TEZPUR UNIVERSITY


MASTER OF ARTS

# ENGLISH

CENTRE FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

# MEG 301: BRITISH POETRY III: MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY

## BLOCK I

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TEZPUR UNIVERSITY (A CENTRAL UNIVERSITY)

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# MEG 301: British Poetry III: Modern & Contemporary


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# MEG 301: British Poetry III: Modern & Contemporary

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| Dr. Sanjib Sahoo | Associate Professor, Dept. of English & Foreign Languages, Tezpur University |
| Dr. Suchibrata Goswami | Assistant Professor, Centre for Open and Distance Learning, Tezpur University |

## CONTRIBUTORS

| | |
|---|---|
| Dr Suchibrata Goswami | Assistant Professor, Centre for Open and Distance Learning, Tezpur University |
| Benjamin Karam | Research Scholar, Dept. of English & Foreign Languages, Tezpur University |
| Dr Smaranjit Singha | Assistant Professor, Dept. Of English, Ramkrishna Nagar College, karimganj. |

## EDITORS

| | |
|---|---|
| Dr. Sanjib Sahoo | Associate Professor, Dept. of English & Foreign Languages, Tezpur University |
| Dr. Suchibrata Goswami | Assistant Professor, Centre for Open and Distance Learning, Tezpur University |



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## COURSE INTRODUCTION

## BLOCK I

**MEG 301: British Poetry III: Modern and Contemporary** is the last of the three courses designed to introduce the learners to British poetic tradition. This course deals with the characteristic techniques, concerns and major works of representative poets from the Modern period to the contemporary.

**Block I** deals primarily with modern and post war English poetry.

**Module I: Modern English Poetry I** has three units in it. ***Unit 1: Trends in Modern English Poetry*** will discuss the factors that led to the emergence of modernism in British poetry. In doing so poetry of both the World Wars, different Movements like Imagism, Symbolism etc. and their impact in bringing modernism to poetry will be analyzed. An attempt is also made to see the development of modernist style and temper in different group of poets from 1930's, till 1960and after. ***Unit 2: Reading the Poet: W. B. Yeats*** will see the Irish struggle for independence in early twentieth century that forms a major cluster of poetry in the bulk of modern English poetry. W.B Yeats, being one of the foremost poets not only of Ireland but also of England, will be discussed elaborately in this unit where some of his best known poems will be analysed. In ***Unit 3: Reading the Poet: T. S. Eliot*** we will be discussing one of the **most prominent poets that dominated** both in British and American poetry **from** 1920s to the 1950s, T.S Eliot. The High Modernist mode popular in poetry was featured by the disparate but fragmentary experiences of a civilization found itself in a complex and heterogeneous situations best expressed in Eliot's imagistic poetry. We have prescribed few select poems of Eliot for this purpose which will be critically analysed in this unit.

**Module II: Modern English Poetry II** encompasses another group of modern poets whose style is different from the previous group

***Unit 4: Reading the Poet: W. H. Auden*** will exclusively deal with W. H Auden whose poetry ranges from traditional forms to radical modernism and is best known for his persuasive poems. Often engages with themes as varied as politics, religion, love and morality, Auden is best known for his stylistic and technical achievement. The poems that have been included in this unit will introduce you to W.H. Auden, the poet, his major themes and his style. Louis MacNiece as a poet is placed alongside the modernist poets like W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender and Cecil Day Lewis, the great poets of the 1930s. ***Unit 5: Reading the poet: Louis MacNeice*** will see with the help of the select poems how MacNeice used his Irish background and history to present humane opposition to totalitarian ideologies in poetry. ***Unit 6: Reading the poet: Stephen Spender*** will make you acquaint with yet another poet of 30s, Stephen Spender. Often referred to as the Oxford Poets, a sympathizer of the leftist cause Spender moves away from the esotericism of T. S. Eliot, volunteering instead to stay in touch with urgent political issues and to speak in a voice that can be understood by all. In this unit you will be able to learn about the milieu of Spender's poetry through select poems by the poet.

**Module III: Post War English Poetry** includes three representative post war English poets Philip Larkin, Dylan Thomas and Ted Hughes. ***Unit 7: Reading the Poet Philip Larkin*** exclusively discusses poetry of Larkin along with his themes and style. Any understanding of the post-war English poetry remains incomplete without reading the poems of Philip Larkin. With a keen eye for observation and a delicate taste for humour, Larkin in his works skilfully captures the socio-cultural milieu of the post-war generation. ***Unit 8: Reading the Poet Dylan Thomas*** deals with yet another most influential figures in the realm of post-war English poetry, Dylan Thomas. Thomas's poetry is a curious blend of the Modernist tendency for verbal obscurity and the Romantic sensibility for individualism. Though many a times he is

criticised for an ambiguous style, his popularity is still intact in the bulk of English poetry.

***Unit 9: Reading the Poet Ted Hughes*** will read the poems of a poet whose practice of poetry completely deviated his contemporaries. Hughes' animal poems which have debunked our conventional perception of the animal mind and established their relation to the human world are perhaps one of the best contributions of modern poetry. In the twenty first century, with the rise of fields like eco-criticism and calls for environmental conservation, reading Hughes seems to be very pertinent.

Maximum efforts have been given to present a details reading of the poems and a critical and analytical view in ration to the poems prescribed. For better understanding of the poems we suggest the learners to read the texts of the poems which are also available in print and web.

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# MODULE I: MODERN ENGLISH POETRY I

## (*UNIT 1: TRENDS IN MODERN ENGLISH POETRY*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *1.0 INTRODUCTION*

W.H Abrams defines modernism by saying that, 'The term modernism is widely used to identify new and distinctive features in the subjects, forms, concepts and styles of literature and the other arts in the early decades of twentieth century, but especially after World War I (1914-18). The specific features signified by 'modernism' vary with the user, but many critics agree that it involves a deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional bases not only of Western art, but of Western culture in general". According to Abrams the 'precursors of modernism' are those 'thinkers who had questioned the certainties that had supported the traditional modes of social organization, religion, and morality"(Abrams 175).Thus, Modernism can be understood as a

term that indicated towards a new style and temperament that was not existed before.

Keeping tract with Abrams' observation, in this unit we will be discussing the factors that led to the emergence of modernism in British poetry. In doing so poetry of both the World Wars, different Movements like Imagism, Symbolism etc. and their impact in bringing modernism to poetry will be analyzed. An attempt is also made to see the development of modernist style and temper in different group of poets from 1930's, till 1960and after.

## *1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

After reading this unit you will be able to

- learn the definition of modernism
- identify the contexts of modernist poetry such as social, political and literary
- understand trends of poetry at different stages from 30's to 60's and after along with examples of select poets
- prepare yourself for the critical study of select poets in the succeeding units

## *1.2 CONTEXT OF MODERNIST POETRY*

### 1.2.1 Social context

David Perkins observes that both in England and the United States during the 1950's poets expressed a rejection against the established style. In the continuity of poetry from generation to generation there had been no comparably sharp break from forty years, since the advent of Modernist poetry just before and after the first World Wars. The publication of Philip Larkin's *Poems* in 1954 can be pinpointed as the beginning of this new period along with Charles Olson's influential essay "Projective Verse" (1950) and Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959).

Anticipation of Modernism in poetry goes back in the late Victorian era towards the end of Nineteenth Century.Although the reigning Victorian poetic styles and standards were challenged from diverse ends, Victorian poets like Browning, Hopkins, Hardyare acknowledged for germinating the seed of Modernism through their poetic style and temper.For example, Browning'sobscurity and use of irregular dictionwas a point of affinity between his and modern poetry. Browning's specialty wasin depictingpoetic imagination through a rapid succession of associations.His Dramatic monologues as a revelation of the psyche can be called uniquely modern.

While Browning's "obscurity" is considered to be a legacy to modernism,the "metaphysical"modeof Hopkins was another accelerating point that was considered as modern. His irregular diction, cryptic 'conceit'and frequent 'contraries' were found to be modernist in tone. The most modern in Hopkins' conceptof the modern poet's unconscious as a storehouse of heterogeneity, in the line of Freud. For him the ability of locating a poem's value lies in the psychological process of creation in the poet's mind. Poets like Yeats, Cummings, Frost were greatly dominated by the metaphysical wit or Style.

Apart from these poets' style, it was the gradual emergence of literary and artistic movements that contributed a lot in creating a modernist style. Aestheticism, impressionism, and symbolism that hugely contributed to the rejection of Victorian prudish moralism and scientific materialism. Aestheticism was a movement that stressedin 'art for art's sake',an impersonal craftsmanship. This contributed to the modernist style of the Decadence who wrote with a desire to understand the deeper and darker resources of thepsyche.The Symbolistmovement often aimed at the suggestiveness so essential for modernist style. It emphasized on suggesting the mystery of the mind. The Modernists became highly dependent upon symbols in order to capture the life beyond the pragmatic reality. These immensely popular movements later became the basis for the ironic and thecold detachment reflected in modernist poetry.

Though the germination of modernism in poetry is located in 1880s and 1890s, what is called High Modernism began in 1920's when few path breaking works such as Eliot's *The Waste Land* published.The rootless and heterogeneous cosmopolitan culture of the modern world was best represented in the poem.Imagism, symbolist movement, Impressionism, allhighly contributed to held up a faithful mirror of fragmented reality modernism aimed at.*The Waste Land*is a mastery of fragmentation of the modem European civilization expressed through a heap of broken images.

### 1.2.2 The World Wars

The end of nineteenth century was a period of internal disintegration for British Empire. The nationalist movements and various rebellions from the British occupied colonies against the Empire shook the whole nation. Though British empire succeeded in the Boer War (1899-1902) in South America, everything got disrupted with the breaking of the First World War.

The World War left behind great impact on the psyche of the people. The sense of alienation brought by modernism was transformed into a sense of uncertainty and anxiety. Thestarkness of death was expressed by a group of poets many of whom were also active participants in the war. The first hand encounter of war and its trauma expressed by these poets significantly impacted the modernist thought of the meaninglessness of a compact, organized world. Some poets, like Rupert Brook represented the old English tradition of duty and honor by glorifyingwar as a means to show patriotism, thoughmourned the millions of dead.

Younger soldier-poets like Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, and Wilfred Owen increasingly saw the War as organized and motivated insanity. "The war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it" (Sassoon, *The Times*). The firsthand experience of trauma in the trenches was enough for these soldier poets to challenge the uselessness of destructive patriotismand

infuse their work with war's gruesome realities to strip modern war of its old-fashioned glory. The ugliness of war and the anger of the common soldiers and men were reinforced and ridiculed with direct and colloquial description of the battle fields.

Both Sassoon and Owen used realism in order to shock readers out of their complacency and expose the naked reality of dehumanized violence. Sassoon is known forhis incendiary antiwar writing, which reflects shattered illusions about the glory and honour of warfare. Where once it had been romantic, it grew increasingly harsh, mocking and cynical Owen, who wrote some of the most iconic poetry of the First World War with unparalleled mastery of realistic detail, achieved a truly complex, sometimes visionary detachment and distancing. Isaac Rosenberg often used a rapid succession of images to display this detachment. Thus we can see that poems after 1915 approach with far greater skepticism and moral subtlety, through realism and bitter irony.The image of the world as a barren and dehumanized dystopia presented by the war poets found fullest expression in Eliot's *The Waste Land*in 1922 which is considered to be the masterpiece of modernist poetry.

World War II was yet another experience for the poets of 30s. One whole era ended with the dropping of atomic bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki by America. Suddenly the world experienced the advent of an atomic era and nostalgia and sense of ending was replaced by a stark emptiness, best expressed in Eliot's *Four Quartets*.ThusWar poetry prepared the ground for the Modernist poetry of the 1920s and coloured the sensibility of an entire age.

### 1.2.3 Irish Revival

The Irish struggle for freedom in early twentieth century and the troubles in Northern Ireland during the second half of the century constituted a major bulk of poetry of W.B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney. The struggle against British colonialism not only produced political verse but extended to a search for

identity through Irish history, mythology, folklore and peasant cultureand asentimental and nostalgic as opposed to scientific, rationalistic dogma replaced this new poetry. In other words poetry in their hands received a Romantic revival so unique to modernism, an escapist journey into a land of utopiafrom the weariness, disillusionment and the squalor of modem urban life.

Northern Ireland's violence and horror found place in Seamus Heaney's poetry. Again they were rich in the cultural background from which he hailed. Revival of the Irish culture and making the reader aware of their rich background at the time of national distress was the chief intention of these poets. Heaney too, like Yeats, uses memory, legend, myth and elements from Irish culture and history to evoke the picture that was lived and experienced in the context of national violence. His poetry explored the modernist mode in a constant engagement with place and identity through a language to evoke sense of location and setting. Similar evocations can be witnessed in poetry of Thomas Larkin and Ted Hughes. We shall discuss them separately in the proceeding units.

### 1.2.4 Imagist and symbolist Movements

Imagist and symbolist movements were perhaps two unique phenomenon of modernism that served to initiate a distinctive feature of modernist poetry, helped in best expression of the modernist temperaments like detachment and juxtapositions of modern world.

Imagism was a "poetic vogue that flourished in England, and even more vigorously in America, approximately between the year 1912 and 1917. It was planned and exemplified by a group of English and American writers in London, partly under the influence of poetic theory of T.E. Hulme, as a revolt of what Ezra Pound called the "rather blurry, messy….sentimentalisticmannerish" poetry at the turn of the century" (Abrams,130). Major practitioner of imagism,

apart from Pound, were Amy Lowell, H.D (Hilda Doolittle), D.H Lawrence, William CarlosWilliams, Gould Fletcher, Richard Aldington and F.S Flint.

Imagist poetry, as said by Amy Lowell, abandoned conventional limits on poetic materials and versification, is free to choose any subject and to create its own rhythms, use common speech and create an 'image' with vivid sensory description that is concentrated, but clear and compact. A typical imagist poem is written in *free verse*. The writer's impression of a visual object or scene is rendered by means of metaphor or juxtapositions with that of another or diverse objects, but without indicating the relation.

Though in due course imagism faced divisions, especially between Pound and Amy Lowell, the movement had a historical importance in its search for a hard precision and economy to express varied modern experiences.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

The word***Imagiste*** first occurred in print in Pound's prefatory note on the poems of T.E. Hulme and the first statement for an evolving programme appeared in Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* for March 1913.

'A Few Don'ts by an Imagist' signed by Pound dictated the cardinal rules of the movement like this-----

1. Direct treatment of the 'thing'
2. To use absolutely no words that didn't contribute to the presentation
3. To compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome

Imagism, meanwhile, prescribed superfluous words, abstractions and iambs.

## *1.3 POETRY OF THIRTIES*

W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis, and Louis MacNiece were the poets who belonged to the era of 1930s. These were product of Second World War. Stark realities ofwar, growing communalism, class-struggle etc. made their poetry different from their predecessors of First World War poets. The political and economic events like depression and Fascism in

Europe,Spanish Civil War and Republicans' attempt to form democracy inspired the poetry of these poets. Auden himself was a supporter of Republican Army like many other poets of his time. Marxism found much sympathy in the hands of the poets of Thirties.

With the shifted focus of poetic subject from myth into social and political commitment, the poets of the Thirties favoured of a less obscure and more native English speech in lieu of the discontinuous or disjointed style of the previous age.

## *1.4 POETRY OF FORTIES*

The poetry of 1940s was also a reaction against the poetry of thirties. Getting away from the social and political commitment of the surrealist and neo-romantic poetry of the New Apocalypse, poets like Dylan Thomas, and to some extent George Darker or G.S. Fraser focussed on self- unraveling. These poets rejected the self-conscious, intellectualized, ironic style of modernism in favour of a myths, and Gothic effects.

Most important poet of this period is Dylan Thomas. In Thomas's early poetry the pantheistic presence of God in Nature is evident, presence of energies creative as well as destructive. Thus, his style is equally marked by mystery and inarticulate fear of the unknown.

Among his major compositions that established his poetic reputation *Eighteen Poerns and Twenty-five Poems* based on his experiences at Swansea, *Deaths and Entrances* (1 946) and the radio play *Under Milk Wood* (1954) can be mentioned. The spectre of impending death due to alcoholism coloured his later poetry but the discipline of the craftsman, the restrain that narrative verse and drama demand was never faded in his poetry.

## *1.5 POETRY OF FIFTIES*

The Fifties were Philip Larkin, Kingsley Anlis, and John Wain who were together at Oxford. Robert Conquest indicated six other poets in his anthology, *New Lines* ((1956) who were Elizabeth Jennings, John Holloway, Thom Gunn, D.J. Enright, Donald Davie, and Conquest himself. Known as 'The Movement,' this body of poetry attempted to operate on the ordinary and orderly commonsense. But its primary importance lies in the play of intelligence and intelligibility, and observation of daily detail in the middling sections of contemporary society largely excluded from modern poetry

Larkin's poetic fame rests on *The North Ship* (1945), *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *The High Windows* (1974). Larkin's poetry is marked by a stark exposure of all wishful deceptions that we keep about our lives as a settled one, but a distillation of the bleakness and loneliness of modem life in a minor key.

Despite the importance of Larkin as a poet, the Movement and its allies signalled a bordering upon triviality because of their return to traditional modes and styles that often concealed a decline in vigour, range, complexity, and passion.

## *1.6 POETRY OF SIXTIES AND AFTER*

Philip Hobsbaum founded 'The Group' in London including student poets who regularly met in Cambridge. These poets were George MacBeth, Peter Porter, Ted Hughes, and Alan Brownjohn.

196os British poetry also witnessed the emergence of a new generation of poets in America during the Forties, whose influence extended fruitfully to the British poets of the Sixties. The most important of these American poets were Robert Lowell and John Berryman, accompanied by their contemporaries and successors like Elizabeth Bishop, Theodore Roethke, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath. Lowell's poetry found expression in *Life Studies* (1959), came to be

known as 'confessional' poetry, which directly influenced Sexton and Plath in later stage.

The British poets of the Sixties were exposed not only to American 'confessional' poetry but also to the freewheeling and open-structured verse of the 'Beat' movement- the latter influenced the British 'pop' poets. The British poets also picked up elements of black comedy from these poets.

The resulting enlargement of poetic vision is seen in Ted Hughes and Thom Gunn. Hughes shattered the wry placidity of the Movement with his very first volume of poems *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), reviving, as it were, the Romantic concept of inspiration. A serious interest in archaeology and anthropology gradually drew him towards the primitive, the exotic, and the alternative mythical traditions that resulted in *Crow* (1970). Hughes' returning to fresh and mundane country-life of Yorkshire, to a regionalism that became a common features of much recent British poetry. *Lupercal* (1966) and *Wodwo* (1967) are another collections of Hughes. Thom Gunn and Gcofiey Hill, along with Seamus Heaney contributed to contemporary British poetry. We are going to discuss few of these poets elaborately in the succeeding units.

## *1.7 SUMMING UP*

In this unit you have learnt about the trends of modern British poetry till the present day. You have seen how the search for precision and economy along with irony dominates the modernist movement. Political commitment or social reporting, neo-romanticism, and assertion of Englishness are some of the other interwoven themes that we come to know from the reading of this unit.

## *1.8 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. Assess the contribution of the poets of the First World War to modem British poetry

2. What ways do Browning, Hardy and Hopkins anticipate modernity in poetry?

3. Write an essay on the major voices in modem poetry

4. Bring out Eliot and Pound's contribution to Imagist Movement.

5. Write short notes on

i) Aestheticism, ii) Impressionism, iii) Symbolism iv) Imagism v) 'confessional' poetry

vi) The Movement vii) The Group viii) The rejection of modernism

## *1.9 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS*


Hamilton, Ian ed. *Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*. Oxford, 1994

Vinson, James ed. *Confemporary Poets*. London, 1975

--------- Great Writers of the English Language: Poets ed. London, 1979


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## *UNIT 2: W. B. YEATS: 'THE SECOND COMING', 'SAILING TO BYZANTIUM', 'AMONG SCHOOLCHILDREN'*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *2.0 INTRODUCTION*

The Irish struggle for independence in early twentieth century forms a major cluster of poetry in the bulk of modern English poetry. Yeats' writing during Irish Renaissance and his understanding of the futility of Irish movement contributed to his poetic diction and thematic concerns. Always seen as the pioneer of Celtic Revival in Ireland, we encounter the central symbolism of interpenetrating gyres or cones and the phases of the moon. Along with the doctrine of the Mask, these metaphors enabled Yeats to impose a certain pattern or order on the history of Western civilization. The bitterness and disillusionment of modernity transforming the self into split personae or discovery of the double selves in modern man make Yeats a uniquely modern poet. In this unit we shall try to see this uniqueness of Yeats' modernity through the prescribed poems and the thematic concern they reflect.

## *2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- acquaint yourself with the life and works of W.B Yeats
- read critically the select poems ofYeats
- grasp the major thematic concerns and stylistic features inYeats' poetry

## *2.2 W B YEATS: LIFE AND WORKS*

William Butler Yeats was born on June 13, 1865, in Dublin, Ireland, the oldest child of John Butler Yeats and Susan Mary Pollexfen. Although John trained as a lawyer, he abandoned the law for art soon after his first son was born. Yeats spent much of his early years in London, where his father was studying art, but frequently returned to Ireland as well. In the mid-1880s, Yeats pursued his own interest in art as a student at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin. Following the publication of his poems in the Dublin University Review in 1885, he soon abandoned art school for other pursuits.

After returning to London in the late 1880s, Yeats met writers Oscar Wilde, Lionel Johnson and George Bernard Shaw. He also became acquainted with Maud Gonne, a supporter of Irish independence. This revolutionary woman served as a muse for Yeats for years. He even proposed marriage to her several times, but she turned him down. He dedicated his 1892 drama The Countess Kathleen to her.

Around this time, Yeats founded the Rhymers' Club poetry group with Ernest Rhys. He also joined the Order of the Golden Dawn, an organization that explored topics related to the occult and mysticism. While he was fascinated with otherworldly elements, Yeats's interest in Ireland, especially its folktales, fuelled much of his output. The title work of *The Wanderings of Oisin*and *Other Poems* (1889) draws from the story of a mythic Irish hero.

In addition to his poetry, Yeats devoted significant creative energy to writing plays. He worked with playwright Lady Gregory to develop works for the Irish stage, the two collaborating for the 1902 production of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. More works soon followed, including *On Baile's Strand*, *Deirdre* and *At the Hawk's Well.*

Yeats married Georgie Hyde-Lees in 1917, and they soon had daughter Anne and son William Michael. The celebrated writer then became a political figure in the new Irish Free State, serving as a senator for six years beginning in 1922. The following year, he received an important accolade for his writing as the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature. According to the official Nobel Prize website, Yeats was selected "for his always inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation." Yeats continued to write until his death. Some of his important later works include *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1917), *The Tower* (1928) and *Words for Music Perhaps* and *Other Poems* (1932). Yeats passed away on January 28, 1939, in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France. The publication of *Last Poems* and *Two Plays* shortly after his death further cemented his legacy as a leading poet and playwright.

Irish poet William Butler Yeats first published his first works in the mid-1880s while a student at Dublin's Metropolitan School of Art. He eventually dropped out, but he continued to write. Yeats' early accomplishments included *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems* (1889) and such plays as *The Countess Kathleen (*1892) and *Deirdre* (1907). In 1923, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Yeats wrote several more influential works after receiving this honour, including *The Tower* (1928) and *Words for Music Perhaps and Other Poems* (1932). Yeats died in 1939. He is remembered as one of the most significant modern poets of all time.

## 2.3 READING YEATS' POEMS

### 2.3.1 The Second Coming

'The Second Coming' is one of Yeats's most famous and most anthologized poems because of its stunning, violent imagery and terrifying ritualistic language. It is also one of the most thematically obscure and difficult to understand. Structurally, the poem is quite simple—the first stanza describes the conditions present in the world (things falling apart, anarchy, etc.), and the second surmises from those conditions that a monstrous Second Coming is about to take place, not of the Jesus we first knew, but of a new messiah, a "rough beast," the slouching sphinx rousing itself in the desert and lumbering toward Bethlehem. This brief exposition, though intriguingly blasphemous, is not terribly complicated; but the question of what it should signify to a reader is another story entirely.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

Yeats' poem influenced the titles of many books from diverse fields. Some of them include Chinua Achebe's classic novel *Things Fall Apart,* Elyn Saks's 2008 memoir, *The Center Cannot Hold: My Journey Through Madness,* art books like David Gulden's photography collection *The Centre Cannot Hold*), politics like *The Center Holds: Obama and His Enemies*), alternate history *American Empire: The Center Cannot Hold,* popular history like *A Blood-Dimmed Tide: The Battle of the Bulge by the Men Who Fought It*, Northrop Frye's *Spiritus Mundi, anyone?*

To grasp the significance of this poem we must turn to the elaborate, mystical theory of the universe that Yeats described in his book *A Vision*. This theory issued in part from Yeats's lifelong fascination with the occult and mystical, and in part from the sense of responsibility Yeats felt to order his experience within a structured belief system. The system is extremely complicated and not of any lasting importance—except for the effect that it had

on his poetry, which is of extraordinary lasting importance. The theory of history Yeats articulated in *A Vision*centres on a diagram made of two conical spirals, one inside the other, so that the widest part of one of the spirals rings or gyres around the narrowest part of the other spiral, and vice versa. Yeats believed that this image captured the contrary motions inherent within the historical process, and he divided each gyre into specific regions that represented particular kinds of historical periods and could also represent the psychological phases of an individual's development.

