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## UNIT 4 DESCRIPTIVE PROSE-3

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit, you will examine two more passages of descriptive writing in some detail. After reading this unit carefully and completing the exercise, you will be able to :

- recognize the literary characteristics and stylistic feature of a prose piece;
- explain the role of style in presenting the content effectively.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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Descriptive writing, as we have seen, is one of the varieties of prose. We have also seen that even within descriptive writing we can find writings of different kinds. In the earlier two units, you have seen the way that historians, travellers and anthropologists use prose for descriptive writing. While the content is important, it is style and presentation which separates literary prose from the non-literary and functional variety. It is for this reason that it is important to look at the literary aspects a little more closely by analyzing the stylistic features.

In this unit, you will read two passages of descriptive writing. The first passage is a description taken from Mulk Raj Anand's *The Village*.

The second passage is from the novel *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens. There are marked contrasts in the two passages. Both the passages are dramatic in nature. But while the first vividly describes a dramatic episode, the second dramatically builds up the atmosphere of the period.

## 4.2 PASSAGE FROM MULK RAJ ANAND'S *THE VILLAGE*

This passage is an extract from Mulk Raj Anand's novel *The Village*. This is a striking description of an unusual and bizarre event which takes place in a village. Snake bites are frequent occurrences in villages but local customs vary in their treatment. Often magic and exorcism are part of the treatment of snake-bites, in addition to various kinds of medication. But it is generally believed that the poison that has entered the body needs to be treated by other means besides medication, and the process is aided by faith cures and spiritual powers of a hallucinatory and dramatic kind. Some others perform these rites secretly with meditation and prayer in strict solitude.

### 4.2.1 Text

'There is the palanquin, there is our boy,' the peasants chorused. A tense silence prevailed during which the father of the lad, who had been brought, rushed to see if there was still life in the boy's body.

Harnam Singh was going to run out to fetch Chandi, but he had hardly risen before she rushed in, fuming and frothing, her eyes glinting like burning coals, her nostrils **dilating** wide like a breathless mare.

'They torture me and torment me, these eaters of their masters, Mahantji,' she said. 'Look, they have bruised my legs and arms. Why are they after my life? Why can't they tease their mothers, their sisters! May they die!'

'There is no talk!' There is no talk!' consoled the Mahant. 'They are rogues! You should keep quiet and not take any notice of what they say. Now where is Hafiz, the drummer? You wait and rest till he comes.'

Chandi sat wearily for the moment, and closed her eyes as if she were going to sleep.

'He is in the hall, I think,' said Harnam Singh, and he shouted, 'Ohe!, Hafizia, come in, ohe!, come in.'

Hafiz, the bearded old hereditary musician, came, bearing his drum. He still led concert-parties to peasants' homes on the occasion of marriages and births, and, as a menial, he had waited to be called to Mahant's sacred presence. He raised his hand to his head, saying, 'Salaam, Mahantji, father-mother.'

Lalu had heard that Chandi, the witch woman, was supposed to be possessed by the spirit of the king of snakes. She could cure anyone who had been bitten, with the help and blessing of the Mahant.

He had now finished grinding the liquid, and was draining the mixture into cups for the company to drink. But just then Hafiz struck up the drum and Chandi, who had sat still and intent, brooding heavily, began to shiver like someone possessed of a fever.

That was how she began to go into her **trance**, and though he had often seen her do it in his childhood, he left the pestle and mortar and watched, fascinated.

Even as he turned, the shivering gave place to a hissing, hard-breathing, shaking movement, at a faster tempo. And, as he contemplated the faces of the **congregation** in the **eerie** tenseness of the monastery courtyard, and saw the bitten body lie as dead in the stillness, the hissing, hard-breathing, shaking movement became the wriggling of a snake when it gives chase. The music of the drum had mounted to a rhythm which seemed to seep into Lalu's blood, and he felt embarrassed even as he lent himself to it.

