



# ALAGAPPA UNIVERSITY

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## Directorate of Distance Education

**B.A. [English]**

**V - Semester**

**112 51**

# AMERICAN AND COMMONWEALTH LITERATURE

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## American and Commonwealth Literature

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## INTRODUCTION

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### NOTES

American literature refers to the written or literary work that was produced in the US and its preceding colonies. The literature reflects beliefs and traditions that come from the nation's frontier days. The ideals of self-reliance and independence appear frequently in American writings. As America was a series of British colonies during its early history, its literary tradition begins with a link to the broader tradition of English literature. Yet, unique American characteristics and the breadth of its production usually cause it to be considered a separate path and tradition. American writers have been known to break away from literary tradition and choose their own directions. Writers of other countries, on the other hand, appear to absorb their national literary traditions. However, many American authors have rejected the old in order to create something novel.

On the other hand, Commonwealth literature, refers to the literature of those countries that were colonised by the United Kingdom. Most often, this type of literature addresses the problems, challenges and consequences of the decolonization of a country and mainly discusses the questions that relate to the political and cultural independence of the colonized. It also deals with the themes such as racialism and colonialism. The problems and consequences of the decolonization of a country, especially questions relating to the political and cultural independence of formerly subjugated people, and themes such as racialism and colonialism are addressed by the postcolonial literature. A range of literary theory has evolved around the subject. In addition, commonwealth poetry radically enlarged the atlas of literature in English, combining modern and contemporary poetry with metaphors from indigenous culture. This has resulted in a rich and vibrant poetry issued from the hybridization of the English muse with the muses of post-colonial societies in Africa, India, and the Caribbean.

This book, *American and Commonwealth Literature*, is written with the distance learning student in mind. It is presented in a user-friendly format using a clear, lucid language. Each unit contains an Introduction and a list of Objectives to prepare the student for what to expect in the text. At the end of each unit are a Summary and a list of Key Words, to aid in recollection of concepts learnt. All units contain Self Assessment Questions and Exercises, and strategically placed Check Your Progress questions so the student can keep track of what has been discussed.

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## BLOCK - I

### POETRY

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Walt Whitman and  
Robert Frost

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# UNIT 1 WALT WHITMAN AND ROBERT FROST

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### Structure

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

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The purpose of this unit is to introduce the reader to the poetic style of Walt Whitman and Robert Frost. The unit will help us understand Whitman's poetry through an in-depth analysis of his poem *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*. Whitman's work showcases a complex interaction between realism and transcendentalism, characteristic of the changing landscape of American poetry. The aim of this unit is to showcase the relationship between poetry and the condition of America in Whitman's work and how this relationship was presented to his readers. In addition, the unit will discuss in detail the poetic style of Robert Frost by focusing on his poem *Mending Wall*. Frost's work is dedicated to presenting a picture of the rural life in New England and his poetry is known for its usage of American colloquialisms. His writing shows a deep preoccupation with social and philosophical themes. He is one of the most celebrated American poets till date and his work continues to be read widely, influencing successive generations of poets.

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## 1.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the poetic style of Walt Whitman and Robert Frost
- Analyse Walt Whitman's poem *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*
- Discuss the theme of Robert Frost's poem *Mending Wall*

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## 1.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: WALT WHITMAN

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### NOTES

Walt Whitman was born in Huntington, Long Island, on the 31 May 1819, to Walter Whitman and Louisa Van Velsor. He finished schooling at the age of eleven following which he began to work to supplement his family's income. He worked as an office boy and then as an apprentice at the *Patriot*, a Long Island newspaper edited by Samuel E. Clements. Through various printing assignments and jobs, Whitman found a passion for literature and writing, even reading classical works by Homer and Dante on his own.