'The Second Coming' was intended by Yeats to describe the current historical moment (the poem appeared in 1921) in terms of these gyres. Yeats believed that the world was on the threshold of an apocalyptic revelation, as history reached the end of the outer gyre and began moving along the inner gyre. In his definitive edition of Yeats's poems, Richard J. Finneran quotes Yeats's own notes:

> The end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, is represented by the coming of one gyre to its place of greatest expansion and of the other to its place of greatest contraction... The revelation [that] approaches will... take its character from the contrary movement of the interior gyre...

In other words, the world's trajectory along the gyre of science, democracy, and heterogeneity is now coming apart, like the frantically widening flight-path of the falcon that has lost contact with the falconer. The next age will take its character not from the gyre of science, democracy, and speed, but from the contrary inner gyre—which, presumably, opposes mysticism, primal power, and slowness to the science and democracy of the outer gyre. The "rough beast" slouching toward Bethlehem is the symbol of this new age; the speaker's vision of the rising sphinx is his vision of the character of the new world.This may not make much sense as philosophical terms. But nonetheless as poetry, and understood more broadly than as a simple reiteration of the mystic theory of *A Vision*, 'The Second Coming' is a magnificent statement about the contrary forces

at work in history, and about the conflict between the modern world and the ancient world.

The poem begins with the image of a falcon flying out of earshot from its human master. In medieval times, people would use falcons or hawks to track down animals at ground level. In this image, however, the falcon has gotten itself lost by flying too far away, which we can read as a reference to the collapse of traditional social arrangements in Europe at the time Yeats was writing.

In the fourth line, the poem abruptly shifts into a description of "anarchy" and an orgy of violence in which "the ceremony of innocence is drowned." The speaker laments that only bad people seem to have any enthusiasm nowadays.

At line 9, the second stanza of the poem begins by setting up a new vision. The speaker takes the violence which has engulfed society as a sign that "the Second Coming is at hand." He imagines a sphinx in the desert, and we are meant to think that this mythical animal, rather than Christ, is what is coming to fulfil the prophecy from the Biblical Book of Revelation. At line 18, the vision ends as "darkness drops again," but the speaker remains troubled.

Finally, at the end of the poem, the speaker asks a rhetorical question which really amounts to a prophecy that the beast is on its way to Bethlehem, the birthplace of Christ, to be born into the world.

## *2.3.2 'Sailing to Byzantium'*

'Sailing to Byzantium' by William Butler Yeats was first published in 1928 in the collection called *The Tower*. The title suggests an escape to a distant, imaginary land where the speaker achieves mystical union with beautiful, eternal works of art. "Byzantium" refers to the ancient name of Istanbul, the capital of the Byzantium Empire of the fifth and sixth centuries. But Byzantium in the poem is an imaginary city, a country of the poet's mind.

The poet is getting old and finds Ireland, where he is presently living is not congenial to men of advanced age. The poet is "an aged man" who comes to the realization that youth and sensual life are no longer an option for him, and he

commences on a spiritual journey to the ideal world of Byzantium. The poet therefore decides to go the Byzantium which is a traditional place of art and engage himself there with the study of the treasures. The poet also called Byzantium 'holy' for it is the centre of spiritual and intellectual activity and not a place suitable for physical and sensuous pleasures of life.

As soon as the poet arrives in the Byzantium he prays to God's saints to come down from heaven and teach him to appreciate art; he request them to help his being absorbed into the artifice of eternity that engaged in the pursuit of the spiritual.

'Sailing to Byzantium' is quite a short poem consisting of four stanzas, rhyming *abababcc*, all in roughly iambic pentameter. In the first stanza, the poet describes, the natural world, where the young of all species- birds, fishes, and people are busy loving, reproducing and commending the flesh. As an old man, the poet at once celebrates the fertility and joyful images of teeming fish, birds and people but despairs of their temporal ignorance.

In the second stanza Yeats describes the predicament of the old man more closely 'An aged man' is no more than a scarecrow, a tattered coat upon a stick' without much physical vigour. Hence the old must seek Byzantium; that is, the country of the old; it is reached by sailing the seas, by breaking utterly with the country of the young; all passion must be left behind; the soul must be free to study the emblems of unchanging things.

In the third stanza Yeats now appeals to the sages who stand in God's holy fire and who have thus been purged of the last remnants of sensuality. These sages look like the figure represented in the gold mosaic of a wall. The poet wants them to come out of the holy fire and to descend upon him with a hawk- like movement. He wants them to become the "singing masters of his soul" and to purify his heart. In other words he wants them to teach him to listen to spiritual music, as distinguished from the sensual music. The poet after getting rid of all sensual desires would like to be transformed into some object of art having an eternal value. The third stanza presents the speaker standing before a golden mosaic,

pleading the Byzantine sages and "God's holy fire" to illuminate his soul. He realizes that his heart is trapped inside a fleshy creature that will soon die: the poet wants to leave this world and enter the world of timeless art through his song-poetry.

In the fourth stanza Yeats has renounced his earthly body, he would not like to re-born in the same or in any other earthly shape. He will reject all physical incarnations, because all living beings are subject to mortality and death. He would like to become something eternal and imperishable. He would take the shape of the golden bird, the kind of bird which Grecian goldsmiths are believed to have designed for the pleasure of an emperor. As a golden bird, a work of art, he would be beyond decay or death and would therefore be unlike the "dying generations" of real birds. As a golden bird, he will be placed on a golden bough, and he will appear to be singing songs of all times to an audience of the lords and ladies of Byzantium. His song, when he becomes a golden bird, will be that of spiritual ecstasy and he will be surrounded, not by the young lovers and other animal creatures of the sexual cycle, but by an audience that is elegant and abstract. In Byzantium, he will have no age; past, present and future are all one there.

The poem's major theme is the transformative power of art; the ability of art to express the ineffable and to step outside the boundaries of self. Some concrete details of the poem might be read autobiographically, such as the speaker's desire to leave his country, references to himself as an old man, "a tattered coat upon a stick", and having a heart "sick with desire. The speaker feels the desire to sail to Byzantium and metaphorically to transcend the sensual music of Ireland. He wants to transform his own consciousness and find mystical union with the golden mosaics of a medieval empire.

### *2.3.3 'Among Schoolchildren'*

The poem 'Among School Children' was composed after the poet's visit to a convent school in Waterford Ireland in 1926. This poem moves from a direct consideration of the children to Yeats' early love, Maud Gonne, and then to a

passionate philosophical conclusion in which all of Yeats's platonic thinking blends into an exalted hymn of raise to the glory and the puzzle of human existence.As Yeats entered the school, he was received by an old nun who conducted him through different classes. The children in the classes looked with wonder at the sixty year old smiling public man (poet). At the sight of children, he is reminded of Maud Gonne, his beloved, as she must have been a student like the girls who stood before him at the time. He recalls a particular day when she had told him how trivial incidents and reproof from the teacher would make her unhappy and turn the entire day into the cheerless void.

The poet had listened to her account and expressed sympathy, till he completely identified with her: it was as if there two selves seemed to blend into one like the yolk and white of an egg. At this point, there is an allusion of the myth that claims that man and woman were originally one, but since they forcefully separated, they always attempt to come together.

The poet thought keeps visualizing the image of Maud Gonne and he looks upon this girl and imagines that Maud Gonne, too as a child very much like the girl now standing before him. No doubt her beauty was classical like that of Helen, the daughter of the Leda. The colour of the cheeks and the hair of one particular girl reminded him of the complexion of his beloved; his imagination runs wild and he sees her as if she were actually standing before him.

The poet then recalls the feature of Maud Gonne in her old age. Her cheeks were hollow; she was old and decrepit and looked as if she subsisted on the wind and shadows in place of water and solid food. Even so, she was still a good model of a work of art. Naturally poet is reminded of his own old age. He was quite good looking once. Though not as beautiful as Leda but it is useless to brood over youth and beauty that was now a thing of the past. One must always remain cheerful and keep smiling, showing to the world that even if one has grown a scarecrow, one is a comfortable kind of scarecrow. Old age and death are awful realities. One should accept the inevitable and make the best of a bad situation.

In the sixth stanza the poet ridicules great philosophers of the world in a light hearted vein. Plato, the famous philosopher regarded the world as unreal, a mere reflection of ideas. On the other hand, Aristotle was a practical minded man of action and, as the tutor of Alexander, must have chastised that great conqueror frequently. Yet another philosopher Pythagoras declared that he was 'golden thighed'. He was a great musician himself and could listen to the music of the spheres or the musical sounds emanating from the movement of planets in their orbit. But all the outstanding knowledge and wisdom of these renowned men could not prevent the natural process of ageing. Their philosophies notwithstanding, they grew old and broken like a scarecrow with the passage of time.

Passionate loves, loving mother and pious nuns all cling to illusions, phantoms pure and simple. Their fondness for cherished images makes them blind to hard and harsh reality. The beloveds are not at all as good and beautiful as they are imagined, sons never as handsome and dutiful as believed or supposed, and the God is in heaven never as just and merciful as generally understood. And yet this worship of images continues unabated. The fact is that the images stand for glorious ideals which are hardly ever attained. These idols mock at all human efforts. They are mockeries of the heart as great philosophers are mockeries of the intellect. None of them can change the facts of life or influence the course of nature.

The last stanza is an emphatic re-affirmation of the poet's maxim that life is an organic whole made up of opposites. Just as chestnut tree is neither leaf blossom or bole but the sum total of all three, so also man is neither mind nor body nor soul but an untitled entity of the three. Life becomes really fruitful and labour is truly rewarding when the diligence of the scholar does not make him clear eye. Just as a dancer cannot be isolated from the dance, so also the body cannot be separated from the soul. Harmony between the two is indispensable for self-fulfilment for the bloom, and beauty of the tree of life.

## *2.4 MAJOR THEMES*

### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ART AND POLITICS

Yeats believed that art and politics were intrinsically linked and used his writing to express his attitudes toward Irish politics, as well as to educate his readers about Irish cultural history. From an early age, Yeats felt a deep connection to Ireland and his national identity, and he thought that British rule negatively impacted Irish politics and social life. His early compilation of folklore sought to teach a literary history that had been suppressed by British rule, and his early poems were odes to the beauty and mystery of the Irish countryside. This work frequently integrated references to myths and mythic figures, including Oisin and Cuchulain. As Yeats became more involved in Irish politics—through his relationships with the Irish National Theatre, the Irish Literary Society, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and Maud Gonne—his poems increasingly resembled political manifestos. Yeats wrote numerous poems about Ireland's involvement in World War I ("An Irish Airman Foresees His Death", "A Meditation in Time of War"), Irish nationalists and political activists ("On a Political Prisoner", "In Memory of Eva Gore Booth and Con Markiewicz"), and the Easter Rebellion ("Easter 1916"). Yeats believed that art could serve a political function: poems could both critique and comment on political events, as well as educate and inform a population.

### THE IMPACT OF FATE AND THE DIVINE ON HISTORY

Yeats's devotion to mysticism led to the development of a unique spiritual and philosophical system that emphasized the role of fate and historical determinism, or the belief that events have been preordained. Yeats had rejected Christianity early in his life, but his lifelong study of mythology, Theosophy, spiritualism, philosophy, and the occult demonstrate his profound interest in the divine and how it interacts with humanity. Over the course of his life, he created a complex system of spirituality, using the image of interlocking gyres (similar to

spiral cones) to map out the development and reincarnation of the soul. Yeats believed that history was determined by fate and that fate revealed its plan in moments when the human and divine interact. A tone of historically determined inevitability permeates his poems, particularly in descriptions of situations of human and divine interaction. The divine takes on many forms in Yeats's poetry, sometimes literally ("Leda and the Swan"), sometimes abstractly ("The Second Coming"). In other poems, the divine is only gestured to as in the sense of the divine in the Byzantine mosaics in "Sailing to Byzantium". No matter what shape it takes, the divine signals the role of fate in determining the course of history.

## IRISH NATIONALISM AND POLITICS

Throughout his literary career, Yeats incorporated distinctly Irish themes and issues into his work. He used his writing as a tool to comment on Irish politics and the home rule movement and to educate and inform people about Irish history and culture. Yeats also used the backdrop of the Irish countryside to retell stories and legends from Irish folklore. As he became increasingly involved in nationalist politics, his poems took on a patriotic tone. Yeats addressed Irish politics in a variety of ways: sometimes his statements are explicit political commentary, as in "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," in which he addresses the hypocrisy of the British use of Irish soldiers in World War I. Such poems as "Easter 1916" and "In Memory of Eva Gore Booth and Con Markiewicz" address individuals and events connected to Irish nationalist politics, while "The Second Coming" and "Leda and the Swan" subtly include the idea of Irish nationalism. In these poems, a sense of cultural crisis and conflict seeps through, even though the poems are not explicitly about Ireland. By using images of chaos, disorder, and war, Yeats engaged in an understated commentary on the political situations in Ireland and abroad. Yeats's active participation in Irish politics informed his poetry, and he used his work to further comment on the nationalist issues of his day.

## MYSTICISM AND THE OCCULT

Yeats had a deep fascination with mysticism and the occult, and his poetry is infused with a sense of the otherworldly, the spiritual, and the unknown. His interest in the occult began with his study of Theosophy as a young man and expanded and developed through his participation in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a mystical secret society. Mysticism figures prominently in Yeats's discussion of the reincarnation of the soul, as well as in his philosophical model of the conical gyres used to explain the journey of the soul, the passage of time, and the guiding hand of fate. Mysticism and the occult occur again and again in Yeats's poetry, most explicitly in "The Second Coming" but also in poems such as "Sailing to Byzantium" and "The Magi". The rejection of Christian principles in favour of a more supernatural approach to spirituality creates a unique flavour in Yeats's poetry that impacts his discussion of history, politics, and love.

## *2.5 SUMMING UP*

By now you must have understood the significance of the poems of Yeats and their position in modern poetic tradition. Though the succeeding generations of poets reacted against some of his tenets or stylistic experiments, it cannot be denied that twentieth century English poetry would never see the kind of impact that the stalwart had. We hope that you would be inspired to read other texts from Yeats.

## *2.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. One of the important themes in Yeats's writing is his exploration of the relationship between the natural and the artificial, and particularly the relationship between nature and art. Describe how Yeats characterizes this relationship with special reference to 'Sailing to Byzantium'.

2. Some of Yeats's least accessible poems are his works of visionary history, which often incorporate themes from *A Vision* and seem, on the surface, thematically irrelevant to contemporary readers. Can we read 'The Second Coming' as a poem embracing more universal elements of human experience than its' occult, mythological frame of reference might imply?
3. Is Byzantium an actual place in the poem, or is it a mental state? What reasons do you have for your opinion?
4. What does Yeats think of nature in 'Sailing to Byzantium'?

## *2.7 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS*


Brooks, Cleanth. *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*. Chapel Hill, 1939

Daiches, David. *Poetry and the Modern World*. Chicago, 1940

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## *UNIT 3: T. S. ELIOT: 'THE LOVE SONG OF J ALFRED PRUFROCK', 'THE HOLLOW MEN'*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *3.0 INTRODUCTION*

1920s to the 1950s was a period dominated by poets like Ezra Pound and T.S Eliot, both in British and American poetry. The High Modernist mode popular in poetry was featured by the disparate but fragmentary experiences of a civilization found itself in a complex and heterogeneous situations best expressed in Eliot's imagistic poetry. Eliot was one such poet who had experimented formalism and aestheticism, impressionism, symbolism and imagism to produce the modernist mode. In this unit we are discussing two of the most representative poems of Eliot, their style and thematic presentations in elaborate details. An indepth reading of the texts of these poems will certainly enable you to understand Eliot's view of the modern age. We also suggest you to read *The Wasteland* to understand Eliot's philosophy.

## *3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- acquaint yourself with the life and works of Eliot
- read critically the select poems prescribed for your study
- grasp the major thematic concerns and stylistic features inthemodernist poetry of Eliot

## *3.2 T. S. ELIOT: LIFE AND WORKS*

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born at St. Louis on 26 September 1888 to an eminent American family tracing its roots to Somersetshire in England, and a member of the famed 'Boston Brahmins' of New England. In 1893, Eliot was enrolled into an elementary school run by a lady called MrsLockwood and in 1898 in Smith Academy. After completing his studies at Smith Academy, Eliot was enrolled in Milton Academy near Boston to prepare for Harvard University. In 1906, after successfully completing his year-long studies at Milton Academy, Eliot entered Harvard University. He was drawn towards the humanities, "studying the literatures of several countries, languages, history, and philosophy" (3). During his days at Harvard, he not only read widely but nurtured his literary skills harbouring literary ambitions. In 1910, Eliot undertook the Junior Year Abroad, during which he stayed in Paris and visited London and Munich. In Paris, he attended lectures of Henri Bergson, the leading French philosopher and studied French authors including Charles Baudelaire, Jules Laforgue and Tristan Corbière. During his stay at Paris Eliot made friends with Jean Verdenal, who was a medical student and whose death in the First World War left Eliot deeply affected. Eliot dedicates his poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917) to Jean Verdenal. In 1911, Eliot returned to Harvard and enrolled in masters. Although he was poised for an academic career, he continued to write mostly

fragmentary verses. In 1914, British philosopher Bertrand Russell visited Harvard during which he happened to meet Eliot and was greatly impressed with his potential. In 1914, Eliot took a Sheldon Traveling Fellowship for a year and entered Merton College, Oxford to study with Harold Joachim, who had interpreted F.H. Bradley. Before he went to Oxford, Eliot joined a summer programme at Marburg University in Germany and visited Belgium and Italy. However, the First World War commenced soon after he arrived at Marburg and he had to leave Germany for London. There, Eliot stayed at Bloomsbury and came into contact with the leading writers and thinkers of the day, including American expatriates like Conrad Aiken and Ezra Pound who would go on to play a significant role in Eliot's evolution as an artist. In 1914, Eliot met Vivienne Haigh-Wood and married her after a courtship of three months. This not only shocked Eliot's family back home but soured his relationship with his father forever. Vivienne was a "chirpy, nervous woman suffering from both physical and psychological ailments". Soon Eliot found the marriage as well as Vivienne, who was prone to depression, demanding. Plagued by financial constraints he had to focus on earning a livelihood. He took up teaching, which despite bringing home a regular salary, was something Eliot never really enjoyed. He also started reviewing books for *Times Literary Supplement, New Statesman, International Journal of Ethics* besides other journals. This laid the foundation for the influence he was to wield as a literary critic and theorist later on. In 1917, through his wife's family, Eliot got a job in the Colonial and Foreign Department of Lloyds Bank, London. This job, for the next eight years, gave Eliot the financial security he needed to focus on his writing. Soon after he joined Lloyds, Eliot's first book of poems *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) was published by the Egoist Press. Its proprietor Harriet Shaw Weaver was a great patron of the avant-garde. In May 1917 he accepted the position of assistant editor of *Egoist*, a magazine started in 1914. In 1919 Eliot's second poetry collection *Poems* was published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf of the Hogarth Press. This book was also published in America by Alfred Knopf. While *Prufrock and Other Observations* was

essentially a modernist piece of work, this latter book comprised poems of varied kinds—including French poems written under the influence of Symbolists, poems in the traditional quatrain stanza, as well as other poems. Ironically, while in 1919 and 1920 one finds Eliot at the height of his poetic prowess, his personal life was in an abysmally difficult state. He too underwent bouts of depression and had to admit himself in a sanatorium in Switzerland where he completed the first draft of *The Waste Land* that was to become his magnum opus. By the time the First World War ended, Eliot had begun working on fragments that would eventually become part of a four-part poem by early 1921. That very year, in summer his mother and sister came to visit him. This visit left both parties unhappy: Charlotte not only disapproved of her son's wife but also held her responsible for his stay in England; at the same time as she disapproved of some of Eliot's friends. This visit left him considerably distracted as a result. However, eventually Eliot managed to complete the poem and in 1922 in the October issue of The Criterion in the United Kingdom and in the November issue of The Dial in the USA. This poem at once took the literary scenario by storm. In 1925, Eliot left his job at Lloyds and joined Faber and Gwyer, which later on became Faber and Faber. Eventually Eliot became the director of Faber and Faber. In 1925, Eliot published Poems: 1909-1925 which was a collection of his poems from *Prufrock and Other Observations*, *The Waste Land*, *Poems* as well as *The Hollow Men*. In June 1927, Eliot converted to the Church of England and in November of the same year he took British citizenship. By 1932, the Eliots' marriage had reached a point where T.S. Eliot did not wish to continue it further, and he contemplated a separation from his wife. The same year, he accepted an offer for Charles Eliot Norton Professorship from the University of Harvard. After returning from USA, he became formally separated from his wife whom he had left behind in England. In 1939, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* was published. This work was basically a collection of light verse. In 1938, Vivienne was admitted to the Northumberland House Mental Hospital at Stoke Newington where she remained till her death in 1947. However, barring one occasion T.S. Eliot never visited or met his wife

though legally he remained her husband till the end. Between 1938 and 1957, Mary Trevelyan of the University of London was Eliot's companion. Trevelyan wrote a detailed memoir of Eliot. In January, 1957 he married his long-time secretary Valerie Fletcher who was almost half his age. And yet, Eliot found happiness in this marriage. In 1965, Eliot passed away at his home at Kensington, London. Eliot's friend John Davy Hayward, with whom Eliot lived during 1946-1957 published Eliot's poems from the early phase of his career, especially poems published in The Harvard Advocate between 1907 and 1910, in the form of a book titled *Poems Written in Early Youth*. In 1997, another recollection of unpublished poems came out as *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1907-1917*.

## *3.3 READING THE POEMS OF T. S ELIOT*

### *3.3.1 The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

The twentieth century was a century "that was itself fascinated by its own modernity" (Beasley 19). Starting from the fag end of the nineteenth century, the literary, artistic and aesthetic movement of modernism flourished in the first few decades of the twentieth century in Europe and America. At the turn of the twentieth century, rapid developments in science and technology and rapid changes in the ways of life along with a rebellious attitude towards history, social institutions and tradition fuelled the development of literary modernism. Modernist literature and art was a radical break away from the prevailing literary and artistic traditions. The significance of the modernist writers lies not only on their experimentation in the different genres of writing but in the fact that their deliberations on prevailing intellectual discourses—in literature, philosophy, fine arts, politics and society—are manifested in their writings. Modernist authors sought to highlight and find answers to the existential questions plaguing people during those times. Fragmentation, alienation, dehumanization of man and loss of identity were some of the issues dealt with in modernist writings. T.S. Eliot's poem 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' was written in around 1911-1912

though it was published in 1915 in Prufrock and Other Observations. This poem, regarded as the earliest exposition of modernism in English poetry, is seen as a forerunner of Eliot's seminal poem *The Waste Land*.

The poem 'The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock' is not a love song; in fact it has an anti-Romantic stance. The poem opens with an epigraph taken from "Inferno", Canto XXVII, lines 61-66 of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The words are spoken by Count Guido de Montefeltro who had been banished to Hell for his deeds on earth. Thinking that Dante too is one damned like him Guido reveals himself and his past. By the lines mentioned in the epigraph Guido means that if he spoke to somebody who would return from Hell to the world of men he wouldn't have revealed himself. However, since this never happened he could speak to Dante about his identity and his past without fear of infamy. By this, we understand that Guido views the speaker Dante, his listener as a fellow sufferer in Hell. Similarly, in the poem Prufrock seems to exist in a metaphorical hell while the reader, to whom Prufrock reveals his inner thoughts and hesitations as he undertakes his journey, is a fellow sufferer.

The opening lines of the poem refer to a 'you and I' that recurs throughout the poem, highlighting the notion of fragmented personality characteristic of the modernist experience. This "you and I" may refer to either the speaker (Prufrock) or his alter-ego, the conscious and unconscious minds of Prufrock or his public and private selves or else the speaker and the reader. In the poem, Prufrock undertakes a journey through dingy streets with "one-night cheap hotels" (line 6) and "sawdust restaurants" (line 7), thereby highlighting the dark underbelly of a modern metropolis. After passing through those parts Prufrock finally arrives at a room where "women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo" (first mentioned in lines 13-14). This at once establishes a contrast with the dingy streets through which Prufrock has travelled. The party where Prufrock finds himself in is populated by members of the elite who freely move around communicating with one another while Prufrock seems incapable of communication. And so throughout the poem we find Prufrock deliberating with himself, immersed in

thoughts while a wall of silence surrounds him, distancing and alienating him from the people around. At the same time, "women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo" becomes a refrain that signifies the cliché-ridden talk of the women who populate such gatherings; as if these women talk of the famous Renaissance painter and sculptor Michelangelo in a bid to display their knowledge of the arts without sound knowledge of the same or else because it is fashionable to do so. Thus, Prufrock finds himself in a pretentious world that he finds difficult to adjust to. In line 15 of the poem the reader learns of a yellowish fog enveloping the house where the party is going on. As Prufrock observes the fog morphs into a cat that rubs its back and its muzzle on the window-panes, licks its tongue "into the corners of the evening" (line 17), hovers about the drains, allows the soot from the chimneys to fall on it (thereby highlighting the pollution in a modern city), slips on the (slippery) terrace of the house, and eventually curls himself to sleep. Like the enveloping fog, the cat too curls 'about the house' and falls asleep. The time is October, i.e. the season of autumn and Prufrock too (as we learn later on in the poem) is in the autumn of his life. The yellowish fog is reminiscent of the industrial bog that Eliot must have witnessed during his younger days beside the Mississippi-Missouri. The yellow colour is reminiscent of a jaundiced state—thereby signifying that both the modern times and the modern world are jaundiced and ailing. The image of the cat going to sleep underlines the ennui that had settled in on the times as well as Prufrock's own inactivity. The feline image occurs later on in the poem too.