But Chandi was almost going mad as, with a majestic sweep of her loose black hair, streaked with white, a smile on her lips that lit the haggard, sunken-cheeked ugliness of her face into an ecstasy, she began to revolve her head while she blew forth sharp whiffs of breath, like a cobra when it dances. Round and round the head went, round and round, till, while Lalu felt tickled to laugh, the blood of Chandi's face seemed to merge into an illusory circle of fire. And while she moved her head thus furiously she began to crawl on all fours, still revolving her head, still blowing and puffing short gasps of breath, spitting the profuse froth that was gathering on the corners of her mouth, and describing circles round the palanquin.

From shivering she passed to shaking, from shaking to wriggling and crawling in circles. Then she began to jump and **caper**, with short steps more like a monkey than a snake, and her head revolved with the violence of a whirlwind as she blew her breath in spurts of anger, and cast her spittle about the air as if she were spreading her venom against the world with a malevolent wrath. Her face struck the earth sometimes, and she seemed to lose control of her head completely, so that it struck against the edge of the palanquin and bled. But on and on she went, in a ceaseless, dangerous movement, the curves of a snake dance that was as fascinating in its mixture of human and reptile gestures as it was frighteningly terrible to behold. And time and space seemed to swirl in this mad dance to which the continuous thunder of the drum added a mighty **abandon**. Life seemed to lose its meaning and its reality on the shimmering waves of the steady stares that waited, half full of doubt, half full of hope, for the miracle to be performed.

The tension grew to a strange and **uncanny** height as Chandi, wrapt in the ecstasy of her movement, tired and violent, lifted by the swirling tides of her furious activity, became completely involved in her own warmth and seemed to forget the purpose for which she had summoned the spirit of the king of snakes. She drifted almost to the edge of the kitchen, which, to her as an outcast from society, was forbidden territory.

But then she changed her direction suddenly as if, even in her trance, she remembered her birth. And she danced to the foot of a banyan tree which stood overshadowing the courtyard in a corner, and blew into the holes at its roots to **propitiate** the snake gods who were supposed to live there. Then, absorbed in the shaking splendour of her dance, she whirled across to the palanquin where the bitten body of the peasant boy lay. And she began to blow at the various parts of it, drifting away after a brief spell as if to intensify her movement. And the father of the boy whispered: 'Wah Guru, Hey, Wah

Guru!' as if each movement of suspense, while his son still lay **dormant**, was like the load of centuries on his tight-stretched heart.

At this stage, the Mahant got up and, going towards Chandi, made as if to breathe a divine secret into the snake spirit's ear. And the musician shouted short little cries of encouragement as he hastened the tempo of his thumps on the drum.

Chandi followed the Mahant, spitting and snarling as a snake to its charmer, and moved towards the body. She circled round, while the holy man explored the pale olive skin of the boy for the spot where it had been bitten. But he couldn't find it.

The father of the boy, unable to bear the suspense any longer, rose eagerly and came forward and laid his fingers on his son's left ankle.

Upon this the Mahant led the snake spirit up to the ankle of the boy and breathed again into Chandi's ears.

The possessed woman sat, her head revolving, sweeping the dust with her hair, with a playful movement which rapidly assumed the utmost ferocity. Then, falling upon the boy's ankle, she blew upon the wound again and again spitting and spattering, and rubbed the sweep of her hair on it.

The Mahant bent down when she had repeated this for several seconds, and breathed something else into her ear.

Then he motioned to the palanquin bearers to take the body and lay it on the terrace and signed to the musician to stop beating the drum.

Chandi's head revolved frantically for a while, as it had done when she had blown at the ankle. Then, as if the fuel to the fire of her movement was exhausted now that the music had stopped, she slackened. Her shaking became a wriggle, and then her wriggle relaxed into a quivering and the quivering into a shiver, till at the end she sat still, brooding and intent, her lean, ugly face dropping from the flushed warmth to a **surly**, lined hardness, 'Give her some chapattis, oh Sitalgar,' the Mahant ordered, 'and some lentil,' and he went back to his seat.

The boy's body on the terrace turned and heaved and his eyes opened with a start. His father fell upon him with cries and pressed his limbs, turning the while to the Mahant and uttering short cries of gratitude, 'You are blessed! Blessed is the Wah Guru! Blessed are you, oh you of the line of the saints of Nandpur'

The audience, which had missed many heartbeats, whispered, 'Wah Guru! Wah Guru!'