From the age of seventeen onwards, Whitman worked as a teacher at various schools in Long Island for a few years before going to New York where he started his own newspaper *Long-Islander* but sold it shortly after finding work at the *Long Island Democrat*, edited by James J. Brenton. He dabbled in teaching again before working for various newspapers. In 1842, he became the editor of the *Aurora* and from 1846 to 1848 he worked as an editor for the *Brooklyn Eagle*. His experience in music criticism and love for opera inspired him to write in free verse. Using free verse, he endeavored to write the American epic and by 1855 he had produced the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The poetry collection was edited throughout his life and drew praise from readers including Ralph Waldo Emerson. In the years of the American Civil War, he helped the wounded in hospitals. Seeing the effects of the War from close, Whitman was deeply affected by the horrors and aftermath of the violence of war on innocent people.

In 1865 *Drum-Taps* was published, followed by *Democratic Vistas* (1871), *Memoranda During the War* (1876) and *Specimen Days* (1882).

### Inspiration and Major Themes

Walt Whitman drew inspiration from varied themes such as democracy, nature, war, etc. Let us discuss these influences.

#### (i) Democracy and Poetry

In *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman set out to write an American epic which would speak to the common people. Whitman's poems always carry this quality of celebrating the common people who are the soul of America for him. His poems are engaging and Whitman often uses the first-person point-of-view, striving to bring to the poetic space the voice of common American man. In this way, his poetry is the signification of the varied and diverse voices of the American people. Hence, *Leaves of Grass* is widely considered an example of voice of the American idea of democracy itself.

The democratic self is a characteristic of transcendental thought which was popularized in the works of Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. These authors upheld the goodness of people and strived to promote

the democratic voice in and of America. For Whitman, poetry was the vehicle of democratic thought and expression.

Poetry could be used as a tool for change and revolution. Unlike the private exercise and experience of poetry prevalent at the time, Whitman stressed that poetry was a public activity and his poems are meant to be read aloud in public.

### **(ii) Individualism**

If democracy was the modern American concern, then the individual voice was its instrument. Early 19th century onwards, with the advent of the working class in America, the concept of individualism spread widely. Representing the individual voice in his poems, Whitman's poetry sought to make the diversity of American voices heard. Whitman celebrated this individualism, the importance of self-expression and the originality of thought while simultaneously calling for an understanding of unity in the diversity of voice and opinion.

### **(iii) The Soul, the Body, and Desire**

In line with transcendental thought, Whitman maintained that the body and the soul were connected and it was the body that made the experience of its surroundings and the world possible. Whitman's poetry is an exploration of physical experience and desire. Erotic themes are present in his poems and though he was often criticized for it, he maintained that his thematic concerns were a reflection of the freedom of expression he championed in his poetry. His poems are rooted in the interconnected physical and spiritual experiences of life.

### **(iv) Nature**

Whitman's poetry is filled with celebratory descriptions of nature which surrounds the poet and the people in his poetry. The reader is invited in this experience of nature and often transported to the poetic setting through Whitman's writing in an attempt to establish connection between the human and the natural world. It is in this experience of nature that diverse humans who are separated in time and distance find connections and similarities in the sameness of elements of the natural world. Nature emerges as a thing of beauty and power which establishes connections between ideas and physicality that are represented through poetry.

### **(v) War**

Having experienced the horrors of war closely, a number of Whitman's poems deal with the loss and pain of war. He wasn't patriotic and believed in peace. For Whitman, war was something to be avoided.

### **Writing Style**

Whitman has a characteristic writing style. He wrote in free verse, giving preference to Americanisms, colloquialisms and slangs to communicate the democratic voice

*Walt Whitman and  
Robert Frost*

## **NOTES**

## NOTES

of the common people. His poems feature a wide array of characters from diverse aspects of the American society.

The poetry is meditative, often spiritual, but at the same time the tone is passionate and emotional. He didn't care much for metrical patterns and instead reveled in free verse and the usage of the long line. The poems display an irregularity in stanza form and structure, going through a long process of experimentation and rearrangement. His writing mirrors the prosody of the English Bible at times.