In the poem, notions that have traditionally been upheld with admiration and awe—whether time or the universe—are consciously belittled. And thus in "*The Love Song*" time is played around in Prufrock's mind. Beginning with line 23 till line 37, Prufrock keeps repeating "there will be time" in a bid to reassure himself that there is a lot of time for taking, revising and eventually rejecting the decision of asking the "overwhelming question"—which implies a question of great significance. The phrase 'there will be time' is a reference to the Metaphysical poet Andrew Marvell's poem '*To His Coy Mistress'*. While the

speaker in Marvell's poem expresses his intention of taking his beloved to different exotic places if there were time, Prufrock is unable to articulate his thoughts to the lady. While there is a sense of urgency in Marvell's speaker, Prufrock thinks of delaying the overwhelming question. Of course, the question itself is not stated anywhere in the poem though the reader presumes it to be a proposal to a lady whom Prufrock admires. Prufrock despite being aware that he is running short of time keeps giving himself the false assurance that there would be time. He speaks of putting on a mask of pretension as he steps out to meet other people who too are wearing masks. According to Prufrock there is time to "murder and create" (line 28), that is for destruction and creation, which though contrasting are complementary too—since destruction is followed by creation. Further in line 29 when Prufrock says, "And time for all the works and days of hands", he is referring to Works and Days by the ancient Greek poet Hesiod. This didactic eight hundred-line poem talks of a farming year; thus "works and days" in 'The Love Song' implies the passage of time though ironically time rarely seems to flow in the poem. According to Prufrock, the works and days of hands drop the overwhelming question on a plate. And yet, there will be time even as women constantly move about with their cliché-laden utterances. As Prufrock continues reassuring himself doubt and fear creep in, eventually his defeatist self overwhelms him and he turns back and walks down the stairs. This act of walking down the stairs is a reference to Russian author Dostoevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment*. In the novel, the character Raskolnikov is both drawn towards and repulsed by his landlady who lives upstairs. And thus, whenever he ascends the stairs or thinks of doing so, there is an ambivalence in his ascendancy. Similarly, Prufrock too seems both attracted and intimidated by the woman of whom he is the potential suitor. His courage fails him and he walks down the stairs, in a way reminiscent of Raskolnikov. It is significant that throughout the poem, women seem unattainable to Prufrock, and there is in him a perennial fear of rejection (by women) that feeds into his lack of self-confidence. This is manifested in his incessant hesitation of taking a step forward to ask the overwhelming question.

This lack of confidence and low self-esteem are spurred by the fact that Prufrock is no longer a young man; on the contrary he is a middle aged man whose bald pate is increasingly visible and who has visibly thinned, and so despite dressing up in the latest fashion he feels self conscious. The fashionable dresses cannot overshadow the fact that Prufrock is essentially a simple man; as is "asserted by a simple pin" (line 43). And yet Prufrock does not have the courage to ask the overwhelming question, for that would be akin to disturbing the universe. However, it is ironical that since Prufrock is a Laforguian little man he is hardly, if ever, going to draw much attention even if he asks the overwhelming question. And then a sense of boredom sets in as Prufrock says that he has "known them all already" (line 49) that recur several times till line 55. In this manner Prufrock attempts at face-saving in the advent of defeat or ignominy and therefore he asserts that he knows the evenings, mornings and afternoons as well as the "voices dying with a dying fall/ Beneath the music from a farther room" (lines 52-53) which is a reference to Shakespeare's play Twelfth Night, where Duke Orsino. Prufrock asserts that he knows the eyes of society that hold him in a "formulated phrase". Here the reference is to the gaze of society that seeks to reduce everyone to certain labels or clichés, dehumanizing man, reducing an individual to an insect that is pinned in the laboratory, scrutinized under the microscope. Prufrock feels objectified, like an insect "pinned and wriggling" (line 58) on a wall; he feels anguish and suffocation at this constant scrutinizing that he is subjected to. He is anxious to escape from this state but is unable to. And so, Prufrock begins to wonder how he should begin, though in true modernist fashion, Prufrock is himself unaware of what to begin. Gradually Prufrock's self-disgust becomes manifest when he speaks of 'spitting out' the "butt-ends" of his "days and ways" (line 60), the 'butt-ends' evoking an image of the cigarette butt; as if his life too is useless like the cigarette butt. In lines 62 to 67, Prufrock reveals his familiarity with the lady whom he presumably wishes to profess his love to. However, the lady is never described in detail or in totality. On the contrary he depicts her in fragments, underlining the fragmentation of people in the modernist era. The

lady's arms are uncovered and fair, and lying on the table or wrapped around a shawl; she is wearing a bracelet and the brown hair on her arms glisten in the lamplight. This last image is reminiscent of the line "A bracelet of bright hair about the bone" from John Donne's poem 'The Relic'. The perfume from the lady's dress distracts Prufrock.

And yet Prufrock does not know how to begin and his thoughts, longing to escape drifts to the industrial cosmopolitan city that lies beyond the immediate confines of the room (lines 70-72). And Prufrock remembers how at dusk men in shirt sleeves lean out of their windows, onto narrow streets while smoke emerges from the pipes. These men are lonely and their act of leaning out of the window symbolizes that though they are desirous of escape they are unable to do so. The fact that these men are all in shirt-sleeves also indicates the facelessness or lack of individual identity of people in the modern times. Further, in lines 73-74 Prufrock expresses his desire to be "a pair of ragged claws" that 'scuttle' across the sea-bed. This not only symbolizes Prufrock's debasement as an individual in his own eyes but also his urge to escape or run away (i.e. 'scuttle') from taking decisions or asking the overwhelming question. This is also an indication of Prufrock's desire for withdrawal from the modern world he exists in.

Ennui and lethargy returns to Prufrock as he evokes the image of the cat once again (lines 75-78), comparing it to the afternoon and the evening. As he says, the afternoon and the evening peacefully sleeps "Smoothed by long fingers" (line 76). We learn that the afternoon/the cat is asleep since it is tired or else it pretends to sleep ("malingers"). This once again evokes the notion of pretension. The cat is stretched on the floor beside the speaker and his other self. After all this, Prufrock questions himself, would it be proper to ask the question, to "force the moment to its crisis" (line 80). Asking the question is a moment of crisis for Prufrock and he wonders if he has the strength to do so. In line 81, we witness Prufrock's preparation to assume the role of a hermit or a monk which he immediately rejects. He says that he is not John though he has seen his own head being presented on a platter. This is a reference to John the Baptist, who had

baptized Jesus and who was beheaded after the stepdaughter of the powerful king asked for his head. And Prufrock comparing himself to the Biblical John rejects the notion soon after, stating that he is no prophet. Prufrock admits to his secondary status and also the fact that he is afraid. In line 85, Prufrock says how he saw the eternal Footman hold his coat and "snicker". A footman is a servant who helps rich people put on their coats or open their coats when they enter a house. The eternal Footman here refers to the messenger of Death in Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. The fear of death makes Prufrock shiver and he admits to his timid nature. After that, from line 87, Prufrock begins to question if asking the overwhelming question would be worthwhile at all. In a sense, Prufrock is trying to analyse if not justify his failure. In line 92, he draws in the reference of Andrew Marvell's poem 'To His Coy Mistress', comparing his effort of raising the matter, i.e. asking the overwhelming question to a herculean effort of squeezing the universe into a ball. In line 94, Prufrock compares himself to Lazarus the Biblical character. According to the Book of Luke Lazarus is a beggar who sits at the gate of a rich man named Dives. After death, Lazarus is sent to Heaven while Dives is sent to Hell. Dives appeals to Abraham to send Lazarus to return to earth, to the world of men so that he can share with his brothers the sufferings of Hell. Accordingly Jesus raises him from the dead. Prufrock by comparing himself to Lazarus probably tries to establish himself as a representative of the dead. And then Prufrock speculates what would happen if after he pops the overwhelming question, the lady settling herself comfortably, casually rejects his proposal and his feelings. And so he continues speculating over the worth or the worthlessness of the whole spectacle—of the gathering where people are dressed elaborately, where people discuss novels (in an apparent reminder of the women talking of Michelangelo) and where Prufrock distracted by the woman's perfume and attracted by the glistening hair of her arms is about to ask an overwhelming question to the woman. Eventually Prufrock seems to descend into a state of incoherence where he is himself not aware of the meaning of his own words. At the same time, however, the gaze of the people around him (that makes him feel

like an insect pinned to a wall) seem to pierce through him and read his thoughts like the penetrating rays of the "magic lantern" (line 105). This can be seen as an obvious reference to the X-ray machine. At the same time, the image of the nerves, rather the pattern of nerves projected on a screen also signifies split selfhood.

Further, from line 111 to line 119, Prufrock draws comparisons with Prince Hamlet, and then with an attendant lord – in each case rejecting the comparison, denying his very existence. He eventually calls himself the Fool, or the jester in Shakespearean drama. The comparison with Prince Hamlet is significant because like the protagonist of that great Shakespearean tragedy, Prufrock too procrastinates constantly, seeking a delay or a deferral of asking the overwhelming question. Prufrock initially says that he is not Prince Hamlet but the attendant lord who does not occupy centre stage and only adds in a fairly insignificant way to the progress of a scene. However, eventually he says that he is the jester, the one who is not only a misfit of sorts in the scheme of things but also the outsider. Like the Fool, Prufrock too is alienated and seems like an outsider in the company he is. In line 120, he admits to growing old, strongly echoing Henri Bergson's notion of 'To live is to grow old'. Prufrock's hair is parted at the back and he wears the bottoms of his trousers rolled which contributes towards making him an outsider. Prufrock questions if he dare eat a peach (in line 122). According to Elizabeth Schneider, the peach was considered indigestible at the time (reminding the image of the cigarette butt) and therefore to try to eat something that is indigestible Prufrock commits an act of daring. Prufrock looks forward to walking on the beach, thus removing himself further from the room where the party is taking place. And once on the beach, Prufrock hears the mermaids singing though he is sure that the mermaids would not sing to him. In other words, Prufrock faces rejection not only in human society, but in the mythical world too. Reminiscent of Donne's "Teach me to hear mermaids sing", Prufrock seeks escapade from the human world and eventually seems to find acceptance in the depths of the sea. He sees the mermaids riding the waves going away from him, towards the sea. They comb the hair of the waves in a way

reminiscent of Prufrock combing his own hair, parted behind. Eventually, the 'you and I' that recurs throughout the poem becomes a "we" (line 129) as he enters the chambers of the sea. It seems as if Prufrock finds solace in his own company and immerses himself in the world of his thoughts, accompanied by sea girls who wear garlands of red and brown seaweed. However, human voices wake him up ("wake us" line 131) and Prufrock is broken out of his reverie or his deliberations as he is awakened to the clamour and chaos of human beings all around him. These last lines of the poem establishes the thought that poetic genius alone is not sufficient to create great poetry in the chaotic modern world, which can be seen as an undermining of Romantic notions of creativity.

### *3.3.2 Hollow Men*

Eliot starts his poem "The Hollow Men" with a quote from Joseph Conrad's novel *The Heart of Darkness*. The line "Mistah Kurtz-he dead" refers to a Mr Kurtz who was a European trader who had gone in the "the heart of darkness" by traveling into the central African jungle, with European standards of life and conduct. Because he has no moral or spiritual strength to sustain him, he was soon turned into a barbarian. He differs, however, from Eliot's "hollow men" as he is not paralyzed as they are , but on his death catches a glimpse of the nature of his actions when he claims "The horror! the Horror!" Kurtz is thus one of the "lost /Violent souls" mentioned in lines 15-16. Eliot next continues with "A penny for the Old Guy". This is a reference to the cry of English children soliciting money for fireworks to commemorate Guy Fawkes day, November 5; which commemorates the "gunpowder plot" of 1605 in which Guy Fawkes and other conspirators planned to blow up both houses of Parliament. On this day, which commemorates the failure of the explosion, the likes of Fawkes are burned in effigy and mock explosions using fireworks are produced. The relation of this custom to the poem suggests another inference: as the children make a game of make believe out of Guy Fawkes, so do we make a game out of religion.

The first lines bring the title and theme into a critical relationship. We are like the "Old Guy", effigies stuffed with straw. It may also be noticed that the first and last part of the poem indicate a church service, and the ritual service throughout. This is indicated in the passages "Leaning together…whisper together", and the voices "quiet and meaningless" as the service drones on. The erstwhile worshippers disappear in a blur of shape, shade gesture, to which normality is attached. Then the crucial orientation is developed, towards "death's other Kingdom." We know that we are in the Kingdom of death, not as "violent souls" but as empty effigies, "filled with straw", of this religious service.

Part two defines the hollow men in relation to the reality with those "direct eyes have met". "Direct eyes" symbolizing those who represent something positive (direct). Fortunately, the eyes he dare not meet even in dreams do not appear in "death's dream kingdom." They are only reflected through broken light and shadows, all is perceived indirectly. He would not be any nearer , any more direct, in this twilight kingdom. He fears the ultimate vision.

Part three defines the representation of death's kingdom in relationship to the worship of the hollow men. A dead, arid land, like it's people, it raises stone images of the spiritual, which are implored by the dead. And again the "fading star" establishes a sense of remoteness from reality. The image of frustrated love which follows is a moment of anguished illumination suspended between the two kingdoms of death. Lips that would adore, pray instead to a broken image. The "broken stone" unites the "stone images" and the broken column," which bent the sunlight.

Part four explores this impulse in relation to the land, which now darkens progressively as the valley of the shadow of death. Now there are not even hints of the eyes (of the positive), and the "fading" becomes the "dying" star. In action the hollow men now "grope together /And avoid speech", gathered on the banks of the swollen river which must be crossed to get to "death's other kingdom". The contrast with part I is clear. Without any eyes at all they are without any vision, unless "the eyes" return as the "perpetual", not a fading or dying star. But for

empty men this is only a hope. As the star becomes a rose, so the rose becomes the rose windows of the church; the rose as an image of the church and multifoliate. This is a reference to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where the multifoliate rose is a symbol of paradise, in which the saints are the petals of the rose.

But Part Five develops the reality, not the hope of the empty men; the cactus not the rose. The nursery level make believe mocks the hope of empty men. In desire they "go round the prickly pear" but are frustrated by the prickles. The poem now develops the frustration of impulse. At various levels, and in various aspects of life, there falls the frustrating shadow of fear, the essential shadow of this land. Yet the shadow is more than fear: it concentrates the valley of shadow into a shape of horror, almost a personification of its negative character. The passage from the Lord's Prayer relates the shadow to religion, with irony in the attribution. Next the response about the length of life relates it to the burden of life. Lastly the Lord's Prayer again relates the Shadow to the Kingdom that is so hard. This repetition follows the conflict of the series that produces life itself, frustrating the essence from descent to being. This is the essential irony of their impaired lives. The end comes by way of ironic completion as the nursery rhyme again takes up its repetitive round, and terminates with the line that characterizes the evasive excuse. They are the whimpers of fear with which the hollow men end, neither the bang of Guy Fawkes Day nor the "lost violent soul."

In part Five the frustration of reality is described by the abstractions introduced in Part I; life is frustrated at every level, and this accounts for the nature of the land and the character of its people. By placing God in a casual relation to this condition, the poem develops an irony which results in the "whimper". But the most devastating irony is formal: the extension of game ritual in liturgical form.

## *3.4 MAJOR THEMES*

**The Damaged Psyche of Humanity**

Like many modernist writers, Eliot wanted his poetry to express the fragile psychological state of humanity in the twentieth century. The passing of Victorian ideals and the trauma of World War I challenged cultural notions of masculine identity, causing artists to question the romantic literary ideal of a visionary-poet capable of changing the world through verse. Modernist writers wanted to capture their transformed world, which they perceived as fractured, alienated, and denigrated. Europe lost an entire generation of young men to the horrors of the so-called Great War, causing a general crisis of masculinity as survivors struggled to find their place in a radically altered society. As for England, the aftershocks of World War I directly contributed to the dissolution of the British Empire. Eliot saw society as paralyzed and wounded, and he imagined that culture was crumbling and dissolving. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" demonstrates this sense of indecisive paralysis as the titular speaker wonders whether he should eat a piece of fruit, make a radical change, or if he has the fortitude to keep living. Humanity's collectively damaged psyche prevented people from communicating with one another, an idea that Eliot explored in many works, including "A Game of Chess" (the second part of The Waste Land) and 'The Hollow Men'.

Eliot simultaneously lauded the end of the Victorian era and expressed concern about the freedoms inherent in the modern age. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" reflects the feelings of emasculation experienced by many men as they returned home from World War I to find women empowered by their new role as wage earners. Prufrock, unable to make a decision, watches women wander in and out of a room, "talking of Michelangelo" (14), and elsewhere admires their downy, bare arms. A disdain for unchecked sexuality appears in both "Sweeney among the Nightingales" (1918) and *The Waste Land*. The latter portrays rape, prostitution, a conversation about abortion, and other incidences of non-reproductive sexuality. Nevertheless, the poem's central character, Tiresias, is a

hermaphrodite—and his powers of prophesy and transformation are, in some sense, due to his male and female genitalia. With Tiresias, Eliot creates a character that embodies wholeness, represented by the two genders coming together in one body.

Eliot used fragmentation in his poetry both to demonstrate the chaotic state of modern existence and to juxtapose literary texts against one another. In Eliot's view, humanity's psyche had been shattered by World War I and by the collapse of the British Empire. Collaging bits and pieces of dialogue, images, scholarly ideas, foreign words, formal styles, and tones within one poetic work was a way for Eliot to represent humanity's damaged psyche and the modern world, with its barrage of sensory perceptions. Critics read the following line from The Waste Land as a statement of Eliot's poetic project: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (431). Practically every line in The Waste Land echoes an academic work or canonical literary text, and many lines also have long footnotes written by Eliot as an attempt to explain his references and to encourage his readers to educate themselves by delving deeper into his sources. These echoes and references are fragments themselves, since Eliot includes only parts, rather than whole texts from the canon. Using these fragments, Eliot tries to highlight recurrent themes and images in the literary tradition, as well as to place his ideas about the contemporary state of humanity along the spectrum of history.

**Mythic and Religious Ritual**

Eliot's tremendous knowledge of myth, religious ritual, academic works, and key books in the literary tradition informs every aspect of his poetry. He filled his poems with references to both the obscure and the well-known, thereby teaching his readers as he writes. In his notes to *The Waste Land*, Eliot explains the crucial role played by religious symbols and myths. He drew heavily from ancient fertility rituals, in which the fertility of the land was linked to the health of the Fisher King, a wounded figure who could be healed through the sacrifice of an effigy. The Fisher King is, in turn, linked to the Holy Grail legends, in which a

knight quests to find the grail, the only object capable of healing the land. Ultimately, ritual fails as the tool for healing the wasteland, even as Eliot presents alternative religious possibilities, including Hindu chants, Buddhist speeches, and pagan ceremonies. Later poems take their images almost exclusively from Christianity, such as the echoes of the Lord's Prayer in "The Hollow Men" and the retelling of the story of the wise men in "Journey of the Magi" (1927).

**Infertility**

Eliot envisioned the modern world as a wasteland, in which neither the land nor the people could conceive. In The Waste Land, various characters are sexually frustrated or dysfunctional, unable to cope with either reproductive or non-reproductive sexuality: the Fisher King represents damaged sexuality (according to myth, his impotence causes the land to wither and dry up), Tiresias represents confused or ambiguous sexuality, and the women chattering in "A Game of Chess" represent an out-of-control sexuality. World War I not only eradicated an entire generation of young men in Europe but also ruined the land. Trench warfare and chemical weapons, the two primary methods by which the war was fought, decimated plant life, leaving behind detritus and carnage. In "The Hollow Men," the speaker discusses the dead land, now filled with stone and cacti. Corpses salute the stars with their upraised hands, stiffened from rigor mortis. Trying to process the destruction has caused the speaker's mind to become infertile: his head has been filled with straw, and he is now unable to think properly, to perceive accurately, or to conceive of images or thoughts.

## *3.5 SUMMING UP*

By now you must have understood the hugely comprehensive bulk of work Eliot's poetry is. One needs a varied learning to understand the meaning beneath each of the lines his poems bears. For example, certain knowledge of Dante's *'Inferno'* and Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* is equally desirable before reading of the

poems. It is also to be understood that no simple vision can answer the grave doubts that western civilization causes. A through reading of the poems, finding out meanings of each and every word, understanding the use of images to express the ennui and boredom and uncertainty of this civilization is very much required to internalise Eliot's poetry. Hope you will get all these after reading this unit.

## *3.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. Describe how Eliot adapts the dramatic monologue form in 'The love song of J Alfred Prufrock'
2. How does Eliot use the relationships between men and women to comment on society and culture? Why is "Prufrock" a "love song"?
3. What kinds of imagery does Eliot use? How do these sets of imagery change from "Prufrock" to 'Hollow Men'?
4. Think about Eliot's use of form and language. What is most "poetic" about his works? What linguistic devices does he use?
5. Describe Eliot's range of cultural references. How do references to Eastern religions fit in with allusions to Christ and Dante?
6. What is the place of religion in Eliot's work? How does this change over the course of his career?
7. Why is Eliot so fascinated with death imagery? What does the recurring imagery of drowning symbolize?
8. Describe the kind of person Eliot creates in 'Prufrock'. How does Prufrock fulfil or rebut stereotypes of the modern intellectual?

## *3.7 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS*

A. David Moody (ed). *The Cambridge Companion to T.S Eliot*, CUP, 1994

Jain, Manju. *T.S Eliot: Selected Poems.* Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1992

# MODULE II: MODERN ENGLISH POETRY II

## *UNIT 4: READING THE POET: W. H. AUDEN*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *4.0 INTRODUCTION*

W. H. Auden's poetry is noted for its stylistic and technical achievement. Auden often engages with themes as varied as politics, religion, love and morality. His style ranges from traditional forms to radical modernism and is best known for his persuasive poems. The poems that have been included in this unit will introduce you to W.H. Auden, the poet, his major themes and his style.

## *4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

By the end of this unit you will be:

- familiar with the life and works of W. H. Auden
- able to critically read the selected texts prescribed
- able to grasp the major thematic concerns and stylistic features of the select poems

- familiar with the socio-cultural and political background that shaped the poetry of W.H. Auden

## *4.2 W. H. AUDEN: AN OVERVIEW OF HIS LIFE AND WORKS*

W. H. Auden was born in York in England on 21 February, 1907 to a professional middle-class family. He was the third son of physician, Augustus Auden and Constance Rosalie Auden, a missionary nurse. Auden was brought up in a puritanical and evangelical household and he was acclimatised in the religious ambience of both the Church of England and the Roman Catholicism. He was greatly influenced by the ecclesiastical order and as he believed, it also shaped his love of music and other artistic faculties. In 1908 the Audens moved to Birmingham as his father was appointed the school medical officer. Auden was put in boarding schools from the tender age of eight, returning home only for the holidays. His first school was St Edmund's School in Hindhead and the next institute he attended was Christ Church, Oxford. It was at Oxford that he was acquainted and formed close friendships with Cecil Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice and Stephen Spender. Auden obtained a third class degree from Oxford. After graduating from Oxford, Auden stressed on his poetic career and through Christopher Isherwood he obtained confidence as an author. As a literary mentor, Isherwood looked through his poems and plays, made recommendations and even collaborated on a few plays and a travelogue between the years 1935-39.

Auden visited Berlin between the years 1928 and 1929, and in the nine months that he was in Germany, he was introduced to the political unrest and tumult of the time and eventually it became the hallmark theme of many of his poems. In 1930 he published his first book, *Poems* by Faber and Faber, who later published all his works. During 1935 and 1939, he worked as a freelance reviewer and lecturer for various firms. In 1936, he went to Iceland and from the experiences gathered there, he later collaborated with Louis MacNeice and wrote a travel book titled *Letters from Iceland*. Auden also visited China with Isherwood

in 1938 in the midst of the clamour of Sino-Japanese war and reflected their experiences in *Journey to a War*. In 1939, Auden and Isherwood set sail to the United States, entering the country with temporary visas. From New York where they settled, Isherwood left for California and his departure strained their partnership. In the meantime, however, Auden developed a relationship with Chester Kallman, who was a companion to him for years. They shared houses and apartments until Auden's death in 1973.

In 1946, Auden became a naturalised citizen of the US. He became Professor of Poetry at Oxford University during 1956 - 1961. Because of a comparatively lighter schedule at the university Auden could still spend considerable time in New York, where his habitat was St. Mark's Place in Manhattan's East Village. Auden spent some happy time in Oxford and he shifted his home to there in the last phase of his life to a cottage at Christ Church. But he continued travelling and he died in Vienna in the year 1973, but was buried at Kirchstetten.