The bells in the temple were tinkling for evening worship and everyone felt a sense of relief after the orgy of the miracle.

#### 4.2.2 Glossary

**dilating:** becoming wider or more open  
**hereditary:** passed down from father to son

<b>trance:</b>	sleep-like state when one appears to be unaware of the things around
<b>tempo:</b>	the rate of pattern of movement, work or activity; speed at which music is played
<b>congregation:</b>	a group of people gathered (often for worship)
<b>eerie:</b>	causing fear, because strange
<b>caper:</b>	to jump about in a funny way
<b>abandon:</b>	the state when one's feelings and action are uncontrolled
<b>uncanny:</b>	mysterious; not natural or usual
<b>propitiate:</b>	to win favour by offerings or rituals, to attempt to please
<b>dormant:</b>	inactive, or as if asleep
<b>surly:</b>	seeming angry; habitually bad-mannered

### 4.2.3 Discussion

The scene that is described here is of the ritual performed by a 'witch', a woman who mimics a snake in an elaborately symbolic dance performed to the accompaniment of music and wild rhythmic movements. In the course of this performance, which to the woman is almost a routine demonstration of her occult and unconscious powers, she is transformed from a wretched and pathetic old woman into a powerful agent of life-giving, or at least life-restoring, mysterious divine forces. Scepticism and faith, superstition and religious ecstasy mingle with hope and despair in a dramatically shifting scenario of an old woman-beggar becoming a sorceress-enchanter and agent of divine providence, at the climax of which the poison seems to have been drained out of the body of the boy restoring him to life, refreshed as though after a long sleep. This dramatic episode is vividly described by Mulk Raj Anand. You will have noticed that there is only a thin dividing line between narrative and descriptive prose in this passage. This will be discussed at length in the next block.

The scene is described through the eyes of Lalu, a young boy, the hero of the novel. He was engaged in making a drink, into which he was grinding some hemp for the Mahant and others present, when the boy who was bitten was brought in a palanquin by his father with the help of other villagers. But each time the miracle was performed by the old woman, Chandi, under the direction of the Mahant, there was great suspense and fear that it might not after all work. The old woman, who has been tormented by the urchins in the neighbourhood, was in a foul mood, but fortunately was immediately available along with the drummer. So without any delay the ceremony of propitiating the king of snakes was started. Before long she went into a trance and danced the snake dance, imitating the movements of a cobra, infuriated and ready to strike. She went through the various stages of its angry arousal and the vicious fatal strike of its poisonous fangs. After the propitiation of the king cobra, she symbolically enacted the process of taking back the poison from the spot in the left ankle of the boy where he was bitten, thus repeating the entire cycle, happily bringing back the boy from the jaws of death and restoring him to his desperate father, to the relief of the entire crowd which was holding its collective breath in agonised suspense. Chandi, the witch-beggar woman, once again became a pathetic old woman to be rewarded by a few chapattis and some lentils. But in her trance she had performed a life-restoring miracle.



death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very **blinkers**. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their foot-hold at street corners, where tens of thousand of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points **tenaciously** to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green **aits** and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the **cabooses** of **collier-brigs**, fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the **rigging** of great ships; fog dropping on the **gunwales** of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little **□prentice** boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all around them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.

Gas looming through the fog in divers places in the streets, much as the sun may, from the spongy fields, be seen to loom by husbandman and ploughboy. Most of the shops lighted two hours before their time – as the gas seems to know, for it has a haggard and unwilling look.

The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest, near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation; Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.

Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, to assort with the groping and **floundering** condition which this High Court of Chancery, most **pestilent** and **hoary** sinners, holds, this day, in the sight of heaven and earth.