Whitman's poetry introduces topics that were taboo in his society, topics dealing sexuality, the body, the darker aspects of human personality, and by bringing them to the fore. His poems rebel against prevailing social and literary codes. He uses metaphors and comparisons to link everyday details and natural surroundings with themes of eternity and mortality. His poems are filled with lists which he catalogued to thematic resonance. Repetition, anaphora, epiphora and parallelisms abound in his style of poetry.

### Check Your Progress

1. In which year was the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* published?
2. What are some of the common themes in Walt Whitman's poetry?

## 1.3 CRITICAL APPRECIATION: *CROSSING BROOKLYN FERRY*

### 1

*Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!*

*Clouds of the west—sun there half an hour high—I see you also face to face.*

*Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me!*

*On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more curious to me than you suppose,*

*And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose.*

### 2

*The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours of the day,*

*The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme,*

*The similitudes of the past and those of the future,*

*The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings, on the walk in the street and the passage over the river,*

*The current rushing so swiftly and swimming with me far away,*

*The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them,*

*The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others.*

*Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore,  
Others will watch the run of the flood-tide,  
Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and the heights of Brooklyn  
to the south and east,  
Others will see the islands large and small;  
Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an hour high,  
A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see them,  
Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring-in of the flood-tide, the falling-back to the sea of  
the ebb-tide.*

3

*It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,  
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations  
hence,  
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,  
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,  
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was  
refresh'd,  
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet  
was hurried,  
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-stemm'd pipes of  
steamboats, I look'd.  
I too many and many a time cross'd the river of old,  
Watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, saw them high in the air floating with motionless  
wings, oscillating their bodies,  
Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left the rest in strong  
shadow,  
Saw the slow-wheeling circles and the gradual edging toward the south,  
Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water,  
Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams,  
Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my head in the  
sunlit water,  
Look'd on the haze on the hills southward and south-westward,  
Look'd on the vapor as it flew in fleeces tinged with violet,  
Look'd toward the lower bay to notice the vessels arriving,  
Saw their approach, saw aboard those that were near me,  
Saw the white sails of schooners and sloops, saw the ships at anchor,  
The sailors at work in the rigging or out astride the spars,  
The round masts, the swinging motion of the hulls, the slender serpentine pennants,  
The large and small steamers in motion, the pilots in their pilot-houses,  
The white wake left by the passage, the quick tremulous whirl of the wheels,  
The flags of all nations, the falling of them at sunset,*

Walt Whitman and  
Robert Frost

NOTES

## NOTES

*The scallop-edged waves in the twilight, the ladled cups, the frolicsome crests and glistening,*

*The stretch afar growing dimmer and dimmer, the gray walls of the granite storehouses by the docks,*

*On the river the shadowy group, the big steam-tug closely flank'd on each side by the barges, the hay-boat, the belated lighter,*

*On the neighboring shore the fires from the foundry chimneys burning high and glaringly into the night,*

*Casting their flicker of black contrasted with wild red and yellow light over the tops of houses, and down into the clefts of streets.*

### 4

*These and all else were to me the same as they are to you,*

*I loved well those cities, loved well the stately and rapid river,*

*The men and women I saw were all near to me,*

*Others the same—others who look back on me because I look'd forward to them,*

*(The time will come, though I stop here to-day and to-night.)*

### 5

*What is it then between us?*

*What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?*

*Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not,*

*I too lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine,*

*I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in the waters around it,*

*I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,*

*In the day among crowds of people sometimes they came upon me,*

*In my walks home late at night or as I lay in my bed they came upon me,*

*I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,*

*I too had receiv'd identity by my body,*

*That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew I should be of my body.*

### 6

*It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall,*

*The dark threw its patches down upon me also,*

*The best I had done seem'd to me blank and suspicious,*

*My great thoughts as I supposed them, were they not in reality meagre?*

*Nor is it you alone who know what it is to be evil,*

*I am he who knew what it was to be evil,*

*I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,*

*Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd,*

*Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,*

*Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant,*

*The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me,*

*The cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous wish, not wanting,  
Refusals, hates, postponements, meanness, laziness, none of these wanting,  
Was one with the rest, the days and haps of the rest,  
Was call'd by my nighest name by clear loud voices of young men as they saw me  
approaching or passing,  
Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning of their flesh against  
me as I sat,  
Saw many I loved in the street or ferry-boat or public assembly, yet never told them  
a word,  
Lived the same life with the rest, the same old laughing, gnawing, sleeping,  
Play'd the part that still looks back on the actor or actress,  
The same old role, the role that is what we make it, as great as we like,  
Or as small as we like, or both great and small.*