Auden was one of the most important poets of the modernist times and he produced enormous amount of literary work. In total he wrote four hundred poems, including seven long poems. He created all kinds of poetry including ballads, limericks, doggerel and haiku, villanelles etc. He also wrote more than four hundred essays on literature, history, politics, music, religion etc. He started writing poetry at the age of thirteen imitating the styles of English Romantic poets like Wordsworth and also Thomas Hardy. He was influenced by many poets but in the twenties found a voice and style of his own. In 1930 he published an edition of *Poems*, and introduced himself as a major poet of his times with wide social, political and cultural concerns along with personal and individual conditions.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

- On September 1939 Britain declared war on Germany and Auden expressed a wish to go back to Britain if needed but his wish was declined and was told that only qualified personnel would be needed.
- Auden had to suffer public wry when mistakenly his name got entangled with two British spies , Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean , who supposedly tried to contact Auden when they fled to USSR.

## *4.3 READING THE POEMS OF W. H. AUDEN*

### *4.3.1 'Consider this and in Our Time'*

Auden's poem 'Consider this and in Our Time' was first published in his collection *Poems* (1930). The poem is a commentary on society and its various literary, cultural, economic and political aspects. The poem opens with a bird's eye view of society, as if observed from the cockpit of an airplane. Through various images at the beginning of the poem, the poet's vision embraces different scenes, e.g. rich people at the garden party of the lavish ambience in a resplendent hotel. But for the poet who is strongly inclined towards class consciousness, the difference of social realities for different classes of people is a significant marker or trace of representation.

> As the hawk sees it or the helmeted airman:
> The clouds rift suddenly - look there
> At cigarette-end smouldering on a border
> At the first garden party of the year.

Auden delves deep into the social realities of the time and tries to determine the standard of existence of human beings on different socio economic plane. The two social classes of opposite ideologies tend to focus on living conditions, contradictory and opposite. The poem reflects on diverse pictures evident to the

shrewd observation of the concerned poet who offers the contemporary social scenario.

In the first stanza, the poet surmises on the images of the border of war torn country, the smouldering of cigarette ends, the violence and apathy prevailing everywhere, the unconcerned euphoria of the ruling classes and a sense of warning that is delivered by the poet. The complacent section in the society enjoys themselves, they are clad in furs, contentment and in uniforms, in the same ambience of boredom and apathy.

Long ago, supreme Antagonist,
More powerful than the great northern whale
Ancient and sorry at life's limiting defect,
In Cornwall, Mendip, or the Pennine moor
Your comments on the highborn mining-captains,
Found they no answer, made them wish to die
- Lie since in barrows out of harm.
You talk to your admirers every day
By silted harbours, derelict works,
In strangled orchard, and the silent comb
Where dogs have worried or a bird was shot.

In the second stanza Auden casually evokes the reference of Satan, as "supreme Antagonist" and as more powerful than the great northern whale. The significance of this term can be read along with Moby dick and its symbolic connotation. The essential hurdles and obstacles or limitations of life require man to get acquainted with it. The opportunism and typical sense of safety and comfort are seen with a satirical eye by the poet. The comfort and ease loving middle class residents seem to survive and flaunt their knowledge before flatters and admirers every day in specific sites and places that are obstructed and fenced. This reference to claustrophobia and regimentation is a recurrent verbal image in W.H. Auden. Referring to verbal images, in Auden's poetry metaphors used mostly tend to work on the plane of language. Unlike Dylan Thomas and Stephen Spender, the evocative imagery is that of language. For example in Dylan Thomas's 'Poem in October', the image of Heron Priests is not only verbal but also visual. Compared to that now look at this rhetorical use of terms like "handsome and

diseased youngsters" which uses handsome not in a positive sense but to denote vanity and futility. Another evil malady of the urban life is being ridiculed and denounced; it is rumour and gossip that kills the regenerative spirit of the society. The danger of this destructive element poisoning the heart of the society is said to be "a polar evil, a prodigious alarm". This rupturing element tends to divide the society and "scatter the people, as torn up paper Rags." The fear that is instilled in the simple minds is being used by those perpetrators. But the last part of the poem is a warning.

The poet categorically admonishes those who, with diabolic and evil strategies, try to destroy and disrupt. The poet says, "The game is up for you and for others". Those who have been reigning would not do so any longer. The undeserving snobbish high breeds would face historical twists and turns and the reign is going to be transferred to "the ruined boys":

> It is later than you think; nearer that day
> Far other than that distant afternoon
> Amid rustle of frocks and stamping feet
> They gave the prizes to the ruined boys.

With this change of scene, however he does not allow the perpetrators to escape justice or punishment. As he says, "You cannot be away"....Not though you pack to leave within an hour." Auden determines a stern future for those people who have lost position and power. According to him either they have to disintegrate and vanish forever or if they remain they should be in the other phase of life - in a vegetable state of disinterest, which he terms as "a classic fatigue".

## *4.3.2 'The Shield of Achilles'*

Auden's poem 'The Shield of Achilles' is a documentation of modern urban existence, bringing it into close association with ancient myths and legends which, to the poet, stands as distinguishing markers between civilisations, mode of thinking and sensibilities. This famous verse of Auden in a way characteristically represents the meaningless and flat urban existence of our time.

Once again, the constituent images in the poem has a wider implication of the general milieu of Auden's time.

Thetis, the mother of Achilles, the great warrior of the epic, *Iliad* is evoked for pointing at the changing world view. This is a poem in which Auden takes recourse to myths and legends and fuses with an expert hand the contemporary social scene and the older Greek stories. The poet points out that Achilles, the great hero of the Iliad would surely have found himself out of place, completely alienated from his surroundings, because the world of heroic values is completely missing from the society which has now emerged.

> That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,
> Were axioms to him, who'd never heard
> Of any world where promises were kept,
> Or one could weep because another wept

The sketchy images that Auden builds in order to delineate the present world, are randomly picked up from various areas that seem to represent various aspect of life and living. The socio-political scene, according to the poet, demands our immediate attention. It is not always relevant to weigh and measure Auden's affiliation to socialistic political structure but it can, without any doubt, be affirmed that Auden's was first and foremost a political voice and he was constantly concerned about the relevance of political awareness in common people.

In one of his many exhortations made to his readers, Auden says "Poetry is concerned with extending our knowledge of good and evil and perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent" something which Auden sees as making a "rational and moral choice". His poem 'The Shield of Achilles' is not a gentle reminder but a forceful summon to those who haven't yet cared to see and mingle. This class whom he has not denounced totally, but has reprimanded gently to realise that the time has changed yet has to do their duty. The poet like a figure of nemesis waits upon the people who after their "migratory years, humming down arterial roads", would consider this time and bear witness to this knowledge. In his summing up of *The 1930s Poetry of W H Auden*, Michael O'Neill asserts that

the change and evolution taking place in Auden's poetry is often "through his awareness of poetry as 'a way of happening'". According to him, "Auden achieves his fusion of emotional and conceptual engagement with his subjects: an engagement that illuminates the desperate murk at the heart of private psyches and public crises, and that fuses attention to the contemporary with a wider, longer cultural and ethical gaze".

### *4.3.3 'September 1, 1939'*

Auden's 'September 1, 1939' is an equally memorable and disturbing poem first published in his collection *Another Time* (1940). The poem juxtaposes a sea of images from diverse locales and one needs to concentrate to extract what Auden is attempting to say. The primary concern of the poem is to bring attention to the lack of focus in this meaningless social life. The form and structure of the poem becomes the main idea of the poem itself. Composed to commemorate the outbreak of the Second World War, the date September 1, becomes representative for all who are under oppression and exploitation.

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night.

Auden proposes that we have to love each other in this "low dishonest decade" to salvage the age. The norm should be to see and do together, even resist collectively. The collective anguish and hopelessness in the time of war are potently expressed in phrases like "darkened lands of the earth" and

"unmentionable odour of death / Offends the September night." The meaningless and euphoric competition are evinced in telling lines like:

> But who can live for long
> In an euphoric dream;
> Out of the mirror they stare,
> Imperialism's face
> And the international wrong.

To the concerned poet this is not a good time for everyone because he says that the schoolchildren are taught "Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return." But the poet, the voice of the time and people, knows that everyone has to be responsible and through knowledge and consciousness, we should stall the impending destruction. The poet is resolute that he will be able to achieve as he has a "voice" to "undo the folded lie" and he knows that now is the time to love, not hate. He writes:

> There is no such thing as the State
> And no one exists alone;
> Hunger allows no choice
> To the citizen or the police;
> We must love one another or die.

'September 1, 1939' is a poem, too loaded with suggestions and images from diverse areas that the underlying referents do point to innumerable socio historic junctures of our time, and that is perhaps the reason why so many authors have found the most fitting sources in the phrases and words that characterise Auden's sensibility and social concern. Of course, the poet is also at moments wary of the authenticity that may have cropped his lines. So he introspects and reminds himself that as one who has undergone the tumults and the bitterness of "time" must make himself immune of the challenges which he expresses in this telling phrase:

> May I, composed like them
> Of Eros and of dust,
> Beleaguered by the same

Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

A great poem of a political crisis of cataclysmic scale, through 'September 1, 1939' Auden establishes himself as the humanist friend of the downtrodden who suffer from angst most deep and corrosive. His saddened psyche is aware of the political juggernaut let loose but as a simple poet he too feels helpless and his hope seems to slowly recede to the background. To our mind the phrase "strength of the collective man" is sharply ironical and also satirical. Nobody has worked responsibly. All they use is just an excuse.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

- The date, September 1, 1939, indicates the day just two days ahead of the declaration of World War II.

## *4.4 SUMMING UP*

By now, as we have come to the end of the unit, you may have been familiar with the life and works of the poet W.H.Auden. His themes are almost always political and they move from 'the particular' to address a bigger human concern: concerns about social inequality, political unrest and war. In all the poems that have been discussed in this unit, 'Consider this and in Our Time', 'The Shield of Achilles' and 'September 1, 1939' Auden's main concern remains a very humane one - political unrest, war and the social inequality it breeds. These collection of poems also demonstrates Auden's versatility of using different styles. All the poems tell the same story but remarkably differently. Scenes of human social gathering, of loneliness, legends and myths are evoked to narrate an old story, "we must love one another or die."

## *4.5 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. Referring to the poems prescribed in your syllabus discuss the way in which W.H. Auden addressed the socio-cultural and political background of his time in his poetry.
2. Auden presents with a birds eye view the different aspects of society in his poem 'Consider this and in Our Time'. Discuss the various images Auden employs to bring out the contradictory state of things during the time of war. and unrest.
3. Auden's poem 'The Shield of Achilles' is a documentation of modern urban existence. Briefly discuss Auden's feelings regarding humanity as you understand after reading his poem.
4. Write a note on the role of the different myths that Auden evokes in his poem 'The Shield of Achilles'.
5. Would you consider Auden's poem 'September 1, 1939' as a poem of political crisis of cataclysmic scale? Discuss using well-formed arguments.
6. There seems to be a struggle between tyranny and "strength of the collective man" as an undercurrent in W.H.Auden's poem 'September 1, 1939'. Discuss.

## *4.6 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS*


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## *UNIT 5: READING THE POET: LOUIS MACNEICE*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *5.0 INTRODUCTION*

Louis MacNeice was an Irish poet who was also a contemporary of W.H. Auden. He is known for his loose but very socially aware writing style and was popular during his lifetime. But his poetry is never overtly political and it always presents a humane opposition to totalitarian ideologies. He is acutely aware of his Irish roots but the way he engages with his history is very different form the way his predecessors such as W.B. Yeats engaged with his Irish roots. The place of Louis MacNeice is confirmed alongside the modernist poets like W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender and Cecil Day Lewis, the great poets of the 1930s. MacNeice was a socially conscious poet who found literary expression as a necessary correlative to his ideological concerns. His poetry is primarily characterised by a melancholic scepticism which further urged him to probe into the inequalities, class divisions and social irregularities of the time. He was a popular poet of his times because he touched upon the primary ethical chords of values like, justice, equality etc. and he had a strong voice in favour of a classless, racially equal egalitarian world.

## *5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

By the end of this unit you will be:

- familiar with the life and works of Louis MacNeice
- able to read critically the select texts
- able to grasp the major thematic concerns and stylistic features of the select poems
- familiar with the socio-cultural and political background that shaped the poetry of MacNeice

## *5.2 LOUIS MACNEICE: LIFE AND WORKS*

Louis MacNeice was born in Belfast to Irish parents John Frederick MacNeice, a minister and eventually a bishop of the Anglo Irish Church of England, and Elizabeth Margaret MacNeice, a schoolmistress but severely depressed person. When MacNeice was six years old, his mother was sent to an asylum for treatment and eventually died there of tuberculosis in 1914. It was a turning point in his life as his father remarried and he was sent to Sherborne Preparatory school, where earlier his sister Elizabeth also attended. MacNeice's brother, William who was suffering from Down's syndrome was also sent to live in an institution in Scotland.

MacNeice started writing poetry from his childhood years. It seems from early on poetry was the only medium in which he found satisfaction. By 1926 he was acquainted with the works of poets such as T. S. Eliot and Edith Sitwell. His first collection titled *Blind Fireworks* was published in 1929 and it introduced readers to the versatile felicity of MacNeice as a stylist and a creator of dancing rhythm. During the early years MacNeice also dabbled around writing plays and novels and proved himself to be a person of varied talent but his role and career as a poet always haunted him. It was during this time during 1928-29 that, much to the dismay of his father, he entered into a relationship with a Jewish woman

named Mary Ezra. After a controversial stint about her racial identity, MacNeice married her in 1930 and thankfully obtained a position of an assistant lecturer in Birmingham University. The newly married MacNeices found a congenial place to live in - a cottage in Selly Park. He was helped in these ventures by Prof. E. R. Dodds and his wife, who were both faculties in the same university. But the years in Birmingham proved very unfruitful for MacNeice as he found the environment very different from Oxford. He couldn't write much poetry and endeavoured to write a novel instead titled *Roundabout Way*. This was a semi-autobiographical novel aiming at domestic felicity, but this half-hearted attempt was not accepted favourably by the reading public.

Louis MacNeice later developed association with the Professor of Public Health, George Augustus Auden, who was the father of W. H. Auden and an Oxford fellow. They developed a very close friendship and in 1932, both of them were involved with many Marxist friends. MacNeice was sympathetic towards the 'left' but he could not always affiliate himself wholeheartedly to their cause. In fact his idea that the society needs change and reformation, was relevant but he could not accept the " armchair reformist" who perhaps couldn't contribute to the cause of socialism. His publication of *The Strings are False* (1941) is directly inspired by his fascination with the idea of social change and the scepticism he had about the process of its implementation.

In 1933, MacNeice along with W.H. Auden contributed substantially to Geoffrey Grigson's magazine *New Verse*. Some of his poems sent to T.S. Eliot were published in his journal *The Criterion*. By September 1935, his poems were published by Faber and Faber and his collection titled *Poems* (1935) established him as a major voice in the 1930s. Inspite of this success, MacNeice also underwent some personal setbacks during this period; his wife Mary left him and their son for a younger graduate student named Charles Katzsman. In 1936 he visited civil war torn Spain and saw the establishment of the popular government. He also visited Iceland with W.H. Auden and produced a collection of poems titled *Letters from Iceland* (1937). In 1937, he produced a play, *Out of the Picture*

which was staged with the music by Benjamin Britten, and in the following year Faber and Faber published his second book of verse titled *The Earth Compels* (1938). In the following years MacNeice obtained assignments for a brief lecture tour of various American Universities and it was during this stint that he became close to Eleanor Clark in New York. A lectureship at Cornell University was also organised.

Louis MacNeice, as a poet was most concerned with the inequalities, abuses, and rampant corruptions prevalent in the contemporary modern society. There is a sense of thrill at the pace in which the world seems to advance because of the progress of science and technology, but the sensitive poet is also apprehensive of the lack of parity and rationality in the combinations, groups and communities. His poem 'Birmingham' (prescribed here) tells the story of an urban space, the daily din and bustle with the mechanical lives besotted with states like boredom, ennui, exhaustion and fatigue.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

- A prolific writer, Louis MacNeice produced 18 collections of poetry, 9 plays, 2 fictional works and 8 non-fictional works during his lifetime, apart from various collaborations he did with figures such as W.H. Auden.

## *5.3 READING THE POEMS OF LOUIS MACNEICE*

### *5.3.1 'Birmingham'*

In MacNeice's poem 'Birmingham' the poet speaks as a city dweller, casually and with a hint of irony. It is a poem of observation mostly, but nonetheless characteristically modernist in its theme, diction and most necessarily the transforming nature of its metaphors. The poem reveals to the reader the

contemporary times along with its excesses, mechanisations, depravity of human nature, greed and the danger of material culture.

Smoke from the train-gulf hid by hoardings blunders upward, the brakes of cars

> Pipe as the policeman pivoting round raises his flat hand, bars
> With his figure of a monolith Pharaoh the queue of fidgety machines
> (Chromium dogs on the bonnet, faces behind the triplex screens).
> Behind him the streets run away between the proud glass of shops,
> Cubical scent-bottles artificial legs arctic foxes and electric mops,
> But beyond this centre the slumward vista thins like a diagram:
> There, unvisited, are Vulcan's forges who doesn't care a tinker's damn.

The poem offers various glimpses of the life of the city during the day and in the evenings. The futile and meaningless existence of the city dwellers is highlighted by the street scene constituted by the "Pharaoh 'like figure of the traffic policeman, cubical scent bottles artificial legs arctic foxes and electric mops seen against the 'proud glass" of shops. In this self-centric civilization, the man does not even consider his neighbour rather wants to "score one over him". This modern citizen is a most unthinking person who for the poet pursues "the Platonic Forms" without spirituality. Louis MacNeice here has used a very strong caustic and terse irony in order to reflect the underlying message of meaninglessness of mechanical advancement.

> Splayed outwards through the suburbs houses, houses for rest
> Seducingly rigged by the builder, half-timbered houses with lips pressed
> So tightly and eyes staring at the traffic through bleary haws
> And only a six-inch grip of the racing earth in their concrete claws;
> In these houses men as in a dream pursue the Platonic Forms
> With wireless and cairn terriers and gadgets approximating to the fickle norms
> And endeavour to find God and score one over the neighbour
> By climbing tentatively upward on jerry-built beauty and sweated labour.

This poem also happens to be a poem of disillusion and despair of a very personal nature as it reflects his experiences he had here as a resident lecturer in the Birmingham university. The poet who is a romantic at heart, who is sensitive

enough to feel the corroding nature of the mechanical civilization on the sensible hearts like him, protests obliquely at the growing nature of things and conditions. The poet is a graphic narrator of the scenes of the city and its suburbs, he describes the traffic of cars, the shops and its decorative windows, the "pharaoh' like policeman and the meaningless streams of "faces behind the triples screen". But these sites and scenes also become representatives of the contemporary society, they act like signs.

MacNeice's description of the city of Birmingham is almost impressionistic, providing only vignettes of details, something Edna Longley describes as 'pictorial and metaphorical kaleidoscope' (1988. 47). All of these tiny fragments or images accumulate and create a chaotic busy modern city. But what stands out as the most striking is MacNeice's easy juxtaposition of "the natural" or "the living" with "the dead" or "the mechanical" : "chromium dogs", "proud glass", "faces behind triplex screens" etc. The narrator of 'Birmingham' observes the city with a detached attitude and it reveals some of MacNeice's own political stance. Inspite of being a sympathizer of the leftist movement, MacNeice at the same time was sceptical of the way the ideologies were to be implemented, as for him its validity and practicality was still questionable.

## *5.3.2 'Bagpipe Music'*

Louis MacNeice's poem 'Bagpipe Music' is a ballad which narrates a tale about the moral and existential strife of industrialized society. It runs for a total of 34 lines and follows a simple 'aabb' scheme, tying each line in a seamless flow with the next. The quasi-stanzaic style of the poem alternates between quatrains and couplets in no particular pattern focussing instead on the accentual meter.

> It's no go the merrygoround, it's no go the rickshaw,
> All we want is a limousine and a ticket for the peepshow.
> Their knickers are made of crêpe-de-chine, their shoes are made of python,
> Their halls are lined with tiger rugs and their walls with heads of bison.

John MacDonald found a corpse, put it under the sofa,
Waited till it came to life and hit it with a poker,
Sold its eyes for souvenirs, sold its blood for whisky,
Kept its bones for dumb-bells to use when he was fifty.

It's no go the Yogi-Man, it's no go Blavatsky,
All we want is a bank balance and a bit of skirt in a taxi.

The first two lines in the second stanza ends with the words "sofa" and "poker" which is pronounced "poka" with Scottish accent, it is followed by "whiskey" and "fifty" hence the rhyme scheme 'aabb is preserved'. This 'aabb' scheme is consistent throughout the entirety of the poem.

MacNeice's 'Bagpipe Music' is not a ballad in the traditional sense where it narrates the story of a hero or a heroine who battles his/her tragic ending. It is instead a rather philosophical battle where the tragic ending becomes the depletion of time as people start losing their dreams. According to Strand and Boland, the ballad is so close to a community that it seems it was "almost co-authored by it". MacNeice's ballad is a prime example of a community's struggles becoming a major character in the story told.

Annie MacDougall went to milk, caught her foot in the heather,
Woke to hear a dance record playing of Old Vienna.
It's no go your maidenheads, it's no go your culture,
All we want is a Dunlop tyre and the devil mend the puncture.

The Laird o'Phelps spent Hogmanay declaring he was sober,
Counted his feet to prove the fact and found he had one foot over.
Mrs Carmichael had her fifth, looked at the job with repulsion,
Said to the midwife 'Take it away; I'm through with over-production'.

It's no go the gossip column, it's no go the Ceilidh,
All we want is a mother's help and a sugar-stick for the baby.

The image conjured in the lines, "The Laird o' Phelps spent Hogmanay declaring he was sober,/ Counted his feet to prove the fact and found he had one foot over" is the image of a man in such extreme denial of his state of existence. MacNeice implements the man as a metaphor for the society where everyone is in such a state of denial as well, perhaps to protect their own interest. No one seems truly

happy and so they abuse alcohol and drugs and blame the false happiness given to them by the stimulant.

'Bagpipe Music' points to MacNeice's interest and mature growth toward a view of the Ireland he had left. It is a swinging, scattered poem which attempts to recreate the feeling of bagpipes. Under the hopping Scottish rhythms, the subject of the poem is a Depression induced despair: "It's no go the Herring Board, it's no go the Bible, /All we want is a packet of fags when our hands are idle." In this poem, MacNeice certainly plays the part of both the "entertainer" and "critic"; he does not pretend to be a propagandist or a prophet with answers because no solutions are endorsed, and many are rejected outright.

## *5.4 SUMMING UP*

By now, as we have come to the end of the unit, you may have become familiar with the life and work of the poet Louis MacNeice. Unlike his predecessor W.B.Yeats, MacNeice was never an overtly Irish poet and neither was he overtly political like his contemporary, W.H.Auden. His writing is loose but very socially aware. But being that as it may his poetry always presents a humane dimension as an alternative to totalitarian ideologies. In poems such as 'Birmingham' and 'Bagpipe Music' MacNeice uses a locale and its images to tell a universal story, a story of modern contemporary society. He moves from the particular to the general and the style he uses is always very compelling. Inequality, class division and social irregularities are some of the recurrent themes that appear in his poetry and like W.H. Auden he always strikes a chord for ethical and moral values, ideas that he believes in, although they are not always mentioned explicitly in poetry.

## *5.5 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. Write a short note on Louis MacNeice's life and briefly discuss any two of his well known poems.
2. Louis MacNeice's poem 'Birmingham' is a true modernist poem in every sense. Discuss the style, technique and metaphors that MacNeice implemented to bring his poem to life.
3. Write a short note on the way city dwellers interact with the modern cityscape by giving reference to Louis MacNeice's poem 'Birmingham'.
4. Louis MacNeice experiments with the style of the ballad in his poem 'Bagpipe Music' but the story told is very different from the traditional ballads. Discuss
5. Images of the community constitute a major part of MacNeice's poem ''Bagpipe Music'. Do you think MacNeice's style is done on purpose to achieve a larger picture using the metaphor of the community. Discuss.

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## *UNIT 6: READING THE POET: STEPHEN SPENDER*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *6.0 INTRODUCTION*

Stephen Spender was a member of the British poets (including W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Christopher Isherwood and Cecil Day Lewis) who became eminent in the 1930s and are often referred to as the Oxford Poets. Like his contemporary poets, Spender was a sympathizer of the leftist cause and this is reflected in the engagement with the community that is present in his poetry. Although he was a member of the immediate successor of the modernist movement, Spender moves away from the esotericism of T. S. Eliot, volunteering instead to stay in touch with urgent political issues and to speak in a voice that can be understood by all. The poems discussed in this unit will introduce you to the work of Spender and the milieu that shaped his poetry.

## *6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

This unit will discuss the poet Stephen Spender's poetry. By the end of this unit you will be:

- familiar with the life and works of Stephen Spender
- able to read critically the selected texts
- able to grasp the major thematic concerns and stylistic features of the select poems
- familiar with the socio-cultural and political background that shaped the poetry of Spender

## *6.2 STEPHEN SPENDER: AN OVERVIEW OF HIS LIFE AND WORKS*

Stephen Spender was a contemporary of W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice. The trio were also known as the Poet of the Thirties. They are bound together by considerable affinities among them, the most important feature being their acute social consciousness. This was the driving force and the chief motivation behind their creativity and the prime accelerating force that guided their thematic pattern.