On such an afternoon, if ever, the Lord High Chancellor ought to be sitting here – as here he is – with a foggy glory round his head, softly fenced in with crimson cloth and curtains, addressed by a large advocate with great whiskers, a little voice, and an **interminable** brief, and outwardly directing his contemplation to the lantern in the roof, where he can see nothing but fog. On such an afternoon, some score of members of the High Court of Chancery bar ought to be – as here they are – mistily engaged in one of the ten thousand stages of an endless cause, tripping one another up on slippery precedents, groping knee-deep in technicalities, running their **goat-hair and horse-hair warded heads** against walls of words, and making a pretence of equity with serious faces, as players might. On such an afternoon, the various solicitors in the cause, some two or three of whom have inherited it from their fathers, who made a fortune by it, ought to be – as are they not? – ranged in a line, in a long **matted well** (but you might look in vain for Truth at the bottom of it), between the registrar's red table and the silk gowns, with bills, cross-bills, answers, rejoinders, injunctions, affidavits, issues, reference to masters, masters' reports, mountains of costly nonsense, piled before them. Well may

the court be dim, with wasting candles here and there; well may the fog hang heavy in it, as if it would never get out; well may the stained glass windows lose their colour, and admit no light of day into the place; well may the uninitiated from the streets, who peep in through the glass panes in the door, be deterred from entrance by its owlish aspect, and the by drawl **languidly** echoing to the roof from the padded dais where the Lord High Chancellor looks into the lantern that has no light in it, and where the attendant wigs are all stuck in a fog-bank! This is the Court of Chancery; which has its decaying houses and its **blighted** lands in every shire; which has its worn-out lunatic in every madhouse, and its dead in every churchyard; which has its ruined suitor, with his slipshod heels and threadbare dress, borrowing and begging through the round of every man's acquaintance; which gives to monied might the means abundantly of wearying out the right; which so exhausts finances, patience, courage, hope; so overthrows the brain and breaks the heart; that there is not an honourable man among its practitioners who would not give – who does not often give – the warning, “Suffer any wrong that can be done you, rather than come here!”

#### 4.3.2 Glossary

<b>implacable:</b>	which cannot be satisfied, or whose demands cannot be reduced
<b>megalosaurus:</b>	a gigantic carnivorous dinosaur (megalo means huge)
<b>waddling:</b>	a heavy awkward way of walking, like that of a duck
<b>blinkers:</b>	a pair of flat pieces of leather fixed over a horse's eyes
<b>tenaciously:</b>	holding firmly
<b>ait:</b>	a small island, especially in the River Thames above London
<b>caboose:</b>	a ship's kitchen
<b>collier brig:</b>	a ship for carrying coal
<b>rigging:</b>	all the ropes and sails of a sailing ship
<b>gunwale:</b>	the upper edge of the sides of a small ship or boat
<b>prentice:</b>	short form of apprentice
<b>floundering:</b>	struggling, losing control, almost sinking
<b>pestilent:</b>	having an evil influence
<b>hoary:</b>	grey with age, or having white hair in old age
<b>interminable:</b>	(seemingly) endless
<b>precedent:</b>	a former action or case used as an example or rule for the present or future action
<b>goat-hair and horse-hair</b>	
<b>warded heads:</b>	British lawyers usually wore wigs made of these
<b>matted well:</b>	the courtroom floor covered with coconut matting.
<b>languidly:</b>	lacking strength or will
<b>blighted:</b>	having a destructive effect

#### 4.3.3 Discussion

The opening passage sets the scene. It begins with a one word sentence: “London” The second sentence is longer, but we note at once that it has no finite verb, the third is shorter, but again verbless. In sentence after sentence we have the same **elliptical syntax** (**ellipsis** is a rhetorical device, involving the omission of words and phrases, often easily supplied contextually) building up an atmosphere of gloom, ill-temper, irritation and repetitive and unproductive activity. Dogs, horses as well as people splashed in mud are struggling for a foot-hold in the all-pervading fog, wallowing in the slippery



street, as though the earth was just recovering after the biblical floods. In such a strange world, where everything seems to have turned black, in mourning for the death of the sun (again a figure of speech), meeting a **Megalosaurus** would have caused no surprise.