7

*Closer yet I approach you,  
What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you—I laid in my stores in  
advance,  
I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.  
Who was to know what should come home to me?  
Who knows but I am enjoying this?  
Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you  
cannot see me?*

8

*Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than mast-hemm'd Manhattan?  
River and sunset and scallop-edg'd waves of flood-tide?  
The sea-gulls oscillating their bodies, the hay-boat in the twilight, and the belated  
lighter?  
What gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand, and with voices I love call me  
promptly and loudly by my nighest name as I approach?  
What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks in my  
face?  
Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?  
We understand then do we not?  
What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted?  
What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not accomplish is  
accomplish'd, is it not?*

9

*Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!  
Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves!  
Gorgeous clouds of the sunset! drench with your splendor me, or the men and  
women generations after me!*

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*Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!*  
*Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta! stand up, beautiful hills of Brooklyn!*  
*Throb, baffled and curious brain! throw out questions and answers!*  
*Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution!*  
*Gaze, loving and thirsting eyes, in the house or street or public assembly!*  
*Sound out, voices of young men! loudly and musically call me by my highest name!*  
*Live, old life! play the part that looks back on the actor or actress!*  
*Play the old role, the role that is great or small according as one makes it!*  
*Consider, you who peruse me, whether I may not in unknown ways be looking upon you;*  
*Be firm, rail over the river, to support those who lean idly, yet haste with the hasting current;*  
*Fly on, sea-birds! fly sideways, or wheel in large circles high in the air;*  
*Receive the summer sky, you water, and faithfully hold it till all downcast eyes have time to take it from you!*  
*Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any one's head, in the sunlit water!*  
*Come on, ships from the lower bay! pass up or down, white-sail'd schooners, sloops, lighters!*  
*Flaunt away, flags of all nations! be duly lower'd at sunset!*  
*Burn high your fires, foundry chimneys! cast black shadows at nightfall! cast red and yellow light over the tops of the houses!*  
*Appearances, now or henceforth, indicate what you are,*  
*You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul,*  
*About my body for me, and your body for you, be hung out divinest aromas,*  
*Thrive, cities—bring your freight, bring your shows, ample and sufficient rivers,*  
*Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual,*  
*Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting.*  
*You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers,*  
*We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate henceforward,*  
*Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold yourselves from us,*  
*We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you permanently within us,*  
*We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you also,*  
*You furnish your parts toward eternity,*  
*Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.*

### Summary

Walt Whitman's *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* describes the journey of man on a Brooklyn ferry traveling from Manhattan to his home at the end of his work day. The speaker presents his experience in first-person point-of-view and begins by describing everything around him including the other commuters around him and

the water over which the ferry is travelling as well as the clouds above and the sunrise. Since the commute is an everyday one, it is something ordinary and even ritualistic. It isn't something that the other passengers poetically philosophize over but for the speaker it is interesting because his surroundings are an object of curiosity to him. He seems distant from his fellow passengers in this and he continuously switches to addressing various parts of his surroundings.

He wonders about the people making this journey in the present and the past and the possibility of it in the future. From this, he is brought to a meditation on time and its passage and the way different moments from the past and the future are connected to this moment in the present. In the grand questions of time, this everyday ferry ride has a place for the poet and this just adds to his interest.