One of the most prominent poets of the 1930s, Spender was also a novelist and essayist as well. Stephen Harold Spender was born on 28 February 1909 at Kensington, London. His parents were Harold Spender, a journalist, and Violet Hilda Spender, a painter and a poet of Jewish heritage. He joined Hall School in Hampstead and then to Gresham's school at Holt. Afterwards he attended the Charlecote School in Worthing. It was around this time that he lost his mother and Spender became depressed. He was transferred to University College School in Hampstead, which he later described as the "gentlest of schools". He later attended the University College, Oxford but left the university without a degree. It was around this time that he met the poet, W. H. Auden and formed a close friendship with him. In 1929 Spender moved to Hamburg in Germany where he

became acquainted with Christopher Isherwood. He was introduced to the distinguished circle of poets formed by eminent poets like W. H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Cecil Day Lewis , Edward Upward etc. He also was close to other contemporary figures such as Virginia Woolf, Jean Paul Sartre, Dylan Thomas and others.

Spender's notable early collection *Poems* (1933) was inspired by social protest. Stephen, like Louis MacNeice was a member of the political left wing during this early period. His disillusionment with communism can be found in his essay collection *The God that Failed* (1949). Evidence of his leftist convictions can be found expressed in his works, *Vienna* (1934), in *Forward from Liberalism* (1937) and in the *Trial of a Judge* (1938), an anti-totalitarian drama in verse. Stephen Spender started working on a novel in 1929 and it was only in 1988 that the book was published with the title *The Temple.*

Stephen Spender is a modernist poet of extraordinary strength and will and conviction. Stephen Spender was observant of his society and the changes that he witnessed after the turn of the century, the webbed, overlapping and complex weaving of things, matters and minds. But as a representative of the changing scenario, he has the focus on the transitions that reveal and also illuminate. Spender helped found the magazine *Index on Censorship,* and was involved in the formation of the Poetry Book Society. He was Professor of English at University College, London during the years 1970–77, and was given status as Professor Emeritus. Spender died on 16 July 1995 in Westminster, London in England at the mature age of 86.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

- A prolific writer in his own right, Spender produced more than 11 volumes of poetry, 4 novels, 3 plays and 17 non-fiction books which includes travel writings, criticisms and essays.

## *6.3 READING THE POEMS OF STEPHEN SPENDER*

### *6.3.1 'What I Expected'*

Spender's poem 'What I Expected' is a play in words of the paradoxes of the world. It is a stark reminder of not only the exterior that confuses the mind but also of the revelations of life. The poet in a confessory note reveals to the reader his simple ideas about the cycles of life, the contrariness of things and the contradictions that are present in life. The poet is aware of the oppositions, impediments and obstacles that one has to confront in life, but what he could not anticipate in life was the waning and wasting of spirit, the dullness that creeps into life, the sapping of the ripeness and the lack of goodness. The mechanical overtone of life makes it unbearable, warp the rich vigour and distorts it. The second stanza captures this mood:

What I had not foreseen
Was the gradual day
Weakening the will
Leaking the brightness away,
The lack of good to touch,
The fading of body and soul
Smoke before wind,
Corrupt, unsubstantial.

The poem seems to carry along with it a sense of warning that accompanies modern life essentially; life in this age of "mechanical reproduction" (Walter Benjamin) which corrodes from within. This decay which is purely of the mind and spirit is conveyed by the poet in terms of images that are not typical or conventional. The abnormality and the deviation are concisely and tellingly observed in the verbal image of Spender.

The wearing of Time,
And the watching of cripples pass
With limbs shaped like questions

In their odd twist,
The pulverous grief
Melting the bones with pity,
The sick falling from earth -
These, I could not foresee.

Stephen Spender without mincing words talks of "Time" which seems to him to be "corrupt" and "unsubstantial". The pure and pristine quality of life is completely absent, what appears before one is a spectacle of distortion, warped perspectives. The vivid image of decay strikes the heart with candid contour: "The pulverous grief/ Melting the bones with pity."

In this poem almost all images are suggestive of a sense of ennui, weariness and fatigue that are products of the mechanical approach towards life which is bereft of spirituality. The poet at this juncture of civilization, as it were, pronounces or visualises a state where some replenishing could be done, "some brightness to hold in trust " would be feasible and he also hopes that something 'solid' would dangle through:

Expecting always
Some brightness to hold in trust
Some final innocence
Exempt from dust

Spender's poem 'What I Expected' is not entirely a poem of despair and dejection but also of renewed faith and reaffirmation of the pristine nature of life which the poet ascertains as "some final innocence." It is true that life offers contradictions, oddities and stark opposites that do confuse, but they also keep things in clear perspectives and pose some mundane truth that reveals the essence. This is not a philosophic poem about life's profundities but maybe about its trivial components that do constitute life. The beginning of the poem on the apparent, does offer value judgement about norms, ethics and principles of life but at the same time asserts that as contrary to the conventional modes of leading life, there

are constant challenges that we need to come across very often. These are the real tests of life that we have to go through and triumph over.

## *6.3.2 'Pylons'*

The main theme in Stephen Spender's poem 'Pylons' is the arrival of pseudo-modernism onto a hitherto serene arena. The success of this poem can be understood in its terms of the influence it had on other poets. It heralded an entirely new school of poets called 'The Pylon Poets' which included Spender and his associates.

Pylons literary means a tall structure which is used for support or for navigational guidance, such as metallic posts by roadsides that hold electric wires. The poets feels that though they appear to be the harbinger of electricity, they are an intrusion to the peaceful countryside. Thus the pylon emblem become a powerful symbol in this particular poem. They seem to have a 'towering' influence on people's lives. Secondly, though they are static, and remain static, their kinetic energy on the other hand is all-pervasive. Their metallic figure projects a picture of frozen human emotions. And the universality of pylons reveals the universality of this condition. We cannot live without pylons (electricity) anymore and they have become the most eloquent emblem of modern technology. They run into everywhere and everything, and through this, provides a clear perspective of the future.

The secret of these hills was stone, and cottages
Of that stone made,
And crumbling roads
That turned on sudden hidden villages

Now over these small hills, they have built the concrete
That trails black wire
Pylons, those pillars
Bare like nude giant girls that have no secret.

The valley with its gilt and evening look

And the green chestnut
Of customary root,
Are mocked dry like the parched bed of a brook.

The poet opens the poem by glorifying the elusive quality of the hills and cottages that haunt our imagination. The secret of the "hills" was "stone" - the only natural thing that nothing else could endow with. The "crumbling roads" rather than appear decrepit come across as enchanting as they reveal villages without prior notice. But now that the pylons have come up, "that trail black wires". Black lines now scribble all over the vista of the once beautiful countryside. The colour black which signify gloom and despair is marked all over the village. The poet compare these 'pylons' to giant nude girls that have no secret to hide unlike the pristine countryside which was full of magical surprises. These 'pylons' are vulgar creations which has no aesthetic charm, are devoid of modesty, principles and values.

The evening scene of the valley described in the third stanza of the poem signifies it tranquillity and the prosperity of the green chestnut trees. Spender uses the phrase "customary root" to point out the concept of tradition(s) which are now mocked dry with industrialization which have penetrated the very base and has eaten out the core of nature, leaving the once picturesque countryside lifeless.

It is clear that the poet holds an ambivalent attitude to the progress of modernism. But what Spender conclusively arrives at the end of the poem is that the evolution of technology is unavoidable for growth and advancement, however he also stresses that it has to be healthy and ethical venture. He appears "Shelleyan" in his prophetic stance, and in his pervading revolutionary zeal, particularly in these last lines of the poem which is known for its lyricism:

This dwarfs our emerald country by its trek
So tall with prophecy
Dreaming of cities
Where often clouds shall lean their swan-white neck.

The poem thus ends on an optimistic note reconciling two hitherto divergent entities: Nature and Science.

## *6.3.3 'An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum'*

Stephen Spender's poem 'An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum' describes a classroom in a slum, highlighting subtlety the plight of unfortunate children, social injustice and inequality. The poet uses vivid images to reflect upon the difficulties faced by the underprivileged children that is still prevalent in our world.

As a socialist and a pacifist, Spender in his poem, 'An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum' concentrates on the theme of the condition of the underclass population of society. The image of an elementary classroom in a slum questions the value of education, suggesting hope, that education may finally fulfil aspirations which may never have been fulfilled. The poor emaciated slum children are similar to captives in a world of darkness, poverty and hopelessness. The poet expresses, through this poem, his outrage at the insensitive attitude of the rich and the privileged towards the children of the slum school. However, he is not pessimistic. He is of the opinion that all learned people of the society have the potential to transport the education beyond the boundaries of the classroom for a better future. The poem begins thus:

> Far far from gusty waves these children's faces.
> Like rootless weeds, the hair torn round their pallor:
> The tall girl with her weighed-down head. The paper
> seeming boy, with rat's eyes. The stunted, unlucky heir
> Of twisted bones, reciting a father's gnarled disease,
> His lesson, from his desk. At back of the dim class
> One unnoted, sweet and young. His eyes live in a dream,
> Of squirrel's game, in tree room, other than this.

The first stanza of the poem shows us the condition of the children in a slum school. Their world is far from our healthy, fresh environment. Like unwanted "rootless weeds" they are outcasts. Their hairs are unkempt, untidy and their faces clearly show the plight of their existence. The poet draws our attention to a particular tall girl whose head is "weighed-down" in dejection, evidence of

the burden of the stressful life she leads. Another boy is introduced who is as thin as a "paper" and he too bears the same malnourished look on his face. These children are "unlucky heir" who have only inherited diseases and misfortune from their parents. One of them is even not able to get up from his desk to read out the lesson. However, there is one particular boy who is a little younger than the rest who has still hopes and dreams, and he waits for the time when he can go out in the open to play.

In the second stanza, the poet gives a picture of the dirty and neglected classroom which is just like its inhabitants. It exhibits an atmosphere of depression and gloom. The walls are "sour cream" in colour and on them the names of the donors and well wishers are engraved. A bust of the great Shakespeare is the shining, civilizing god figure inside the class:

> On sour cream walls, donations. Shakespeare's head,
> Cloudless at dawn, civilized dome riding all cities.
> Belled, flowery, Tyrolese valley. Open-handed map
> Awarding the world its world. And yet, for these Children, these windows, not this map, their world,
> Where all their future's painted with a fog,
> A narrow street sealed in with a lead sky
> Far far from rivers, capes, and stars of words.

The walls also have pictures of splendid Tyrolese which ironically provides sharp contrast to the atmosphere of the classroom in reality. The maps on the walls show the children the route to the harsh world. Their window is their world and it presents to them a future which is dark and cruel. These children are trapped in a world devoid of the beauty of nature: rivers, valleys and seas.

There is change in idea in the final stanza as the poet makes an impassioned cry to break open the "catacombs" of the classroom to show the children green fields:

> Unless, governor, inspector, visitor,
> This map becomes their window and these windows
> That shut upon their lives like catacombs,
> Break O break open till they break the town

And show the children to green fields, and make their world
Run azure on gold sands, and let their tongues
Run naked into books the white and green leaves open
History theirs whose language is the sun.

The poet's deep rooted sadness for the condition of the slum children becomes really palpable as the poem progresses. The poet uses a pacifying tone and appeals to the governor, inspector and the visitors to do something about the condition of these slum schools. Hoping for a better future for the slum children he urges the authorities to realize their responsibilities and liberate the children from their grave-like confinements, so that the map showing the beautiful world can become a reality. The poet wants them to sail, explore and discover the world so that someday their names may also be found in history books.

## *6.4 SUMMING UP*

By now we have come to the end of the unit and you may have become familiar with the life and works of the English poet Stephen Spender. The tone of Spender's poem is often sombre and philosophical and the themes revolve around the profound problem that affects our society at large - poverty and inequality. The universal gap between rich and the poor is a recurring theme in his poetry and is constantly highlighted in poems like 'An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum'. The modern condition and the ennui it breeds are highlighted in his poems like 'What I Thought' and 'Pylons'. And undercurrent that exists in all of his poems is the irony of life in the twenty-first century where in spite of tremendous progress and scientific advancements the gloominess still prevails. The country and city dynamics; nature and science is addressed in Spender's poem and it is evident that he sympathizes not with the modern but what is lost - innocence and the natural world.

## *6.5 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. Spender's poem 'What I Expected' begins with dejection and ends with reaffirmation of life. Discuss.
2. What are some of the modernist motifs that are used in Spender's poem 'What I Expected'? Discuss the elements that separates Spender's poem from the modernism of poets such as T.S. Eliot.
3. Discuss the significance of the pylon metaphor in Stephen Spender's poem 'Pylons'.
4. There is a strong tension between the Traditional and the Modern, Nature and Science in Spender's poem 'Pylons'. Discuss.
5. Stephen Spender's poem 'An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum' uses the image of slum to highlight the larger social crisis of inequality. Explain.
6. There is on the one hand the downtrodden and on the other hand people who are elected into power yet have not kept their promises. Discuss how these two dimensions play out in Spender's poem 'An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum'.

## *6.6 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS*


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# MODULE III: POST WAR ENGLISH POETRY

## *UNIT 7: READING THE POET PHILIP LARKIN*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *7.0 INTRODUCTION*

Any understanding of the post-war English poetry remains incomplete without reading the poems of Philip Larkin. With a keen eye for observation and a delicate taste for humour, Larkin in his works skilfully captures the socio-cultural milieu of the post-war generation. His poetry often forms commentaries on some serious issues of the time, but there is a touch of light-heartedness and objectivity in his treatment of these issues. It is this unique approach to his subject-matter that accounts for much of his popularity among the readers.

## *7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

This unit is aimed at making you familiar with Philip Larkin as a post-war English poet. To this end, this unit will provide you with:

• a brief account of the life and works of Larkin

• critical readings of three representative poems of Larkin

• analyses of the major themes and poetic styles contained in Larkin's selected poems.

## *7.2 PHILIP LARKIN—LIFE AND WORKS*

Philip Larkin was born on 9 August 1922, in Coventry, England, to Sydney Larkin and Eva Emily Day. From his early childhood, Larkin had been introduced to the works of writers like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and D.H. Lawrence through his father's personal collection. His childhood was mostly spent inside his house, with his mother and sister providing him with primary education till the age of eight. His schooling began at Coventry's King Henry VIII Junior School and there for the first time he came into contact with people outside his family. From there he joined King Henry VIII Senior School and later he got a chance to study at John's College, Oxford, with major in English. He left secondary school and went to Oxford University in 1940. In 1943 he passed out from Oxford University with a first-class honours degree. It was during his university life that Larkin met Kingsley Amis and the two remained very close friends throughout their lives.

Larkin started his career as the librarian at the Public Library in Wellington, Shropshire in 1943 and he worked in various other places. In 1945, while working in Shropshire Larkin published his first collection of poems *The North Ship*. He became the university librarian at the University of Hull in 1955 and remained in the post till the end of his life. On that very year his collection of poems *The Less Deceived* was published which greatly contributed to his reputation as a poet. During his stay at Hull, another famous collection of his poems *The Whitsun Weddings* appeared in 1964.

Larkin's first collection of poems *The North Ship* appeared in 1945. The poems in the collection were evidently influenced by the poetry of W.B. Yeats and they lacked that distinct poetic style for which Larkin became famous later.

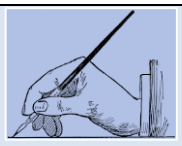
This was followed by his two novels *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947). *A Girl in Winter* is written from the female point of view and it explores the themes of loneliness, unfulfillment and solitude. His collection of poems entitled *XX Poems* appeared in 1951. His more significant collection of poems was *The Less Deceived* (1955) which marked his maturity as a poet. Later he published two other collections namely *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974) which further reinforced his reputation as a leading twentieth century English poet. *The Whitsun Weddings* contained some of his critically acclaimed poems like "Whitsun Weddings," "Toads Revisited," "Ambulances," "An Arundel Tomb" and "Mr Bleaney."It won him the prestigious Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1965. *High Windows* contained his longer poems like "The Building" and "The Old Fools" which critics widely consider to be among his more serious and reflective poems. Larkin edited *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* which got published in 1973. Besides, he was also a renowned jazz critic and the collections of his jazz criticism, book reviews, and several prose pieces appeared in his two books—*All What Jazz* (1970) and *Required Writing* (1983).

It is interesting to note that his job as a librarian provided him with much time to satisfy his passion for writing poetry after the end of his usual work-routine. In fact, he fully utilised his position and his workplace in a way became his personal place of study. He was considered by many as a recluse who usually avoided company of literary figures and social gatherings. During his life Larkin had romantic relationships with many women though he never got married. It was, however, with Monica Jones, a lecturer in English whom he met at University College, Leicester that Larkin spent his concluding days. In 1985, Larkin was hospitalised with oesophageal cancer. His condition worsened towards the end of that year and he breathed his last on December 2, 1985 at the age of 63.

## LET US STOP AND THINK

Larkin was often associated with a group of poets who started an anti-Romantic movement known as **"The Movement."** This group included, apart from Larkin himself, writers like Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest. Though he himself never openly declared his connection with the Movement or his support of its literary ideals, Larkin was often considered as the leader of this group. The Movement poets were opposed to the prevailing fashion of neo-Romantic writing in the style of W.B. Yeats and Dylan Thomas. Like Hardy, Larkin was deeply concerned with the expression of personal emotions in poetry, although he avoided sentimentality ("Philip Larkin," *poets.org*). On the other hand, he can be set in stark contrast to the modernist poets like Eliot and Auden because unlike them he wrote for and to the common man.

In Larkin's poetry, there is a note of lament over the passing away of beauty. At times, he is nostalgic of the earlier English life which is fast changing with the change of time. He is often seen as a pessimist for whom the world is a difficult place to live in. Here, one finds in him a reflection of the tragic vision of Thomas Hardy. However, despite his apparent pessimism, his works also reflectthe sense of joy and delight that he felt in the act of writing. In his poetry Larkin tries to present the little incidents and situations of ordinary human life with a touch of personal tone.



## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What are the main features of Larkin's poetry?

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2. Who are the "Movement poets"? What are its literary ideals**?**

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## *7.4 READING THE POEM "CHURCH GOING"*

The poem "Church Going" appeared in the collection *The Less Deceived.* The poem seeks to investigate into the very meaning of the act of church going. It is written in the tradition of Thomas Gray's graveyard meditations. The poem is also notable for its use of ordinary, day-to-day language. Although there is much debate among critics regarding the poem's central meaning, it is generally considered as a meditative poem on the theme of spiritual barrenness of a world which has turned its back upon God and religion.

The poem starts with a simple description of the narrator's visit to a church on a Sunday morning. The opening line itself hints at the tone of irony that permeates the whole poem. The image of the church given by the narrator is not at all a lively and optimistic one. Rather he presents the church as a decaying institution whose value is gradually declining. The interior of the church is described in a casual manner, as if it has nothing optimistic to present:

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 (3-6)

The silence and boredom of the situation suggests the element of gloom that surrounds the idea of church in the poem. In the second stanza, the speaker continues to present the church in the same vein, even considering the church as a place "not worth stopping for" (18). In the third stanza, the speaker expresses worry over the ultimate fate of churches. He ponders over the uncertain future of churches, saying with somewhat a sympathetic tone: "When churches fall completely out of use / What we shall turn them into" (22-23).

The fourth stanza associates the church with the supernatural and the superstitious elements. The speaker wonders whether the church can be preserved if people look at it with a feeling of awe and mystery, and thereby turn it into a magical place. He imagines women visiting it at the late hour of night with their children hoping for some spiritual gain, or people encountering spirits of dead ones inside it. The speaker, however, knows that all these are signs of superstition which would one day inevitably wither away. He maintains: "But superstition, like belief, must die" (34). At that time nothing of the church's attraction would remain and it would turn into a rejected, desolate space. The fifth stanza carries forward the note of pessimism and the speaker mourns over the church's fate. He suggests how day by day its charm decreases, and the Sunday prayers become a meaningless event. Though he thinks that several people will visit this place—some crew researching on ancient buildings, some who are "ruin-bibber" who are fond of antique pieces, and again some of those who are "Christmas-addict" (43)—none of them are likely to know the actual worth that the church used to carry in the past.

The sixth stanza is more personal and subjective in tone as the speaker expresses his own feelings regarding the church. He reflects that the church is a place which has witnessed so many ceremonies related to marriage, birth, and death. But today, it is nothing more than a "frowsty barn" (53) where people

seldom visit. Still, the speaker finds it to be a pleasant experience standing at this desolate place. In contrast to the preceding stanzas, the concluding stanza gives a more positive idea about the church. Thus, the speaker makes a concluding remark on the church: "A serious house on serious earth it is, / In whose blent air all our compulsions meet" (55-56). It is a place where all our sentiments melt and our minds relax. Though the speaker does not get the same picture of the church at present he searches for it in the past and eventually finds it. He discovers a kind of personal bond with other humans, who are now dead and resting in peace in the graveyard, who had contributed to the glory of the church in its heyday. He remembers their devotion to the church and in the process himself becomes spiritually inspired. The church's value, Larkin suggests, lies in the idea that though the church is a mere building it is the last creative force of unity and, a protective space, meant to preserve human life and traditions. The poem concludes with an optimistic view that even though the world has become devoid of any religious feeling and the church has lost its earlier worth, there will still be someone who seeks to find wisdom among the ruins of the obsolete church buildings.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

Regarding the origin of the poem "Church Going," Larkin observes that the idea of the poem "came from the first time I saw a ruined church I saw in Northern Ireland, and I'd never seen a ruined church before—discarded. It shocked me" (qtd. in Steinberg 151). This suggests a close similarity of the speaker with the poet himself and it supports the readers' popular perception of Larkin as a personal poet (Steinberg 151).

As far as structure is concerned the poem can be divided into three parts: the first two stanzas employ almost a prose-like narration to introduce the subject-matter, the next three stanzas become a "reflective section" focussing on the fate of churches, and the concluding two stanzas serve as an epiphanic realisation on

the part of the speaker. The poem has a carefully planned metre and employs the rhyme scheme of ABABCDECE. One feature of the poem is its balance between the subjective and the objective. The speaker uses a conversational tone which successfully brings out his personal feelings while enabling him to connect to the readers in an objective way.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What is the central theme of the poem 'Church Going'?

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2. From your reading of the poem, what do you know about Larkin's attitude towards religion and church?

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3. What attitude towards the modern society do you find in the poem?

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4. What is the significance of the image of death in the poem?

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## *7.5 READING THE POEM "TOADS"*

The poem "Toads" appeared in the collection of poems *The Less Deceived* published in 1955. It focusses on the predicament of an office employee who works without any job-satisfaction.The poem suggests how egalitarianism became the generally accepted work ethic in work-places in the post-World War II Britain. Larkin himself lived and worked at a time when the government expected an employee like him to consider the interests of the state above everything else.It should be remembered that the Labour Party in the post-war Britain promoted the democratic ideals of the Welfare State. As such, it encouraged the representation of "non-hero" type of characters in literature, such as the speaker of "Toads" (Stojkovic 70). The poem, in that sense, hints at Larkin's personal response to an unpleasant work ethic to which he was bound to surrender.

The title of the poem "Toads" refers to a disturbing idea or feeling that the speaker wants to get rid of. Larkin's choice of the image of toad seems to be induced by his own feelings towards the creature. The irritating nature of the toad

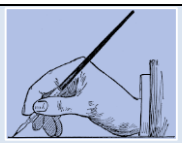
as a slimy, ugly creature is compared to the speaker's own irritating problems of life. This toad troubles him both from outside and inside his mind. He wants to "drive the brute off" (4) with the help of his "wit" (3), suggesting that the solution to the speaker's problem lies inside his own mind. The toad becomes a symbol of the unpleasant situations experienced by him throughout the six working days in his office. It is interesting to note that although there is no clue in the poem regarding the speaker's actual profession, he compares himself with "Lecturers, lispers, / Losers, loblolly-men, louts" (10-11) and finds these people to be more satisfied in their works than he is. He even considers resigning from his post thinking that he can well live without a job like those poor folks who "live up lanes / With fires in a bucket, / Eat windfalls and tinned sardines" (13-15).

Larkin hints at the idea that one may live without money and luxury, but it is difficult to live without a sense of satisfaction in life. However, there is also a realisation in him that he ought to stick to what he is. Despite the painful dissatisfaction, he cannot leave his job and the prospect of getting a pension because it is the stuff "That dreams are made on" (24). He will need money to fulfil his dreams in future and he knows that pension is the source of that money.