In the second paragraph the word fog occurs for the first time and is repeated over and over again; the verbless sentences (the main verb elided) describe the fog expanding in all directions, all over London, outside London, in Essex and Kent, on the land, the river and the sky. It penetrates into the closed cabins of ships of every size and variety, into the 'eyes and the throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners', into the pipe the angry ship's captain was smoking. People on bridges thought 'they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds'. The fog becomes a symbol of complete insulation from the world of real people, suggesting the true nature of the Court of Chancery, living in its own world, isolated from humanity, hanging 'in the misty clouds'. And this is the setting for the 'Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery'.

The street lamps were lit earlier than usual, but they failed to dispel the gloom. The thickest of fogs and the deepest mud and mire could not match the confusion and ineffectualness of the Court. Note particularly the use of superlatives. Then follows the contrast between the comfort, warmth and luxury in which the Court functions routinely day after day with its meaninglessness and utter indifference to human suffering. Justice is delayed from generation to generation and abject misery and helplessness are inflicted on the orphans, the old, the weak and the derelict. The syntax (the arrangement of words, phrases and clauses), the sentence structure and the tense used emphasize the unvarying routine and pointlessly interminable procedures, 'the groping knee-deep in technicalities', 'the slippery precedents', the wigged and gowned lawyers fighting their mock battles 'making a pretence of equity with serious faces, as players might'. The repetitions with variations of certain structures serve to emphasize the futility and the ridiculous nature of their petty wranglings, carried on from generation to generation. Over this sterile activity presides each succeeding Lord Chancellor, concentrating, like the lawyers' 'on the lantern in the roof, where he can see nothing but fog'. Reality in the form of day-light never penetrates into the courtroom through the stained glass windows.

The repeated structures 'on such an afternoon, if ever, the Lord High Chancellor ought to be sitting here – as here he is' and 'well may the court be dim....' both emotionally and logically build up to the climax 'where the Lord High Chancellor looks into the lantern that has no light in it, and like the people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog', feeling suspended and drifting like a balloon, are all 'stuck in a fog-bank'. It is not difficult to see how at this point all the descriptive strands are tied up, reinforcing the central theme of the futility of whatever goes on inside the Chancery. Instead of dispensing justice, the Chancery delays it, causing untold misery to generations of people.

### **Check Your Progress II**

Now read the passage carefully as many times as you consider necessary and then try to understand the exact meanings and suggestions of the words and phrases you find difficult in the contexts in which they are used in the passage. The glossary at the end of the passage is meant to help you.

- i) What kind of atmosphere does the frequent use of the word 'fog' evoke?  
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 .....
- ii) Mark True/False after reading the following statements
- |    |   |            |
|----|---|------------|
| a) | The passage opens in spring                 | True/False |
| b) | The weather is bright                       | True/False |
| c) | It is night time                            | True/False |
| d) | The Court of Chancery is an unpopular place | True/False |
- iii) Explain the following
- a) hard by  
 .....
- b) in the heart of  
 .....
- c) monied might  
 .....
- iv) How many times is the word afternoon repeated in the final paragraph? What purpose, do you think, is served by this repetition?  
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#### 4.4 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we have analysed two fictional passages of prose. The first is a dramatic description of an episode while the second conveys both the genuine feel of the period described. We have:

- examined some of the distinctive stylistic features in the passage such as evocative diction, imagery and syntax, miming of action and repetition.
- seen how style plays a decisive role in presenting content.

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#### 4.5 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

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##### Check Your Progress I

- i) Stage 1: Chandi is bullied by the neighbourhood urchins
- Stage 2 : Suddenly, with the arrival of the palanquin she becomes the object of everyone's attention

Stage 3: When she starts dancing, a gradual change takes place in the ceremony. The transformation is complete.

### **Check Your Progress II**

- i) You may read the passage again, keeping in mind the fact that writers use natural background and seasons in order to trace some correspondence between outer events and inner states of mind.
  
- ii)
  - a) False
  - b) False
  - c) False
  - d) True
  
- iii)
  - a) nearby
  - b) in the midst of
  - c) power that stems from great wealth
  
- iv) Three times. Repetition serves the following purposes
  - moves from the particular to the general
  - gives it an effect of timelessness
  - conveys a strong impression of the repetitive and pointless activity that goes on endlessly in the Court of Chancery.