Whitman continues this meditation on time and comes to the understanding that all passengers across time will experience the sameness of surroundings with the passengers in the present. In that sense, the ferry ride with its view of masts, seagulls and steamer ships is timeless. Even though the speaker himself is alienated from the people due to his poetic interest, he feels the shared experience of the ferry ride unites people across time. This pronouncement expands to encompass all people across time and space. Whitman contrasts the large canvas of time with the small details of the daily life of the speaker who lives in Brooklyn and works in Manhattan. The speaker is aware and confident of his identity and its place in the bigger picture. He speaks of the darker aspects of his character but finds even they are relatable. In this way, he is able to come to terms with all the parts of his self and lives life this way, knowing that others around him are playing as much of a part as he does.

He continues to speak and enquires about the way humans perceive each other. Due to similarity of experience and existence, mutual understanding becomes possible. This thought converges with the recurring idea that all human beings are connected through time. This soon brings him back to the ferry ride he is taking, and he cannot but profess the beauty of the scene. He continues to address different parts of his surroundings and asks everyone to continue their routine as this beauty of everyday life gives him joy and pleasure. He commends the physical world in connecting various people and objects. This relationship to the environment and all of its details must be acknowledged and celebrated as they are the vehicle, much like the ferry itself, of achieving eternal fulfilment.

### **Analysis**

*Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* by Walt Whitman describes the ferry journey between Brooklyn and Manhattan that was taken by daily commuters and uses this image to indulge in a discussion of time and the position of human in relation to time. The poem is rooted in its historical situatedness as it was written before the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge when the ferry was the major means of transport for work between the two New York City boroughs. The distance between the two shores and Whitman's stress on unity despite distance has often been read as Whitman's

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message for the people of America in the time leading up to the American Civil War when the American identity was being questioned and revised. In this sense, the poem with its message of the connectedness of human life in the face and experience of time and the beauty of everyday experience, is a call for America to reflect on unity and understanding.

This 1881 edition is made up of nine stanzas of varying lengths and while there isn't a set formal structure, Whitman exerts his usual writing style to incorporate internal patterns through repetition of words and themes. This repetition has more than an aesthetic or poetic purpose and is in tune with the thematic concerns of the poem which talks of the repetitive and similar nature of human life in its most routine, everyday moments. The poem is filled with lists of objects and details which are presented to the reader as a richly constructed image so that the reader too is transported on to the ferry where the speaker addresses him.

The ferry ride is a metaphor for time and its passage throughout the past, present and future. Whitman believes that such a comparison has comforting consequences as there is much to appreciate about the unchanging yet fluid nature of time and eternity. He again employs metaphor to compare theater to the difference between public and private life but even this divide isn't something that should bother the readers as this too is part of the shared experience of people. It is part and parcel of the emotional and spiritual experience of life. This common experience relates the speaker and the poet to a larger community and the self to the world of which it is a part. In this universe, there isn't a great difference between natural and man-made things or the animate and the inanimate. The new technology which has enabled steamships is also part of the passing of time and change is to be celebrated against the backdrop of time's timelessness.

*Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* by Walt Whitman is an exercise in contemplation of eternity and time. The poem manages to capture the diversity of people and their surroundings while asking for better understanding between people. The people in the poem are ordinary, working-class people who are connected through and in their experience of nature. Whitman manages to capture this diversity in theme and subject matter in a poem that encompasses a ferry ride.

### Writing Technique

Given below are the important features of Whitman's writing style:

- **Meter and rhyme scheme:** While Whitman does not follow any strict metrical pattern or rhyme scheme, the poem is artfully composed to contain internal patterns and structuring which give the effect of the fluidity of time and the experience of the movement of a ferry.
- **Repetition:** Whitman repeats words, phrases, imagery and themes to supplement the tone and mood of the poem which refers to the cyclicity of time.

- **Metaphor:** Whitman often uses metaphors and skillful comparisons to offer a deeply comprehensive picture to the poem, for example, the metaphor of the ferry ride is used to describe the routine passing of time and its fluidity.
- **Symbolism:** The poem is filled with symbols that are related to time and the human experience. For example, the symbol of light and darkness are used to portray the multiple facets of human experience.

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### Check Your Progress

3. What does the ferry in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* symbolize?
4. Why does the repetition of words, phrases, imagery and themes in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* symbolise?