The last three stanzas sum up the speaker's predicament which he cannot escape. He had so long complained against the toad that troubles him outside. But he realises that the same disturbing, filthy creature exists within his own being. His sense of discomfort with his own life is captured when he says: "Something sufficiently toad-like / Squats in me too" (25-26).He knows it well that this restraint is an internal one which, like "hard luck" (27), has permanently become a part of his life. Though he yearns for "The fame and the girl and the money" (31) all at the same time, such a desire seems luxurious to him amid the harshness of life. The second toad that exists internally in the speaker is his own weakness and timidity of character owing to which he is unable to leave his job (Barker). Thus, the speaker reflects on the thought that his inconveniences in his workplace are in a way also caused by his own flaw of character. He believes that the "two toads"—one external or the office environment and the other internal or his

personal weakness of character—are now parts of his life. He concludes: "it's hard to lose either, / When you have both" (35-36).The two problems are bound together in the speaker's life. His tragedy lies in the fact that he knows the main cause of his unhappiness in life and yet he can do nothing to overcome it.

The structure of "Toads" is characterised by the use of a short metre with every stanza containing four lines each. It is mainly notable for the use of half-rhymes where the rhyming words phonetically match only in a partial way and not completely. Thus, we have half-rhyming words such as, "work" and "pitchfork," "life" and "off," "wits" and "louts," "enough' and 'stuff' and so on. Such an imperfection in the rhyming pattern seems to lighten the seriousness of the poem's subject-matter by achieving a certain comic effect. This allows the reader to look at the situation with a more open mindset and saves the poem from being gloomy or tragic. The use of half-rhymes gives a certain "off" note to any poem and a perfect example of it is to be seen in the War poetry of Wilfred Owen which Larkin himself respected and felt great reverence for (Stojkovic 149).



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What information does the poem give about the workplaces in England in the post-World War II period?

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**2.** What is a half-rhyme? Find out examples of half-rhymes in the poem.

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**3.** From your reading of the poem do you find any link or similarity between the life of the speaker and that of Larkin?

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## *7.6 READING "THE WHITSUN WEDDINGS"*

"The Whitsun Weddings" is one of the most famous and widely read poems of Larkin. Written in 1958, it is the title poem of the collection *The Whitsun Weddings.* In the words of James Booth, Larkin in the poem "aspires to occupy the ivory tower of aesthetic detachment" (*Philip Larkin: The Poet's Plight* 2). The poem is a realistic description of the sights the author saw during one of his train journeys. The setting of the poem is the carriage of a train on a particular Whitsun.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

Whitsun or Whit Sunday is a Christian religious festival observed on the seventh Sunday following the Easter. Also known as Pentecost, it is a sacred day for Christians that commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Christ's disciples. In the medieval England, Whitsun was one of the main festivals which gave the serfs a break from the drudgery of life in the fields ("Whitsun").

The poem starts with a description of the speaker's journey by train from Lincolnshire on a bright Sunday. The train was nearly empty and there was no sense of hurry as we usually associate with a train journey. There are descriptions of houses, streets, fish-dock, and river observed by the speaker who is sitting inside the train. The images are vivid and lively that give a touch of realism to the entire description.

The second stanza describes the outskirts of the town, and is notably focussed on the rural life with images of "farm," "cattle," "short-shadowed hothouse," "hedges" and "grass." However, such a rural setting is not free from the impacts of industrialisation as we can understand from the line "Canals with floating of industrial froth" (15). The wastes discharged from industries have polluted the water of canals and there is an implicit note of sadness over such a condition of the natural world. However, the gloomy aspect of modernisation and industrialisation becomes more obvious as the speaker's train enters the next city where one finds "acres of dismantled cars" (20).

Among the many things he saw in the platforms outside the train, what caught the speaker's attention are the different people who are participating in wedding-parties. He saw girls in "parodies of fashion, heels and veils" (29), the fathers "with broad belts under their suits" (36) and "seamy foreheads" (37), the mothers "loud and fat" (38), and an uncle "shouting smut" (39). The reader here gets a realistic picture of a section of the English society that Larkin was quite familiar with. But his interest seems to be more on highlighting the manners and attitude of the girls of his time. Thus, there is mention of "perms," "the nylon gloves," "jewellery-substitutes" etc. which reveal the contemporary English girls' obsession with appearance and looks.

For Larkin, a wedding ceremony is a public spectacle, where different sections of society gather, observe the event and form their own impressions of it in different ways. The fifth and sixth stanzas throw light on this aspect as the speaker's attention is fixed on a particular wedding. While children found the ceremony "dull" (50) and boring, fathers were happy that they had performed their duties well by marrying off their sons and daughters, which was like a "success so huge" (51). However, Larkin also hints at the darker aspect of the institution of marriage by the use of the phrase "happy funeral" (53) which functions like an oxymoron. The implication is that for women marriage is virtually a sacrifice of their freedom and personality. This is an issue in the post-World War II English society which Larkin addresses here. Moreover, one can locate an element of

mockery of the mechanical rituals of marriage as the speaker relates how "advice were thrown" (47) at the newly wedded couple and how girls became nervous on seeing the "religious wounding" (55), i.e., the formal necessities that a bride was supposed to fulfil in marriage.

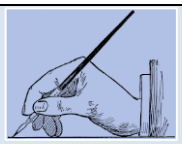
As soon as the speaker enters London the earlier rural scenes are replaced by "building-plots" (58) and "poplars" (58) and his attention shifts to the city landscape. He notices some particular things—an "Odean" (65), "a cooling tower" (65), "someone running up to bowl" (66)—which keep his mind at the present moment and prevent him from becoming contemplative. Larkin employs an interesting simile as he compares the postal districts of London to "squares of wheat" (71). The poem's aesthetic significance is clearly reflected in the last stanza where the speaker sums up his experience of the journey in a philosophical way. The impressions received during the journey become concentrated inside his mind, which gave rise to a "sense of falling" with the pulling of the brakes. Larkin employs a simile in the last lines as he compares his feelings to "arrow-shower" which will again turn into rain. Such a simile seems natural at the close of the speaker's physical and metaphysical journey. Thus, the poem ends on a note of spiritual insight. The speaker's experience of a train journey changes into a greater, fuller and more enriching outlook on human life itself.

A significant feature of the poem which has attracted the critics and readers alike is its skilful blending of two levels of experience. One can note a double meaning in the poem as there is an internal layer closely accompanying the external level of narration. In this connection James Booth observes:

'The Whitsun Weddings' (1958) is a masterly 'literal' description, but the world it creates is also a metaphorical figure for the world of delight within the poet's senses five. An intimate kinetic subtext counterpoints the literal description, just as in a figurative painting an abstract pattern of colour and shapes underpins the depiction of how things look (*Philip Larkin: The Poet's Plight* 145).

Such a skilful rendering of two levels of meaning in the poem is suggestive of the poet's own philosophy in life. In this connection, James Booth observes:

"The plight of the poet is to be between society and isolation, between engagement and detachment, between personal and impersonal, between history and the fleeting moment" (*Philip Larkin: The Poet's Plight* 2).In other words, Larkin's poetic mind operates at two distinct levels or dimensions that are opposite to each other. "The Whitsun Weddings" represents this sense of conflict central to his poetic vision. The journey in the train symbolises the speaker's continuous observation of the outside world with a thoughtful reflection on the nature of human life itself. Larkin is well-known for his concern with the commonplace and ordinary life. But the presence of an internal, metaphysical layer of meaning in the poem cuts across that element of simplicity which is typical of Larkin.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. How does Larkin blend two levels of experience in the poem? What is his purpose in doing so?

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2. What would you like to say about Larkin's treatment of women in the poem?

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3. Do you find any urban-rural conflict in the poem? If yes, show with illustrations.

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## *7.7 MAJOR THEMES IN PHILIP LARKIN'S POEMS*

**Middle-class Life**

It is notable that Larkin's poems are often thematically concerned with an exploration of the character of the poetic persona. According to James Booth the speaker of "Toads" is "a generic middle manager" who "works in an office and has a secretary, but no reader could guess from the text whether he is an insurance broker, an advertising executive, a bank employee or a librarian" (*Philip Larkin: The Poet's Plight* 40). In any case, the speaker's tone contains an element of distrust for the establishment and the entire system that controls him. Here, one may find a similarity between the speaker of "Toads" and the protagonist of Kingsley Amis's famous campus novel *Lucky Jim* published in 1953. Both the two fictional characters mock at the system while remaining entrapped in it. While saying so, it should be remembered that Larkin and Amis were close friends and the former had greatly assisted the latter in writing the novel. In fact, it was after witnessing Larkin's day-to-day professional life at the University College, Leicester, as an assistant librarian that Amis got inspiration for writing the novel. Hence, there is enough reason to believe that the character of the speaker of "Toads" was most probably a reflection of Larkin himself or at least was inspired by Larkin's own work-life experience.

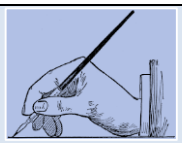
**Marriage and Women**:

Although Larkin spent most of his time as a librarian sitting inside the confines of his work-space, he did have a keen sense of knowledge of the society around him. Hence, commenting on social institutions of his time forms a major theme in his poems. For instance, marriage is a major theme in "Whitsun Weddings." But one may wonderas to why Larkin's main focus is on weddings rather than on other sights that he came across during his journey. Although the

poem's title is "Whitsun Weddings" descriptions of several other scenes come up in the course of the narrative. It is a fact that Larkin himself never got married though he had relationships with several women during his life. The poem in that sense seems to form his personal response to the institution of marriage and the various rituals connected with it. Besides, how Larkin presents the young girls in the poem is also quite interesting. What idea does it convey on Larkin's attitude towards girls? Do you think that he is attempting to criticise them, their manners and showiness? However, it should also be remembered that Larkin was never in favour of criticising or satirising others. Larkin maintains: "To be a satirist, you have to think you know better than everyone else. I've never done that…" (qtd. in Booth,*Philip Larkin: The Poet's Plight*4). Such an observation complicates our understanding of Larkin's treatment of women in the poem.

**Religion and the role of church:**

Larkin's understanding of the changing English society gets reflected in another of his poems, "Church Going," where he is thematically concerned with a sad retrospection on the decaying institution of religion and church. The poem highlights a particular period in the British history when common people started showing a tendency of increasing religious scepticism following the horrible experiences of the two World Wars. At such a period, Larkin's poem is seemingly an attempt to restore people's belief in the church. This poem is comparable to another of his church-related poems, "A Stone Church Damaged by a Bomb," where Larkin admires and worships the church for its solid presence amidst the transitoriness or indifference of life (Stojkovic 81). Whereas some critics saw "Church Going" as a part of the "Movement" which sought to import a new vision into the contemporary British poetry, others considered it as a traditional piece of religious mourning. In any case, one can find in the poem a sense of alienation from the modern world. This alienation is represented by a nostalgic longing for and looking back to an old world symbolised by the church (Stojkovic 73).



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What is Larkin's attitude towards the institution of church?

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## *7.8 STYLE IN PHILIP LARKIN'S POEMS*

Larkin's plain language of poetry can provide us with some important ideas about the trends in contemporary English poetry. In this connection, Tijana Stojkovic maintains: "…the quarrel between the poetry of the fifties and Modernism can be traced in the understanding of diction, or word-usage. Interestingly, the completely different attitudes are revealed through the use of the same concept—purification of language" (39). Both Larkin and the Modernists were trying to purify the language of English in their own ways. Although the Modernists sought "to purify the language of the tribe" (Stojkovic 39) such

purification meant a complete breaking away from the traditional language of poetry. They attempted to create elements of ambiguity and uncertainly in their poems by using an unconventional and difficult language. Understanding such poetry obviously became a difficult task for the common readers. Poetry was thus becoming an art of the elite class, readable and enjoyable exclusively to the intellectual section of the society whose members were highly learned and well-versed in myths and scholasticism. As a result, English poetry was losing its wide readership as well its universal charm. It was at this critical juncture that Larkin entered the world of English poetry with his concept of simple yet forceful poetic style. In that sense, he purified the language of English poetry of all those ambiguities and complexities which resulted from the application of the Modernist art. Throughout his life, Larkin criticised the elitist concept of poetry in favour of a more common-sensical and natural style and theme which could connect to the common mass in their own language.

Larkin's poetic style is plain and simple, yet effective. Quite significantly, his style was praised by T.S. Eliot, one of the most important figures in twentieth-century literature and modernism, who himself wrote in a very sophisticated language. Eliot says that Larkin has considerable control over the use of language and thus "often makes words do what he wants" (Stojkovic 39). In a sense, as a representative poet of the 1950s Larkin's poetic language marked a departure from the highly complex and difficult language of the Modernists. Larkin's primary aim is to communicate with the readers in a simple, direct way with his easily understandable language.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

Larkin's works are notable for their "definitiveness" in terms of forms, types of rhyme and even individual words. Unlike Hopkins and Yeats, Larkin does not write numerous poems

with similar themes or overlapping forms (Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*). He remarks in this regard: "Poetry is not like surgery, a technique that can be copied: every operation the poet performs is unique, and need never be done again" (qtd. in Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*) Herein lies the originality of each of his poems.

The primary aim of Larkin's poetry is, as Tijana Stojkovic observes, to create "a successful communication between the writer and the reader" (41). Larkin observed that the prime reason why he wrote poetry was to preserve his own experiences from getting lost (Marsh 28). For him, writing poetry is a pleasurable experience; it is a means to satisfying that mysterious impulse which makes him write. Moreover, he himself lived a commonplace and simple life and his poetry is an attempt to reflect that simplicity.

Larkin, in fact, worked for the popularisation of poetry by trying to connect with a large audience. This stance of Larkin can be placed within the context of post-war democratic ideals. Just as the egalitarian spirit of scientific development in the seventeenth century popularised the plain style, the rise of egalitarian spirit in Britain in thefifties and the sixties promoted the revival of a neo-classical aesthetic. Neo-classicism preferred order and commonality to individuality. It is this neo-classic spirit that runs through the entire body of Larkin's poetic creation (Stojkovic 74).

## *7.9 SUMMING UP*

In this unit we have undertaken a careful reading of three representative poems of Philip Larkin. We have seen that Larkin's poems reveal a common man's simple yet thoughtful response to an ever-changing world. Whereas "Church Going" and "The Whitsun Weddings" are seemingly objective in their approach to this change, "Toads" applies a personal tone in addressing an individual's predicament that has a wider social context. All the three poems are set against a larger common social backdrop and they

collectively exhibit Larkin's ability to express in plain terms the impact of the society on the individual's mind and spirit. On the whole, Larkin's poetry reflects the social stability in the newly democratised British society that encouraged a more refined and simpler use of language. Thus, the blending of the personal experiences with the social realities of the time lends a note of objectivity to his subject-matter that defines his generation.

## *7.10 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. Make a brief assessment of the socio-cultural context in which Philip Larkin wrote his poems.
2. What was the main literary ideal of Larkin as a poet? How did he try to achieve it?
3. Give a brief account of Larkin's poetic technique and use of language, with reference to his three poems prescribed for your study.
4. Discuss the central theme of the poem "Church Going."
5. Comment on the significance of the central image of the toad in Larkin's "Toads." Discuss the significance of the image in relation to Larkin's own life and character?
6. What kind of a picture of the English social life does Larkin portray in "The Whitsun Weddings"? Illustrate with examples from the texts.
7. How is the poem "Toads" thematically similar to Kinglsey Amis's novel *Lucky Jim*?
8. Why did not Larkin consider himself as a satirist?
9. How did Larkin try to popularise the genre of poetry?
10. What is Larkin's main purpose behind writing poetry?
11. How did Larkin differ from the Modernists in terms of poetic language?

**Write Short Answers:**

1. How did Larkin reconcile his job as a librarian with his passion for writing poetry?
2. Why is Larkin often considered as a "Movement" poet?

3. Briefly discuss the setting of the poem “Church Going.”
4. What do you think is the significance of the ending of “Church Going”?
5. Comment on the structure of the poem “Toads.”
6. Do you think that Larkin satirises the institution of marriage in “Whitsun Weddings”?

## *7.11 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS*


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## *UNIT 8: READING THE POET DYLAN THOMAS*



## *8.0 INTRODUCTION*

A Welsh who wrote exclusively in English, Dylan Thomas is one of the most influential figures in the realm of post-war English poetry. Thomas's poetry is a curious blend of the Modernist tendency for verbal obscurity and the Romantic sensibility for individualism. Although he has been often criticised for deliberately writing in an ambiguous style that makes his works unintelligible to readers, his flamboyant personality both as a poet and a man has accounted for his towering popularity.

## *8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

This unit is aimed at making you familiar with Dylan Thomas as a post-war English poet. To this end, this unit will provide you with

• a brief account of the life and works of Dylan Thomas

• critical readings of three representative poems of Dylan Thomas

• analyses of the major themes and poetic styles contained in his selected poems.

## *8.2 DYLAN THOMAS: LIFE AND WORKS*

Dylan Thomas was born in Swansea, Wales, on October 27, 1914 in a lower middle-class Welsh family. His father, David Jones Thomas, was a schoolteacher and his mother, Florence Hannah, was a seamstress. He had a sister, Nancy, who was nine years older than him. From his days of childhood Thomas had a leaning towards English language and therefore he never learnt to speak in Welsh. His formal education started at Mrs. Hole's Dame School. At school, Thomas was known to have been a neurotic child who shied away from other children and liked spending time alone. His favourite subject was English, with very little interest in other subjects. Thomas's religious sensibility as a boy was shaped by his attendance at the Sunday school and the Presbyterian chapel. As a child he had access to The Bible and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* which were to form a great source of inspiration for his poetry in the days to come. His school life came to an end at the age of 16 when he joined the South Wales Daily Post as a junior reporter. At the age of 18 he left his job to concentrate on his poetic career.

Thomas's first volume of poems was *Eighteen Poems* published in 1934 and with his first publication he announced his grand arrival in the English poetic world. This was followed by collections of poetry such as *Twenty Five Poems* (1936), *The World I Breathe* (1939), *The Map of Love* (1939), and *New Poems* (1943).Perhaps, Dylan's best-known collection was *Deaths and Entrances* which got published in 1946. It is a collection of twenty five poems which included some of his famous poems like "Fern Hill," "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London," "Poem in October," and "The Hunchback in the Park." This was followed by *Twenty Six Poems* (1950), and *In Country Sleepand Other Poems* (1952) in which was included one of Thomas's most famous and widely read poems "Do not go gentle into that good night" which is an elegiac poem written on the occasion of his father's illness and subsequent death. His last book of

poetry was *Collected Poems, 1934-1952* (1952) which won him the Foyle poetry Prize.

Thomas was a versatile writer who tried his hands at many genres, though it was poetry on which his reputation rests. In his lifetime, Thomas published a collection of poetry and prose entitled *The Map of Love* (1939) which did not receive much success due to the tensions of war-time. However, it contained some fine poems which, in the words of Herbert Read, were written on "the elemental physical experience: birth, copulation, death" (qtd. in Lycett).

Thomas wrote several prose works which are part of his overall literary output. His famous prose work *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940) is notable for the presence of autobiographical elements; it deals with the experiences of the poet's childhood and youth in South Wales. *A Child's Christmas in Wales* (1955) is a tale about Christmas. His other notable prose works include *Quite Early One Morning* (1954), and *A Prospect of the Sea* (1955). He also left an unfinished novel entitled *Adventures in the Skin Trade* which was later published in the book *Adventures in the Skin Trade, and Other Stories* (1953). Thomas wrote a radio play entitled *Under Milk Wood* (1954) which gives a charming picture of a Welsh seaside village. The play is notable for its use of comic elements that focus on the humorous aspects of human life. He also wrote three film scripts—*Me and My Bike*, *Rebecca's Daughters*, and *The Beach at Falesa*—which were later collected in *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts* (1995).

In 1936, Thomas's drinking habit took him to a pub in London where he met his future wife Caitlin Macnamara who was a dancer at the pub. The two soon entered into a relationship and the very next year they got married. In 1944, the couple left London and settled at Laugharne. Between 1945 and 1949 Thomas served as BBC's scriptwriter which gave him an opportunity to engage in formal writings on different topics. In 1947, he visited Italy with his family, where he wrote the collection *In Country Sleep and Other Poems.* Thomas arrived in the United States in 1950 for the first time and became popular among the reading

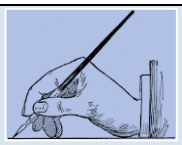
public there for his flamboyant personality. He would often read out his poems on the stage with full passion and energy which contributed much to his popularity. However, despite his popularity, excessive drinking and a reckless lifestyle caused a gradual breakdown of his heath. He experienced a number of health issues in quick succession and on 9 November 1953, he breathed his last at a hospital in New York. Despite his short and tempestuous career, he left many admirers and one among them, William York Tindall, says about him: "More of us loved than hated the irresponsible, charming, outrageous man; for he was our bourgeois idea of what a poet should be" .

Dylan Thomas rose to prominence quite rapidly and died at a tender age of 39. His flamboyant personality and addiction to alcohol was seen by any as a part of the legacy of artistic self-immolation that he had left behind. More importantly, he was a representative of a neo-Romantic phase in English literature. He is also well-known for his Utopian vision, combined with a call for freedom from the age of machines. Thomas is also one of the most interesting regional poets in English in the twentieth century (Hardy 1). His growing up with a deep knowledge of the downtrodden areas of South Wales, its poverty, dirt, waste and unemployment informs his overall poetic output directly or indirectly.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

Dylan Thomas was often associated with a group of poets in the late 1930s and early 1940s known as "The New Apocalypse" although he himself never favoured his inclusion under such a label. The poets of the New Apocalypse were known for their rhetorical flourishes and a distinct prophetic voice which often made their writings incomprehensible to common readers. On the other hand, "The movement" which included poets like Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis and Thom Gunn stressed the use of a plain and simple language. The tension between the "The New Apocalypse" and "The Movement" was that between plainness and obscurity, between simplicity of expression and unintelligible and scholarly references. As

such, Thomas's use of unclear images and opaque sentences became a main target of attack of the Movement poets (Stojkovic 50).



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What was the main reason for which the Movement poets attacked Dylan Thomas's poetry?

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## *8.4 READING "POEM IN OCTOBER"*

"Poem in October" is a lyrical poem which appeared in Thomas's famous collection *Deaths and Entrances* published in 1946. Written on the occasion of Larkin's thirtieth birthday, the poem reveals the poet's Romantic sensibility which finds expression in a prolific use of wide-ranging images. It shows his fascination with natural objects and is one of his most anthologised poems.

The poem begins with the description of a rainy day in Autumn. The speaker is awakened by the sounds coming from "harbour" and "wood." The setting is probably a seaside. It is his thirtieth birthday and he thinks that nature is reminding him of the day. There is a suggestion that the poet wants nature to

participate in his birthday celebration and he imagines how nature is also aware of his yearning. The call of the birds like seagull, and rook, combined with the sound made by sailing boats and the sea water, awakens and prepares the speaker to take a walk on that rainy day when the town's deep sleep has not yet broken.

The beauty of the poem's setting is provided by the rain as the speaker says in the second stanza: "My birthday began with the water" (11). Through his imagination the speaker includes nature in the celebration of his birthday as he thinks that the birds in the sky are "flying my name" (12). Here, the speaker identifies himself with nature and imagines his close association with her through the birds. It can be seen that much of the poem's charm lies in its use of natural imagery. In the third stanza, this is exemplified by the lines such as:

A springful of larks in a rolling
Cloud and the roadside bushes brimming with whistling
Blackbirds and the sun of October
Summery
On the hill's shoulder (21-25)

Here, the imagery of birds seemsto represent the liveliness and joy inherent in the world of nature. Again, the close relation between the sun and the hill presents the idea that the elements of nature always remain in a state of peaceful co-existence. The personification of the hill suggests that nature is a living, breathing entity as active as the limbs in the human body. The fourth stanza further establishes the supremacy of nature by triviliasing the achievements of human civilisation. The phrase "church the size of a snail" (32) and the lines "the castle/Brown as owls" (33-34) draw unlikely comparisons between the mightyman-made constructions and the tiny objects of nature. Such unusual comparisons constitute a satire on the material civilisation that the human beings are so proud of.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

## Dylan Thomas and Neo Romanticism:

Dylan Thomas's poetry is often marked for its distinct Romantic tone which gives to his otherwise complex themes a touch of simplicity. With regard to the poetic style of Thomas, Anna Anselmo observes: Influenced by the poetic rhythms and tempos of his native Wales, Dylan Thomas is difficult to pigeonhole, even though his poetic efforts … are close to the so-called 'Neo-Romantic' movement. The Neo Romantics reacted against the lucid complexity and distance of modernist poetry; they were inspired by André Breton's Surrealism and were responsible for bringing visionary qualities and the love of nature back to poetry. Thomas never signed the Neo-Romantic manifesto, but his poetry shares some of its concerns: vital energy, wild daring imagery, verbal acrobatics, and the gift of vision.

In the fifth stanza the speaker's tone of narration seems to change as his poetic mind cut across the barriers of time and space. He turns his focus "away from the blithe country" (41) and its sights and sounds he has been enjoying. He seems to lose sense of the present moment as the images of different summer-fruits like apples, pears and red currants flash across his eyes. His mind is transported to his childhood days and he visualises his mother telling him parables of "sun light" (49) and "the legends of the green chapels" (50). A sense of nostalgia for the bygone days of the past is aroused in the speaker as he takes a mental flight on the wings of imagination.

