the little people, as in a cataclysm.'

While the passage opens on a rather quiet and tranquil note, the suggestion of considerable activity is gradually built up through the smaller paragraphs. Then the idea of convergence of movement which is centripetal and circular rather than in the form of straight lines, or perpendicular, is developed. Following this, we have the description of the Mexicans hurrying to the market place from the hills and plains of the surrounding country, involving trekking for one or even two days. The picturesque effects are achieved through the use of striking metaphors: 'while dots of men are threading down the trail over the bare humps to the plain', 'twinkle-movement of asses', 'white specks of men, sea-gulls on plough-land, come ebbing like sparks'... There are also pairs and triplets of words and phrases, repetition of sentence structure with variation, minute concrete details building up the picture of

great crowds of people getting together, ostensibly to buy and sell but in reality to meet one another, to co-mingle, to satisfy their urge for human companionship.

Comparisons, as in similes and metaphors, which are usually discussed under figures of speech, can be used both conventionally and with considerable insight and originality. They are encountered extensively in descriptive writing. While similes are explicit and often sustained comparisons, metaphors are concise and sharp, not always extended and sustained. Take the following examples: 'the dust advances like a ghost along the road'; 'the white specks of men, like sea-gulls on plough-land'; 'they have no goal any more than clouds'. In all these the comparison of point of similarity is clearly and deliberately stated, often elaborated, depending on the writer and his intention. However, in the case of metaphors the points of similarity are often intuitively seen in flashes, implied rather than explicitly stated. Consider the following examples from 3.2.1; 'the gummy-eyed windows blinked dimly out'. Here the comparison between the eyes of the very old and ill, looking out through their sticky eyelids and the dusty dirty windows of the old and decaying houses are fused into a metaphor, a direct and simultaneous identification of two similar objects or processes. In the same passage, 'haggard corridors of rottenness and ruin', contains a fusion of tired worn-out people and the streets that were rotten and lay in ruins. The description of the town 'that blows the bubbles of its church-domes above the stagnant green of trees', is a compressed simile, achieved with great economy of words. It is important to develop sensitivity to metaphor in the study of literature, particularly descriptive writing, whether it is poetry or prose.

There are various schemes of repetition that are frequently and effectively employed, particularly in descriptive writing to convey strong emotional overtones. Sometimes it may just be repetition of the same word, for example, 'the cheapest spuds, the cheapest tea, the cheapest meat, the cheapest fat'; 'sway, sway'; sometimes words with similar meanings or sounds are repeated like 'running, trotting, ebbing along'; or 'running men, running women, running girls, running lads' (repetition with variation, emphasizing running). Schemes of repetition can also include balance and parallelism or antithesis as in 'shrinking wretchedness with the flaunting gorgeousness of silk and satin', 'the bloom of rose and scent of lavender'. With these balanced phrases go alliteration (use of two or more words, near to each other, beginning with the same letter 'alone, alone all, all alone') and assonance (words having similar vowel sounds), and consonance (words having similar consonant sounds), reinforcing sense with sound. There are numerous and intricate patterns of repetition frames. Some of these we shall identify and analyse as we go along.

### **Check Your Progress II**

i) What is the first thing that struck you when you read the passage?

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ii) Give some examples of similes and metaphors from the passage you have just read

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iii) What is the function of repetition when effectively employed?

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iv) Who are the Zapotecs and the Serranos? Describe them in 2-3 sentences.

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### 3.4 LET US SUM UP

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In the two passages that we examined in some detail, we found a number of stylistic features:

- a) personification which invests objects and events with human significance;
- b) metaphors and similes capture the essential similarity or relationship between very dissimilar objects.
- c) the use of schemes of repetition, and literary devices such as assonance and alliteration are effective in creating emotional responses and heightening certain stylistic effects.

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### 3.5 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

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#### Check Your Progress I

i) This is a direct reference to the well-known poem by Wordsworth 'The Daffodils'. It is a very popular poem and its likely you have studied it some time. If not, it is worth a reading. It contrasts strikingly with the lack of freedom and beauty in the street described here. This comparison is intended to drive home this point.

### THE DAFFODILS

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
Besides the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine  
And twinkle in the milky way,  
They stretched in never-ending line  
Along the margin of a bay:  
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,  
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they  
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:  
A poet could not but be gay,  
In such a jocund company;  
I gazed – and gazed – but little thought  
What wealth the show to me had brought;

For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon the inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.

- ii) If the answer is not clear to you, you should go back to 3.2.1 and re-read the whole passage, particularly the earlier part. This point has been discussed in 3.2.3. Try and summarise it in your own words.
- iii) See sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.3. The understanding of this point is central to the whole discussion.
- iv) The point is that everything in this street is doomed: not only the old and the dying, but also the young people and the children. Even birds and plants are not exempted. This is what moves readers most powerfully. The expressions are carefully selected to reinforce this impression. Go back to 3.2.1 if necessary.

### Check Your Progress II

- i) The first thing one notices is that everything seems to be in motion, in the act of doing something. This is achieved by the extensive use of active verbs. For examples, turn to the text and the first paragraph of **3.3.3 Discussion**.
- ii) Similes and metaphors are used extensively in descriptive writing, as we discussed in Unit 1, section 1.5. If you need help to pick out examples of similes and metaphors, turn to paras 2 and 3 of **3.3.3 Discussion**.
- iii) Repetition is effectively employed to convey strong feelings and to emphasise a particular point. Refer to the last para of **3.3.3 Discussion**.

- iv) The Zapotecs and the Serranos are the Indians who came to the markets. The Zapotec men are small and dark and wear big hats while the women are usually barefoot and recognizable by their blue rebozos. The Serranos, who came from the hills, wear little conical black felt hats and black sandals.