## 1.4 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: ROBERT FROST

Robert Frost was born on 26 March 1874, in San Francisco, California, to William Prescott Frost Jr. and Isabelle Moodle. Frost's father was a teacher and, then, an editor at the San Francisco Evening Bulletin. In 1892, Frost graduated with valedictorian honours from Lawrence High School where he had excelled as a student. Although he worked He took to various jobs such as teaching, delivering newspapers and working in factory, however, he was only truly happy with poetry.

Frost's first poem *My Butterfly. An Elegy* was published in the New York Independent in 1894. In the following year, he married Elinor Miriam White with whom he shared a deep interest in poetry. He was at Harvard University during 1897-1899, before moving to New Hampshire where he worked on the farm and focused on his writings. In the years 1906-1911, he worked as an English teacher at the Pinkerton Academy in New Hampshire. In 1912, Frost finally sailed to Great Britain and soon his first book of poetry, *A Boy's Will*, containing poems like *Storm Fear*, *The Tuft of Flowers* and *Mowing*, was published. Here he became acquainted with people like Edward Thomas, T. E. Hulme and Ezra Pound and many others. In 1914, *North of Boston* containing some of his most popular poems including *Mending Wall*, *Home Burial*, *The Death of the Hired Man* and *After Apple-Picking* was published. *Mountain Interval* appeared in 1916. However, Frost returned to America in a couple of years. In 1924, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *New Hampshire: A Poem with Notes and Grace Notes*. This was just the first of four Pulitzer Prizes and he went on to win successive ones in 1931 for *Collected Poems*, in 1937 for *A Further Range*, and in 1943 for *Witness Tree*. During this period, he continued teaching at the Bread Loaf School of English of Middlebury College. In 1960, Frost received a United States Congressional Gold Medal and in 1961, he was named poet laureate of Vermont.

## Inspiration and Major Themes

Robert Frost explored nature, rural life, and the dichotomy between rationality and imagination in his poems.

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#### (i) Nature and Rural Life

Frost's time in New England inspired him to incorporate pastoral scenes and rural life in his poetry. These scenes were usually inspired by actual locations that Frost saw in New England. However, Frost's poetry was not limited to stereotypical pastoral images since he was interested in the conflicts within the natural world from the changing of seasons to the destructive aspects of nature. Nature for Frost is a matter of metaphysical thought which humans interact with. More often than not, Nature is a central character in Frost's poetry rather than being relegated to a background prop.

Frost found rural life and its connection to Nature as the perfect subject matter for his poetry. In comparison to urban life, rural life was fascinating, meaningful, and offered a deeper perspective on the human and the natural world. The figures in his poems are from different walks of this rural life and are characterized by qualities of duty and honour. The everyday routine of these figures inspires metaphysical thought for Frost, making clear the connection between humans and nature.

#### (ii) Rationality versus Imagination

The characters in Frost's poems are often involved in the conflict between rationality and imagination. This conflict plays out between the adult and child experience of the world.

The adults are forced to look at life rationally even though they long for imaginative power. Children, on the other hand, are not bound by rationality and are liberated by imagination and are closer to nature. This imaginative creativity is distilled by the traditions of New England society and in its place the burdens of rationality, duty, responsibility and honour come into life.

#### (iii) Isolation and the Individual

Most of the prominent figures in Frost's poems are isolated and detached from society, whether physically or intellectually. Frost uses isolation as a theme in various ways from an affirmative angle to a destructive one. Isolation from society can cause fear which can make one a prisoner of one's own mind. Frost seems to suggest that an individual should be aware of his role in his community and participate in it accordingly. The path to personal happiness is a social one. To escape from isolation and despair one must first avoid detachment and in its place cultivate communication with the community. However, this is no easy task as to achieve understanding even through communication is difficult. Frost writes poems in free verse dialogues and his poetry carries the message of happiness achieved

through communication by portraying the unhappy destruction of the lonely, isolated individual.