The sixth stanza carries forward the flow of imagination and the speaker tries to relive the days of his infancy. One is here reminded of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. Just as the speaker in *The Prelude* narrates his spiritually enriching days of childhood in the lap of nature, the speaker in the present poem discovers a deep wisdom in the world of the woods, the river, and the sea. He remembers how as a child he felt a secret connection with the very spirit of nature and related his

internal joy to "the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide" (57). At the end of his mental journey into the past, the speaker returns to the present. However, this return is marked by a greater wisdom and an epiphanic revelation that nature, be it in the present or in the past, never ceases to be mysterious. Thus, he says: "the mystery/Sang alive/Still in the water and singing birds" (58-60).

In this way, the present and the past become interlinked in the mind of the speaker and to capture this effect he heavily relies on nature imagery.

One way of understanding the poem's meaning is that you should look at it as a subjective work which is a revelation of the poet's own self. In this connection William York Tindall makes a significant remark: "No matter what the ostensible subject of his prose or verse, Thomas always wrote about himself. A poem by Thomas about Jesus the Zodiac, or a warm is about Thomas" (16). Such an observation suggests that Thomas sought to know himself better through poetry and his poems are in that sense a means of self-exploration or introspection. This idea becomes evident in the last stanza of "Poem in October." The final stanza captures the speaker's passionate longing to preserve the innocent joy of his childhood in his adult age. He apparently longs for an identity which is essentially his own and which will constantly remind him of who he is. The poem concludes with this sense of longing as he says: "O may my heart's truth/Still be sung/On this high hill in a year's turning" (68-70). Thus, the poem becomes a spiritual autobiography where the speaker seeks to discover his self-identity through his spiritual union with the world of nature.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What is the poet's attitude towards nature and the several natural objects?

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2. Discuss the significance of the last two stanzas of the poem.

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3. What is the function of animal imagery in the poem?

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## *8.5 READING THE POEM "DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT"*

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" is notable not only because of its aesthetic value but due to the context and timing of the poem's creation. It was written in 1951 addressing to his physically weak father and it reveals an emotional side of Thomas's otherwise flamboyant personality. His father David Jones Thomas, however, died on 16 December 1952 at the age of 76, one year after the poem was written. Perhaps, the poem also carries a universal significance due to its concern with the idea of death—a common theme which has been explored by numerous writers, from Shakespeare and Thomas Grayto Keats and many other poets both old and new.

## LET US STOP AND THINK

While most critics consider death as the central theme of the poem Harold A. Popp maintains that the poem is not about death but rather about the blindness of the poet's father. He suggests that through the poem, Thomas intended to encourage his father not to accept the inevitability of blindness and to fight against his physical breakdown (35). This opens up a possibility for comparison between the concepts of death and blindness. Can blindness be considered a partial death and if so can a defiance of blindness be similar to a defiance of death itself?

In the poem, Thomas urges his aged father to hold onto life and not to surrender to death so easily. The very title of the poem highlights the idea of defiance against death. The father's approaching death is referred to as "close of day" (2) and "the dying of light" (3). There is a sense of urgency and pessimism in the speaker's voice. In contrast to the popular belief that old people should seek a peaceful death, Thomas associates old age with revolt in terms of the old people's tendencies to fight death. Words like "burn" (2) and "rave" (2) point at this opposition to death. From the second stanza onwards, the speaker describes the attitudes of different people towards death—wise men, good men, wild men, and grave men—showing how none is willing to yield to it. Wise men, in spite of knowing that their final time has arrived, are unwilling to die as they haven't seen the impact of their wise words on people. They want to wait and see their words act like lightning that may change the course of society. In contrast to the wise men, good men are dissatisfied with their life. Their petty acts in life are mentioned as "frail deeds" (8). The phrase "green bay" (8) denotes their desire for a better life under better circumstances. Hence, they want to live longer so that they can transform their failures into success. Again, wild men are those who had spent their life in recklessness which is expressed by the phrase "sang the sun in flight" (10). But when they realise the uselessness of their past actions, it is too late for them to correct their mistakes and thus they ask for a final chance to do

something good in life. Lastly, there are those grave men who are on the verge of death, having lost the power of vision and seeing only "with blinding sight" (13). Even though they have virtually lost eyesight their "Blind eyes could blaze like meteors" (14) which indicates their high spirit. Hence, they are also eager to enjoy life till the last moment.

After having justified the reason for living on, Thomas finally appeals to his father to confront and defeat death which is referred to as the "sad height" (16). The voice of the poet changes as the intensity of emotion rises and he speaks out quite ambivalently: "Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray" (17). What Thomas wants is a frantic reaction from his dying father, expressed through his tears. But on seeing them coming out, Thomas does not know about his own reaction—whether he would be sad or happy. But still, he wants his father to fight death and ultimately emerge victorious. Thus, the poem concludes with the same passionate tone with which it started.

It would be interesting to look for any religious element in "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night." Although there is no direct mention of God in the poem Thomas has himself suggested that in all his poems the idea of God and Christ serves as a powerful background theme. Hence, in the present poem the very phrase "I pray" (17) in the second line of the last stanza seems to hint at the poet's religious and devotional state of mind. For his father's recovery, the poet's ultimate faith rests on God whom he sees as the saviour and deliverer. Therefore, we can maintain that his appeal is addressed not only to his earthly father but also the heavenly father.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What idea does the poem provide about the poet's relation with his father?

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2. How does the poem's form help Thomas in bringing out the central idea of the poem?

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3. What are the different attitudes of different people towards death?

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4. Can you find any idea related to God and religion in the poem? If yes, bring out its significance.

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## *8.6 READING "FERN HILL"*

"Fern Hill" appeared in the 1946 collection of poems *Deaths and Entrances.* The poem provides a collection of images and is notable for verbal innovations. The poem depicts a picture of the Welsh countryside. Fern Hill is the farm of Ann Jones, Thomas's aunt, situated in the rural region of Carmarthenshire. During his childhood Thomas used to visit the place to spend his summer holidays there away from Swansea and the poem's setting is most probably inspired by these visits. Anna Anselmo notes: "The poem is a reminiscence of childhood, vivid, yet dream-like, coloured with the magic unity of nature and child, which is lost in adult life" (35). It also reveals the poet's mental landscape where experiences and memories of different kinds constantly interplay. The images used in the poem are wide-ranging and their meanings are at times difficult to grasp for common readers. While reading the poem, you are suggested not to search for accuracy in meaning but rather to focus on the charm and beauty that underlies each and every independent image.

The poem's setting gives a picture of the natural world as observed and experienced by the speaker. The speaker is apparently an adult and though he relives his childhood memories as an adult, the perspective used in the poem is that of a child. The adjective "lordly" (7) and the phrase "I was prince of the apple towns" (6) express both his sense of happiness and his feeling of fulfilment spending time among the objects of nature. It seems that the images of trees and leaves that "trail with daisies and barley" (8) seek to present the link or connection among all the objects of nature of which the speaker himself now feels to be a part.

The second stanza imports a personal tone as the speaker calls himself "green" which may denote his youth and vigour. There is however a sense of realisation that youth is temporary. In this regard William York Tindall maintains that the theme of the poem is "Not how it feels to be young" but "how it feels to have been young" (280). Time is personified and the speaker requests time to

allow him to play in "the sun that is young once only" (12). The sun is here treated as a symbol for man. By employing the metaphors of huntsman and herdsman, the speaker reflects the two opposite poles of his mind—one that destroys and the other that sustains. This idea is reinforced by the images of the calves and the foxes, representing the tamed and the wild thoughts respectively. However, the speaker's subjective mind comes to acknowledge the presence of the divine in life. In the middle of a description that is romantic in nature, the idea of Christianity comes in. This is done through the expressions like "the Sabbath" (18) and "the holy streams" (19) which connect him to his religious roots.

Thomas's use of multiple images in the third stanza seeks to provide a greater picture of his mind and his response to the outside world. However, the way these images are used and linked to each other apparently shows the liberty that the speaker takes in recounting his experiences. Thus, separate images like—the flowing streams, the hay fields as high as the house, the chimneys which play lovely tunes and produce "fire green as grass" (24)—are provided one after the other without any seeming interconnection. But is there really any connection amongst them? Perhaps, they give us a collective picture of human life against the common backdrop of the Welsh countryside with which the poet is so closely linked. The images of the "stables," "rick" and "horses" also indicate the same idea.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

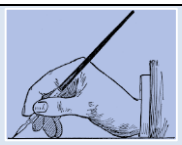
"Thomas's poetry is usually divided into three stages. In the first period, his poems are complex and often obscure, centering on the cycle of birth and death. The poems from the second period, written primarily during the years of World War II, take on a more human and personalized dimension, and include such works as "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" and the elegy "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London." "Fern Hill" was written during the last period, when Thomas produced longer narrative poems, using more understandable imagery and fluid lines. Published in *Deaths and Entrances* in 1946, it is one

of his poems which easily fits the description, romantic; in fact, it has often been compared to William Wordsworth's nature poetry." (Gale, Cengage Learning)

There is the use of Biblical mythology in the fourth stanza as the speaker compares himself to Adam who finds his maiden, Eve. Just as Eve's arrival marks the end of Adam's loneliness, the arrival of the morning gives a new sense of delight to the speaker. The rays of the sun are associated with rejuvenation as even the horses come out of their stables warm and fresh. Such a praise of the sun continues in the next stanza which deals with an ecstatic speaker's mental flight. He imagines himself to be among "foxes and pheasants" (41) and runs his "heedless ways" (44) under the clouds and in the sun. Time is personified to whom the speaker expresses his gratefulness for giving such a cheerful morning. Colour symbolism is used in the phrase "children green and golden" (48) which may stand for the preciously joyful childhood experiences. Still in his maturity, the speaker considers himself a child in front of Time. For a moment, the speaker becomes reflective and ponders upon how everyone will inevitably become with the passage of time. Thus he says, "the children green and golden/Follow him out of grace" (48-49).

The last stanza is notable for its escapist tendency. The speaker desires to escape the harsh realities of the adult world and the farm provides him with a chance to fulfil that desire. He feels at home at the farm which becomes a symbol of happiness. Not only that, it is a place where he gets connected to nature just like a child is connected to their parents. The outside world, on the other hand, is one of sad reality which he intends to flee from and which is referred to as "the childless land." Once again, the speaker sings praise of Time's mercy for sustaining him at the present moment within the surroundings of the farm and the poem concludes with this note of gratefulness: "Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means, /Time held me green and dying/Though I sang in my chains like the sea" (57-59). Here, the last line is optimistic in tone as it suggests

the speaker's search for freedom within the imposed bounds of worldliness. The "sea" is a simile for the speaker himself who, in spite of the chains and restrictions of his life, tries to break free by singing the songs of joy and freedom.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What are the contradictory images that you find in the poem?

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2. Comment on Thomas's use of symbolism in the poem.

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## *8.7 MAJOR THEMES IN DYLAN THOMAS'S POEMS*

It should be remembered that unlike his contemporaries such as T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden, Thomas was not much concerned with intellectual and social issues of the time. On the contrary, with its intense lyricism and highly charged emotion, Thomas's poetry has more in common with the Romantic tradition ("Dylan Thomas").

**Nature:**

One important thematic concern in Thomas's poetry is that of nature and its role in shaping his experiences as a poet as well as a person. His poems on nature mostly abound in the use of animal imagery. This is clearly noticeable in "Poem in October." We can make a list of the different kinds of animals mentioned in the poem: "mussel," "heron," "seagull," "rook," "white horses," "lark," "blackbird," "snail," "owl," and "fish." What do they all suggest? Apparently they are a part of the setting, a means to achieve the desired visual effect on the reader. However, at a deeper level, they provide us with a more complete picture of Thomas's view of nature. Thomas perhaps saw them to be the representatives of the very spirit and energy inherent in nature. Moreover, it is also one of his devices to reveal the shortcomings of a mechanised, urbanised human society that has cut its link with nature. Can we therefore say that by using animal imagery Thomas wanted to teach his readers how to live with nature in harmony?

The idea of nature in the poem can further be broadened when we consider that behind all poems of Thomas, the theme of devotion to God remains present. For him nature may just be a manifestation of God and His supreme authority. Following this strain of thought, we may consider the presence of God in every living creature of the world and this is quite likely to broaden the poem's scope. Here, one may draw his comparison with William Wordsworth who showed a belief in Pantheism.

Thomas himself maintains that the images used in his poems are always in a state of conflict and contradiction with one another. As a poet he intends to capture this state of ever-continuing conflict and to seek in it a state of momentary peace. Thus, the nature imagery in the poem cannot be said to produce one unified and unalterable meaning. These images, as Thomas suggests, keep on producing and destroying other images. Thus, there is a cycle of inter-linked images operating in his poetry. This is a part of the overall ambiguity in appreciating the meaning of Thomas's poetry (qtd. in Sagar 88).

**Father-Son Relationship:**

Another significant thematic aspect in Thomas's poems is that of father-son relationship. This theme brings into focus the emotional side of Thomas as a human being. Throughout his life Thomas had maintained quite a strong emotional bond with his father. Thus, in a poem like "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" his deep love and concern for his father is expressed in a moving way. As a matter of fact, during his childhood, Thomas was introduced to English literature by his father who taught literature at a grammar school. Thomas's Father, David, wanted to become a poet, a dream he could never fulfil (Ackerman 25). Seeing his son achieve what he himself could not must have given a definite solace to the old man. Thomas is likely to be aware of his father's feelings for him; a deep feeling of gratitude for his father, combined with a sense of anguish at his father's decaying physical state, occasioned the poem "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night."

**Nostalgia:**

Longing for the past and nostalgia for the bygone days forms another significant theme in Thomas's poetry. The poet's love for nature and the landscape of the countryside finds expression in his romantic mooring on the bygone days of childhood. It seems that the visions of the childhood which he spent in the lap of nature provide him with an escape from the dehumanising and mechanising aspects of the modern society. This idea is present in his "Fern Hill" where he celebrates an ideal world of the countryside as opposed to a depressing city life. Thomas used to visit his aunt's farm in the countryside where he experienced a sense of freedom from the mechanical existence of the cities. However, in addition to depicting the conflict between the city and the countryside, the poem also foregrounds the sense of tension between one's childhood and adulthood. For Thomas, childhood is connected with the simplicity of nature and its soothing aspects, whereas adulthood is seen as a manifestation of urban life with all its complexities. This idea can be studied in the context of the contemporary English

society which was gradually shifting from its former agricultural lifestyle to an industrial set up. Thomas links his own childhood with the old agricultural set up of the rural England. But this rural scenery was soon replaced by pictures of modernisation. The rapid industrialisation of English villages resulted in a subsequent corruption of the mind. Thus, industrialisation cuts the child off from nature and hampers the child's spiritual growth. It is this philosophical stance on the nature of childhood that informs Thomas's poem "Fern Hill."

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What is the main purpose of Thomas in using nature imagery in his poems?

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2. Why is nostalgia a recurrent theme in Thomas's poetry?

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3. How does Thomas link industrialisation with spiritual barrenness?

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## *8.8 STYLE IN DYLAN THOMAS'S POEMS*

William York Tindall observes: "God and Christ always abound in Thomas' poetry—not in their proper capacities, however, but as metaphors for nature, poet, and their creative powers" (8). His poetry is remarkable for the use of impressive metaphors, rhetorical imagery of suggestive force, and a profound visionary outlook on the experiences of life and death. The complex verbal patterns in Larkin's poems have a forceful rhythm and there is also an abundance of Celtic poetic elements in them which reminds us of the works of G.M. Hopkins and James Joyce (Blamires 373).

Despite the fact that Dylan Thomas was a major poetic force of the 1930s and 1940s, his complex writing style and overblown poetic expression was severely criticised by the Movement poets, especially Philip Larkin. In the book *Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day: Philip Larkin and the Plain Style*, Tijana Stojkovic includes one of Larkin's letters written in 1947 to his friend Kingsley Amis, to reveal how critical Larkin was of the poetic style of Thomas:

I think a man ought to use good words to make what he means *impressive*: Dylan Thos. just makes you wonder what he means, *very hard*. Take a phrase that comes at the start of a poem in *Death & Entrances*—something about waking up in the 'immortal hospital.' Now that is a phrase that makes me feel suddenly a sort of *reverent apprehension*, only I don't know what it *means*. Can't the FOOL see that if I could see what it *means*, I should admire it *2ce as much*?? But I agree he is a shocking influence. . . . (50)

The use of seemingly unrelated images is a part of Thomas's art and he has his own justification for doing so. In his book *The Laughter of Foxes: A Study of*

*Ted Hughes* Keith Sagar quotes a letter written by Dylan Thomas to Henry Treece which throws light on Thomas's art of using imagery. A portion of that letter is given here:

A poem by myself needs a host of images ... I let, perhaps, an image be 'made' emotionally in me and then apply to it what intellectual & critical forces I possess—let it breed another, let that image contradict the first, make, of the third image bred out of the other two together, a fourth contradictory image, and let them all, within any imposed formal limits, conflict. Each image holds within it the seed of its own destruction, and my dialectical method, as I understand it, is a constant building up and breaking down of the images that come out of the central seed, which is itself destructive and constructive at the same time (88).

He further maintains that the life in any poem of mine cannot move concentrically round a central image; the life must come out of the centre; an image must be born and die in another … Out of the inevitable conflict of images—inevitable, because of the creative, recreative, destructive and contradictory nature of the motivating centre, the womb of war – I try to make that momentary peace which is a poem (88).

The above excerpt taken from one of Thomas's letters focusses on the stylistic aspect of his poetic creations. However, it should also be remembered that Thomas was a visionary and craftsman. Therefore, the apparent thematic disorder that we see in almost all his poems is, as Anna Anselmo maintains, "a dream-like, surrealist perspective on life and memory" (35) through which he tries to form his vision of the world.

Apart from employing an absurd and dream-like settings in his poems, which are not easily comprehensible to the average readers, Thomas is also notable for his experiments with structure and style. In doing so, he often goes beyond the limitations of English poetry and relies on the formal structures that are found in the poems of other countries. This is clearly the case with his famous poem "Do Not Gentle into That Good Night." In terms of its structure, the poem is quite unique in the whole range of English literature. The poem has an intricate

verse and rhyme pattern and is an example of what is called "villanelle." The villanelle originated in France and has five tercets rhyming ABA and a final quatrain rhyming ABAA. In a villanelle, the first line of the first tercet in repeatedly used as the last line of the second and the fourth tercet. Likewise, the last line of the first tercet is repeatedly used as the last line of the third and the fifth tercet. Lastly, the first line and the last line of the first tercet form the last two lines of the concluding quatrain. Regarding Thomas's use of the rhyme scheme of villanelle in the poem, John Bailey maintains:

> the highly organised and artificial but also playful form of the villanelle at first seems to contrast starkly with the poem's topic: the sick and dying father. But the form which has to bend language into this disciplined playfulness, effectively helps to express the speaker's overwhelming desire to instil a spirit of resistance and a new passion for living in his father (*Masterclass American and British Literature*).

Thus, the rhyming pattern of the villanelle has enabled him to achieve the desired effect in the poem. Such a use of stylistic innovativeness to skilfully reflect the poem's theme forms a unique feature of Dylan Thomas's poetic craft.

## *8.9 SUMMING UP*

In this unit we have studied about the life and works of Dylan Thomas. We have also undertaken careful readings of three representative poems of Thomas. We have seen that the select poems manifest the poet's creative genius in terms of using symbols, images, and an innovative language. In "Poem in October"and "Fern Hill" we see his close communion with Nature in almost a similar way as that of the British Romantics, while in "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," we find him using the same imaginative faculty to express his personal emotions in relation to his father. In short, the three poems bear testimony to his mastery in the re-creation of forms and language (Hardy 1), thus making him one of the great individualists of modern art (Hardy 51). Besides, in the context of the time, it is evident that Thomas's work is representative of the

tumultuous post-war generation. His blending of the Romantic and the Modernist approach, the old and the new style lends to him a unique position among his contemporaries.

## *8.10 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. Write a note on Dylan Thomas's achievement as a versatile writer in English.
2. Write a note on Dylan Thomas's use of imagery and symbolism with reference to his three poems prescribed for your study.
3. Critically comment on the use of personal tone in Thomas's poem "Poem in October."
4. Bring out the main thematic concern of the poem "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night." Discuss whether the poem's tone is pessimistic or optimistic.
5. Make a comparative study of Thomas's "Poem in October" and "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" with particular focus on their handling of personal emotions.
6. Discuss the central theme of the poem 'Fern Hill'?
7. Can you say that the poem celebrates youth as opposed to agedness? Answer with illustrations.
8. How will you account for Thomas's use of seemingly unrelated images in the poem? What idea does it reveal about his poetic craft?
9. Why is it that Thomas's writing style is often criticised?
10. How does an image function in Thomas's poetry?
11. How does Thomas employ the rhyme pattern of "villanelle" in his poetry?

**Write Short Answers**

1. Why did Thomas choose the rural countryside as the predominant setting of his poems?
2. What do you learn about nature from your reading of "Poem in October"?

3. Do you think that the poem “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” also contains a universal tone apart from its distinct personal tone?
4. Comment on the title of the poem “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night.”
5. How is the theme of nostalgia explored in the poem “Fern Hill”?
6. From your reading of “Fern Hill,” do you think that Thomas can be called a regional poet?

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## *UNIT 9: READING THE POET TED HUGHES*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *9.0 INTRODUCTION*

Ted Hughes is one of those writers in English literature who stand out among their contemporaries by the sheer gift of their art and popularity. His power of imagination and skill in recreating myths account for the readers' interest in him in all ages. His reputation mainly rests on his animal poems which have debunked our conventional perception of the animal mind and its relation to the human world. In the twenty first century, with the rise of fields like eco-criticism and calls for environmental conservation Hughes's value as a poet and a visionary seems to only increase day by day.

## *9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

This unit is aimed at making you familiar with Ted Hughes as a post-war English poet. To this end, this unit will provide you with:

• a brief account of the life and works of Hughes

• critical readings of three representative poems of Hughes

• analyses of the major themes and poetic styles contained in Hughes's selected poems.

## *9.2 TED HUGHES: LIFE AND WORKS*

Ted Hughes, whose original name was Edward James Hughes, was born on 17 August 1930 at Mytholmroyd, Yorkshire, to William Henry Hughes and Edith Farrar. He had two elder siblings: sister Olwyn and brother Gerald. He was raised in a small farming community of Mytholmroyd, a place known for its beautiful natural scenery with barren rocks and hills. In 1937, their family moved to Mexborough, South Yorkshire, where they started a newspaper and tobacco shop. In 1943 he attended Mexborough Grammar School. Three years later, his first poems and prose pieces were published in his school magazine under the pseudonym EepleJoteHyewze. After high school Hughes served in the Royal Air Force for two years from 1949 to 1951. During this time he read and reread the works of William Shakespeare which later formed a deep impact on his poetic craft. He entered Cambridge through a scholarship won in 1948 and attended Pembroke College in 1951 where he studied English. The very next year Hughes dropped English to study archaeology and anthropology, which eventually strengthened his knowledge of myths and legends. During his study there he became deeply acquainted with folklore and the poems of W.B. Yeats. In 1954, he graduated from the Cambridge University and the same year his family returned to West Yorkshire.

Hughes met the American poet Sylvia Plath on February 26, 1956, during the launch party for the literary magazine St. Botolph's Review which he had co-founded with other editors. After a few months on June 16, 1956, the two got married. The following year the couple moved to the United States. She encouraged Hughes to participate in a poetry book contest organised by The New

York City Poetry Centre in 1957 in which his book *Hawk in the Rain* was chosen as the winner by judges like W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and Marianne More. With the publication of this book Hughes's reputation as a major poet was confirmed. Hughes taught at University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He and Plath returned to England in 1959. After one year, their first child, Freida, was born and their second child, Nicholas, was born two years later. However, Hughes had started an adulterous relation with AssiaWevill and he eventually left Plath in 1962. The following year, Plath committed suicide leaving behind a cloud of suspicion regarding Hughes's role in the incident, with many directly accusing him of mentally torturing Plath to death. In 1969, his partner AssiaWevill met the same fate as she too committed suicide also taking the life of their daughter Shura. However, his second marriage with Carol Orchard, a nurse twenty years younger than her, in 1970 was successful and the couple did not separate until his death in 1998.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

It is interesting to note that during his lifetime Hughes's fame and reputation rested less on his poetic works and more on the fact that he had been the husband of Sylvia Plath. This is because Plath herself had been a notable poet of the time, mainly remarkable for her "confessional poems." Plath experienced an unpleasant marital life with Hughes and according to many Hughes was directly responsible for her eventual decision to commit suicide.

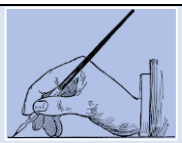
Hughes's major inspiration for writing poetry came from the natural scenery and animals that he closely observed in his native Yorkshire during his youth. Hughes's first book of poetry, *Hawk in the Rain,* was published in 1957. The book was an instant success and his reputation was secured. The book is remarkable for the use of animal-based themes and motifs and it also exemplifies his skill in utilising the traditional poetic forms to meet the demands of his craft.

Some of his other major poetic works include *Pike* (1959), *Lupercal* (1960), *Animal Poems* (1967), *Wodwo* (1967), *Gravestones* (1967), *Crow* (1970), *Fighting for Jerusalem* (1970), *Season Songs* (1974), *Moortown* (1979), *Cave Birds* (1979), *Selected Poems 1957-1981* (1982), *River* (1983), *Flowers and Insects* (1986), *Wolfwatching* (1989), *Moortown Diary* (1989),and *The Birthday Letters* (1998). His major posthumous publications include *Selected Poems 1957-1994* (2002), and *Letters of Ted Hughes* (2008).

*Lupercal* is a highly praised book of poetry for its philosophical treatment of the concepts of death and life, thereby revealing the deep connection between the two. The poems in *Wodwo* as a whole address the question whether it is possible to reconcile the violence and ugliness of Nature with its creative energies and beauty. Hughes's first major work after the demise of Sylvia Plath, *Crow*, presents the picture of a corrupted, degraded world, with the use of simple verse—a style which won wide critical acclaim. *The Birthday Letters* casts light on several previously unknown aspects of his relationship with Plath.

Hughes was a versatile genius who was at once a poet, translator, writer of children's books, and editor. His major books for children include *The Earth-Owl and Other Moon-People* (1963), *Nessie, The Mannerless Monster* (1964), and the famous work *The Iron Man* (1968). These books along with his other children's books were mainly written with the purpose of comforting his own children, Freida and Nicholas, after their mother's unnatural death. Along with another poet Seamus Heaney, Hughes was the co-editor of two anthologies *The Rattle Bag* (1982) and *The School Bag* (1997). He also translated the works of the ancient classical writers like Ovid, Aeschylus, and Euripides. His *Tales from Ovid* (1997) was based on translations from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

During his lifetime Hughes won many literary honours and accolades. In 1984, he became the Poet Laureate and held the post till his death. Just before his death in 1998 he was appointed to the Order of Merit which is one of Britain's highest honours. Hughes died from cancer on October 28, 1998 in Devonshire, England.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What was the main source of inspiration for the nature poems of Hughes?

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## *9.3 READING THE POEM "THE THOUGHT FOX"*

"The Thought Fox" which appeared in the collection *The Hawk in the Rain* published in 1957, is one of the earlier animal poems of Hughes and is considered as his signature piece. The poem's subject-matter is the midnight visit of a fox which slowly advances across a forest clearing and vanishes in the dark. It is said that he got inspiration for this poem after encountering a fox in his boyhood during one of his walks in the country. The poem makes an attempt to re-enact that moment of encounter and gives the readers access to the poet's original experience as accurately as possible.

The poem relates an imaginative experience of the poet who is sitting in front of his writing table and trying to write a poem on a blank page. It can be considered as "a poem about writing a poem" (Webster). The very first line "I imagine this midnight moment's forest" (1) announces the fictionality of the whole experience that follows through the poet's description. The external setting is a midnight forest, where there is complete silence and quietness. However, the poet himself is inside his room sitting by the window. Amidst his state of loneliness he notes the presence of something "alive" (2). In that starless dark

night he could perceive through the window a dark object approaching him. It is a fox with its cold nose touching the twigs and leaves. Hughes not only gives us a visual picture of the fox but makes us feel as if we were actually touching the creature and feeling it. Its eyes constantly move, suggesting its alertness. The repetitive use of the phrase "and now" apparently tries to capture the continuous movement of the creature's foot on the snow. In other words, Hughes tries to describe the moment-by-moment movement of the fox through the word "now." Giving us the same sensory image, the fox sets its footprints on the snow though the animal appears to the poet only as a lame shadow which is difficult to discern. The poet's description notably focusses on the animal's eye as he says:

Across clearings, an eye,
A widening deepening greenness,
Brilliantly, concentratedly,
Coming about its own business (17-20)

The fox's eyes here take on a symbolic meaning as it becomes a metaphor for greenness itself and for a mysterious single-minded force that operates in nature. But this elevated treatment of the creature crumbles against the force of reality in the concluding stanza. It seems that all the suspenseful charm that so long surrounded the fox vanishes once its real nature comes forth. The phrase "a sudden sharp hot stink of fox" (21) obliterates the allure and awe that centred around the animal. It vanishes just like it first appeared, resembling a vague shadow amidst darkness. The impact of the fox's arrival on the poet's mind quickly fades, though in the meantime he finishes his composition on the previously blank page.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

From the perspective of eco-criticism, Hughes becomes an environmentalist who urges us to show respect to other creatures. He deconstructs the notion that human beings are

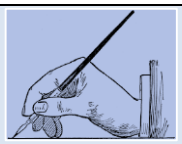
superior to other creatures and that our species is the centre of the universe. There is a suggestion in his works that human beings share many common traits with other animals and hence they are our distant relatives and fellow creatures (Reddick 37-8).

According to Hughes, the poem is a means to bring alive the image of the particular fox that he once encountered in his boyhood. He wants his readers to feel what he himself felt at that moment. In this regard, Hughes remarks that "as long as a copy of the poem exists, every time anyone reads it the fox will get up somewhere out in the darkness and come walking towards them" (qtd. in Enniss 55). Apparently, Hughes did not intend to treat the animal in a symbolic or metaphorical way and thereby limited the scope of the poem's further interpretation. However, it should also be noted that he gave his readers the liberty to read his poems in their own ways, due to which the poem is capable of having multiple meanings and interpretations.

The fox in the poem can be taken in a symbolic way. It may represent the thoughts inside the poet's own mind. In that sense, the fox is not just an animal roaming in the wild; it is rather an expression of the poet's own wide-ranging thoughts that seek freedom through poetry. The poet's immediate world—the clock's ticks and the movement of his fingers on the page—is unable to create any meaning for him and he is still unable to write anything. However, the visit of the fox changes the situation and his mind becomes active. The fox here becomes a symbol of the poetic inspiration that lies within Hughes's own mind and enables him to write. Again, the animal seems to symbolise the darkness and mysteriousness that is in the Nature. It is likely that unknown elements of nature here find a medium of expression through the image of the fox. The animal that is introduced to the reader only in a vague way, as a shadow in the dark, vanishes without any trace leaving behind a sense of awe at the secrecy of nature itself.

Thus, through the image of the fox nature becomes mystified as a source of the unknown.

One feels that the poem expresses Hughes's artistic talent that is magical in essence. The poem evokes the sense of "the sublime and awesome magic which is contained in the myth of creation, where God creates living beings out of nothingness by the mere *fiat* of his imagination" (Webster). Following the Biblical point of view, the way God has created the world out of chaos, Hughes brings alive an imaginary image of a wild creature by the sheer power of his art. Hughes's creative art lends to him a God-like vision which penetrates into the soul of the unknown and brings it out to the light of day. The fox is a creation of Hughes, which in spite of existing on the pages is as lively as a living creature, capable of moving the reader every time they read it.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What does 'darkness' signify in the poem? Does it have anything to do with Hughes's own internal thoughts?

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## *9.4 READING THE POEM 'HAWK ROOSTING'*

"Hawk Roosting" is an unusual poetic piece, notable for its skilful blending of the two supposedly opposite worlds—the human world and the world of nature as represented by a hawk. It appeared in Hughes's collection *Lupercal*. The poem recreates the predatory bird, hawk, in terms of its ability to think and feel, as if it were a human being. However, the representation of the hawk in the poem should not be considered as an example of mere personification. In fact, in the poem Hughes enters into the hawk's mind and tries to represent the world from the creature's unique perspective.

The poem's speaker is a hawk—predatory and aggressive. The bird's perspective of the world is beautifully captured in the form of a monologue. In the process, the reader gets an access to the innermost thoughts and motives of the bird. It is interesting that Hughes gives the bird all the sensibilities of a human being. But unlike humans the bird does not indulge in imagination or dreams which it calls "falsifying" (2). Its close connection to nature is expressed by the lines "The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray/Are of advantage to me" (6-7). Unlike human beings, the bird is at ease with the elements of nature. The bird's inspection of the world below from its sitting place "in the top of the wood" (1) suggests a Godlike omniscientvision. Hughes not only depicts the bird as a creation of nature but also sees in its actions a repetition of the same act of creation. Just like its "foot" (11) and "each feather" (11) on its wings were created by nature, the bird can metaphorically hold creation in its foot as it looks down at the world from the greatest height. In that sense the bird's power equates with that of nature itself. It can fly, inspect, and jump on its prey as and when it wishes. Because of its extreme confidence on the skills of flight and hunting it considers itself to be the master of the whole world. This is suggested by the line: "I kill where I please because it is all mine" (14). Interestingly, these lines also suggest a typical colonial mentality in the bird which makes a postcolonial reading of the poem quite apt. Just like a typical colonial master who is often merciless on his subjects the hawk declares

that its main business is to tear off heads of its preys and to kill them. The line "The sun is behind me" (21) may have multiple meanings. One meaning is that the bird is backed and supported by nature, symbolised by the sun, in its hunts, and another meaning is that the bird is superior to the sun as it has a greater range and reach than that of the sun. In each case, the hawk's boastfulness and pride is asserted when it places the supreme heavenly body,the sun, behind it. The poem's ending part suggests both the bird's single-minded approach to its life as well as Hughes's deep faith in the permanence of this animal-spirit. The poem concludes thus:

Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this. (22-24)

Surely, Hughes hints at a collective idea of the continuity of life on the earth in its own pace. The hawk in that sense symbolises the rhythm and movement of life as a whole.

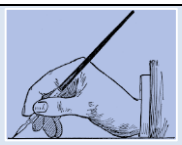
It is interesting that although Hughes himself did not favour a context-based reading of his poems, the poem "Hawk Roosting" can certainly be read against the backdrop of the contemporary European society. The line "And the earth's face upward for my inspection" (8) in the poem suggests a militaristic point of view (Bentley 30). Such a reading of the line certainly brings into mind the hostilities of the World War II. Tim Kendall observes in this connection:

. . . the open invitation of 'Hawk Roosting' to extrapolate back to the human realm incurs serious difficulties. Hughes has stated that he wrote the poem with the idea that 'in this hawk Nature is thinking'; but a nature which thinks is no longer nature … Hughes goes on to admit that the hawk sounds like 'Hitler's familiar spirit'. Turning nature into a Nazi, he makes Nazism seem natural. (207)

So, following Kendall's observation the reader has to confront a serious question—does the poem celebrate violence of the Nazis and consider it as natural? One cannot deny the fact the poem does contain the theme of power politics (V.T. and Sivaramakrishnan) 148). The Hawk brings up an image of a patriarchal dictator pompously asserting his superiority. At the same time, the bird's self-deceptive hubris can be taken as an allegory for a typical coloniser's mentality. This is the reason why critics often accuse the hawk of being a fascist and a representative figure of a genocidal dictator.

## LET US STOP AND THINK

Instead of contextualising the element of violence in the poem by connecting it to Nazism and Fascism, one might choose to see violence here in a more general way. Tim Kendall maintains in this regard: "The Nazism of 'Hawk Roosting'—if it can be called Nazism—becomes justified by Hughes's belief that most of us are, in effect, Nazis: given the opportunity" (208). Thus, Hughes in the poem does not favour Nazism or violence as such, but he shows that a strong predatory instinct inherently functions in all human beings. The poem, therefore, can be regarded as a medium through which Hughes tries to make his readers look into their own selves and identify their own underlying bestiality.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1 How does Hughes depict the hawk's connection with Nature?

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2. Why do critics often consider the hawk as a representative of dictatorship?

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3. How does the use of language in the poem contribute to the building up of the bird's image?

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## *9.5 READING THE POEM "PIKE"*

The poem "Pike" appeared in Hughes's second collection *Lupercal* (1960). It is one of the finesanimal poems of Hughes which gives a vivid and movingdescription of the pike, a predatory fish. In writing this poem Hughes was probably inspired by his personal fish hunts during his early youth.

The poem begins with a description of small, young pikes in a pond. Hughes gives us a first-hand account of the fish, describing themas "three inches long" (1) with a body colour of "green tigering the gold" (2). The phrase "Killers from the egg" (3) suggests their inherently aggressive nature which is an inborn quality. The pike's miniature world in the ponds is beautifully brought out with the help of images like "lily-pads" (9), "black leaves" (11) and "cavern of weeds" (12). The minutely described physical features of the fish create a realistic image of the creature before the reader's eyes. But Hughes's pikes are not a symbol of the simplicity and harmony of nature. On the contrary, they are representatives of a harsh world of nature where the strong feeds upon the weak. Living in such a world surely requires endurance and the spirit to fight till the end of life. Hughes

captures this fighting spirit in one of the dying pikes who has a feature of "iron in this eye / Though its film shrank in death" (27-28).

The poem has two "movements" (Roberts 41). The first "movement" consists of the first seven stanzas which present a series of brilliant images of the beauty and ferocity of the fish. One is here likely to be reminded of Blake's image of the tiger in "The Tyger" where the creature is shown as both terrible as well as beautiful. Similar to Blake's tiger, Hughes's pike is a combination of Nature's two contradictory aspects—beauty and terror. The pike is shown as a killing machine. The idea of death also comes up in the poem where the image of two dead pikes is evoked by the phrase "One jammed past the other's gullet" (25). The diction employed in this phrase, as Neil Roberts points out, is vernacular which gives a touch of plain rural speech to the speaking voice (41).

The last four stanzas have a different rhythm and approach as the speaker shifts his focus from the external to the internal aspects. The physical description of the predatory fish in the first seven stanzas is succeeded by a focus on the speaker's inner thoughts. The poem creates a dream-like atmosphere in which the speaker becomes terrified by his own imaginations. Highlighting on the dreamy nature of the poem Neil Roberts observes:

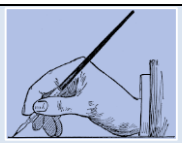
Again and again Hughes's poems read like fragments of an obscure inward narrative of visitation, usurpation and abduction: here the speaker is visited by the pike, his ordinary consciousness is usurped, perhaps he is about to be devoured or abducted into those 'legendary depths'. (42) The pikes in the pond transcend the boundary of reality to become the parts of a dream-world which exists inside the speaker's mind and constantly haunts him.

It is well-known that Hughes had a liking for the use of myths in his poetry. The mythical element in the poem surrounds the image of the pond which is of "legendary depth" (33) holding "Pike too immense to stir" (35). Hughes describes the pond in detail where the pikes live. This pond carries the marks of its ancientness in its "lilies and muscular tench" (30) which have "outlasted" (31) the stones of the monastery whose monks had planted them long ago. Its depth is

compared to that of England. The pond's depth symbolises the long history of England which has witnessed many events, both recorded and unrecorded. The speaker imagines the pikes in the pond watching at him and this thought makes him fear these creatures. Thus, he mentions that "With the hair frozen on my soldier" (38) the speaker still tries to catch these creatures. The sense of fear which the speaker experiences while fishing marks the poem's conclusion. Thus, the focus shifts entirely on the speaker's inner sense of insecurity against an unknown, inexplicable Nature, suggested by the concluding lines: "Darkness beneath night's darkness had freed, / That rose slowly toward me, watching" (43-44).

## LET US STOP AND THINK

The fish in the poem "Pike"is a symbolic creature that reflects the inner instinct of man. According to Yvonne Reddick, "the pike's eye reflects an aspect of humankind's baser nature: certainly the human predatory instinct" (124). His fascination for fishing had enabled him to closely observe each and every movement of these predatory fishes. From this closeness grew a sense of connectedness where the fish became identifiable with human beings. Thus, the cannibalistic nature of the fish is representative of the cruelty he saw amidst his fellow human beings.



## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Identify from the poem such words which denote the violent aspect of the pike.

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2. What is the significance of the image of the pond in the poem?

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3. How would you respond to Hughes's use of the image of England in the poem?

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## *9.6 MAJOR THEMES IN HUGHES'S POEMS*

**The use of Myths:**

Use of myths and shamanism is an important thematic aspect in Hughes's poems. Not only does he draw on the body of myths we have inherited but he also creates new myths out of the existing ones, or present the primal myths in a new way. Myths for him are a powerful device that helps one in healing mental wounds. In his opinion myths have a continuing power to "open inwardly" a reader. In contrast to the confessional poetry that remains purely a subjective and unique way of looking at the world, the use of myths gives a context of accumulated human experiences to any individual, subjective experience (Sagar 1-2).

As a matter of fact, Hughes saw in the act of writing poems a mysterious charm which in a way resembles shamanism. For him, shamanism is not a voluntary choice but rather a calling whereby a man is approached by spirits, usually in dreams, to which he must respond (Roberts 30). Personally, Hughes felt a similar force working upon his mind while engaging in his poetic compositions. For Hughes, a poet's imagination works in a mysterious way similar to the conjuring of spirits by a shaman. Focussing on Hughes's belief in the similarity between a shaman and a poet, Huddlestone maintains: "In contrast to bourgeois literary professionals, poets and shamans are situated, for Hughes, in the … disreputable, lower-class world of irrationality and superstition" ("Myth and Education"). The element of shamanism is clearly notable in Hughes's poem "The Thought Fox." The fox in the poem represents a spirit which serves as a link between the human world and the world of spirits.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

The poetry of Ted Hughes is marked by the presence of a healing gift. Hughes's concept of poetry as an art centres around this idea of healing, as is clear from his own statement:

"Every work of art stems from a wound in the soul of the artist. When a person is hurt, his immune system comes into operation and the self-healing process takes place, mental and physical. Art is a psychological component of the auto-immune system that gives expression to the healing process. That is why great works of art make us feel good" (qtd. in Sagar xi).

It is quite clear from what he says that art and poetry have a definite role to play in the lives of people. Hughes therefore wrote with a definite aim. This aim was to heal his own mental wounds as well as those of his readers.

**The Inner Self of Man:**

Hughes's poems also carry in them an autobiographical element in that they reflect those emotions and feelings experienced by him at certain moments in life. Thus, exploration of his inner self remains a powerful theme in many of

his poems. In his childhood days, Hughes used to go for fishing at night and the sense of excitement he experienced during that time is powerfully captured in a poem like "Pike." In the poem, fishing remains a central theme. In fact, fishing is a metaphor around which the whole poem seems to revolve. What does fishing symbolise in the poem? And what does the pike stand for? In the opinion of Keith Sagar, fishing in deep water at night is the perfect image for Hughes's favourite kind of poetry—poetry "which projects the most naked and unconditional part of the self into the nightmare darkness" (114). Hughes considered fishing as both a physical sport and a psychological activity and defined it as a means of "putting the individual back in contact with the primitive being" (Hong 46). In that sense, the pike becomes a symbol of one's primitive impulse. In the poem the speaker both desires and fears the pike, an attitude that expresses his dilemma regarding his inner impulse (Hong 46). The speaker identifies his own dark impulses with the predatory nature of the pike and is shaken with fear at the experience. It is this internal fear which is reflected by the external objects of the night. However, according to Neil Roberts, the pike is also "a manifestation of creative power" and "the inner resource that the poet is desperate to preserve" (qtd. in Hong 46). Thus, Hughes's inner conflict centres on this dilemma—whether to explore his creative power through the act of writing or to suppress it fearing its consequence.

**Creation:**

As a thoughtful artist, Hughes seems to be obsessed with the theme of creation in his works. This is particularly noticeable in "The Thought Fox."The poem can be considered as a metaphor for both physical and poetic creation, i.e., the two opposite ideas that stand for reality and imagination respectively. One might also argue that "the subject of the poem is not the fox, but the conjuring of the fox as poem" (Persoon and Watson 479). The poem reveals its own fictionality in the sense that it does not describe a real fox in a real forest but rather the poet's imagination of a real fox in a real forest. Persoon and Watson further say that the poem depicts a struggle for dominance between nature and the poet's mind. Hence, "Does the poet imitate nature, or create it" (Persoon and Watson 479)?

This is an important question that you should try to address while reading the poem "The Thought Fox".

**Nature and Animals:**

Perhaps, the most interesting part of Hughes's poetic craft is his ability to portray the mind of an animal, thereby trying to reveal the mysteries inherent in Nature. From this perspective, the relation between Nature and animals is a recurring theme in Hughes's poetry. The poem "Hawk Roosting" remains a fine example in this regard. The hawk in the poem can be looked at from various angles. It can be treated as a representative of Nature and Hughes lets Nature speak for herself through the mouth of the bird. In this connection, Hughes maintains: "Actually what I had in mind was that in this hawk Nature is thinking. Simply Nature. It's not so simple maybe because Nature is no longer so simple" (qtd. in Sagar 116). However, the Nature that Hughes apparently tries to portray is not a sustainer and preserver of life but rather an embodiment of violence. One may argue that this element of violence brings the hawk closer to the human world than nature. Besides, Hughes's use of the first person narrator "I" apparently conflicts with the perspective of Nature which is objective. Hughes's own comment that "Nature is no longer so simple" (qtd. in Sagar 116) indicates his scepticism regarding the purity of Nature in this era of the man-made civilisation.

One very prominent feature of Hughes's poetry is the use of images taken from the animal world and applying it to suit the concerns of the human society. Some critics saw his ability to deal with the state of inanimate nature and the activities of living creatures as a continuation of and development upon the animalist tradition in English poetry already exemplified by Rudyard Kipling and D. H. Lawrence. Hughes used his knowledge of the animal world as a means to comment on the human society. Many a times, one may see that his portrayal of animals symbolises the likes and dislikes, the strengths and weaknesses, and the hopes and failures of human beings. During his boyhood in Yorkshire he used to hunt with his brother and the same hunting spirit somehow pervaded his poetry

too. He himself remarked that writing poetry is like hunting, though of a new kind of creature. The natural backdrop for his poems is seemingly provided by the landscape of his native Yorkshire which is characterised by its valleys and hills and its lush greenery.

## *9.7 SUMMING UP*

In this unit, we have read three poems of Hughes which represent his poetic art and craftsmanship. The three poems, namely, "The Thought Fox," "Hawk Roosting," and "Pike" exemplify the genius and creativity that characterise the poetic creations of Hughes.The first poem exemplifies his ability to recreate Nature on his own terms, the second his capacity to enter into an animal's mind and spirit, and the third his gift for identifying the presence of the mysterious Nature within his own unconscious mind. It is worth remembering that although Ted Hughes belongs to the same generation as Larkin, the former's poetry is marked by a note of primitivism that relies on the elements of myth and shamanism. Unlike Larkin who is an ironist, mocking at the predicament of the human condition, Hughes seeks to define the human experience in its most basic and crudest form by way of using nature imagery. Such an approach of Hughes has to do with a post-war realisation that man, far from being an ideal creation of God that he claims to be, is but a flawed creature slave to its own instinctive needs.

## *9.7 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. Make an analysis of the overall context of Ted Hughes's poetry.
2. Discuss the achievements of Ted Hughes as a nature poet based on your reading of his three poems prescribed for your study.
3. Comment on Hughes's use of symbolism in the poems "The Thought Fox" and "Pike."
4. Discuss the character of the speaker in Hughes's poem "Hawk Roosting."

5. Discuss Hughes's "The Thought Fox" as a nature-poem.
6. Discuss the major thematic concerns in Hughes's poetry with particular reference to the three prescribed poems.
7. Is Hughes's fox in the poem a product of pure imagination or an imitation of reality? Respond critically.
8. How will you relate Hughes's creative power in the poem with that of the Biblical God?
9. Do you find any use of the devise of personification in the poem? How would you study the image of the pike in relation to Hughes's own character?
10. How does Hughes compare shamanism to the act or writing?
11. What does fishing symbolise for Hughes?
12. Which aspect of nature does Hughes usually portray in his works?

**Write Short Answers**

1. How does Hughes employ myth in his poetry?
2. What role does nature and animals play in Hughes's poetry?
3. Explore the theme of creation in Hughes's poetry.
4. What does the fox represent in the poem "The Thought Fox"?
5. Briefly discuss whether "Hawk Roosting" carries a theme of politics in it?
6. Discuss how Hughes's inner psychology gets reflected in "Pike."

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**JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS**

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|---|---|---|
| MA in English | Bachelor's Degree in any discipline | Dr. Suchibrata Goswami<br>suchitu@tezu.ernet.in<br>03712-275358<br>Dr. Pallavi Jha<br>pjefl@tezu.ernet.in<br>03712-275215 |
| MA in Mass Communication | Bachelor's Degree in any discipline | Ms. Madhusmita Boruah<br>madhu@tezu.ernet.in<br>03712-275359<br>Dr. Uttam Kr. Pegu<br>uttamkp@tezu.ernet.in<br>03712-275455 |
| MA in Sociology | Bachelor's Degree in any discipline | Ms. Ankita Bhattacharyya<br>ankita@tezu.ernet.in<br>03712-275359<br>Dr. Amiya Kr. Das<br>amiyadas@tezu.ernet.in<br>03712-275805 |
| PG Diploma in Human Resource Management | Bachelor's Degree in any discipline | Dr. Runumi Das<br>runumi@tezu.ernet.in<br>03712-275015 |
| PG Diploma in Environmental & Disaster Management | Bachelor's Degree in any discipline | Dr. N. Gogoi<br>nirmali@tezu.ernet.in<br>03712-275609<br>Dr. Dipak Nath<br>dipak@tezu.ernet.in<br>03712-275306 |
| PG Diploma in Renewable Energy and Energy Management | BE/B.Tech or M.Sc in Physics or Chemistry | Dr. S. Mahapatra<br>sadhan@tezu.ernet.in<br>03712-275306 |
| PG Diploma in Child Rights and Governance** | Bachelor's Degree in any discipline | Dr. Subhrangshu Dhar<br>sdhar@tezu.ernet.in |


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Centre for Open and Distance Learning
Tezpur University (A Central University)
Tezpur, Assam -784028
India
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