Walt Whitman and  
Robert Frost

### Writing Style

Robert Frost's writing style is unique for an American poet of his time. He used a conversational tone in all of his poems, hoping to engage readers in the themes and ideas he was presenting in his writing. Thematically, Frost's poems are entrenched in realism with a rich collection of rural imagery. Frost's writing is meditative and introspective. It is involved in the conflict between reality and imagination as well as the rural versus urban life.

Frost wrote poetry which was new but also employed traditional stanzas and meters. Simple rhymes like ABAB and ABCB in quatrains often occur in his poems. Some poetry is in free verse but he preferred blank verse and wrote varying lengths of poetry.

Frost's poetry is strewn with metaphors that have a thematic purpose of bringing to his readers his meditations on Nature and humanity.

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## 1.5 *MENDING WALL*: SUMMARY AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.  
The work of hunters is another thing:  
I have come after them and made repair  
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,  
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,  
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,  
No one has seen them made or heard them made,  
But at spring mending-time we find them there.  
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;  
And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again.  
We keep the wall between us as we go.  
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.  
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
We have to use a spell to make them balance:  
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'  
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.*

## NOTES

*Oh, just another kind of out-door game,  
One on a side. It comes to little more:  
There where it is we do not need the wall:  
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.  
My apple trees will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.  
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'  
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
If I could put a notion in his head:  
'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it  
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.  
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offense.  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,  
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather  
He said it for himself. I see him there  
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top  
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.  
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,  
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.  
He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'*

### Summary

The poem *Mending Wall* is about the yearly event of repairing the stone wall that exists between the property of the speaker and his neighbour. Written in first person, the poem starts with the speaker observing that there is something in the natural world itself that dislikes a wall. The ground revolts against it, the boulders start to break on their own and gaps appear without a cause. The speaker says that he is not referring to the hunters who come and make a chaotic mess of the wall because he has always been able to make repairs after their hunt is completed. He says that what he is referring to is something more mysterious and not the work of humans. New gaps appear without any proof of how they occur. Every spring, the speaker and his neighbour find the gaps in the wall and get to work mending it. They keep their distance from each other respecting the line of the wall that divides them, seeing that no rubble spills over to the other side.

The speaker questions this yearly routine and wonders why they even need to mend the wall when nature dislikes it so much. He compares this exercise to a non-sensical ‘out-door game’ and calls the act of mending the wall unnatural (‘use a spell’). He does not understand why the wall is needed. After all, their land is easily differentiated by the speaker’s apple orchard and the neighbour’s pines. The speaker stresses that there is no fear of the apple trees breaking bounds to eat the pinecones as they are not animals. The speaker voices his opinion to the neighbour who answers without any contemplation that ‘Good fences make good neighbours’.

Something about the season of spring instils ‘mischief’ in the speaker who tries to draw his neighbour into the debate and he asks why good fences would make good neighbours. It is not as if either of them owns cows who would require a restraining wall lest they eat the produce. Before putting his energy into building the wall, the speaker feels these questions are necessary. He wants to know what exactly they are separating and whether there is any real problem or offence in not having a wall that anyway does not survive for long. He stops himself from saying that it is ‘elves’ who are responsible for the destruction. However, the neighbour continues to endeavour to mend the wall, sticking to the tradition of mending it and finding pride in it. All he says in response to the speaker is the repetition of his earlier phrase ‘Good fences make good neighbours’.

### Analysis

Robert Frost’s poem *Mending Wall* appeared in his second book of poetry *North of Boston* which was published in 1915, after he had returned to America. His time in England, though fruitful and full of new acquaintances, was filled with longing for his home in New Hampshire where he had lived for nearly a decade.

The rural setting of the poem is a reference to Frost’s life on his farm in New Hampshire where he enjoyed the peace and easy connection with nature in comparison to urban life which he didn’t find enjoyable. The poem, thus, has many autobiographical elements. It is known that on his New Hampshire farm, Frost indeed had a neighbour, a French-Canadian named Napoleon Guay, with whom he often repaired the wall separating their property. The line ‘Good fences make good neighbors’, a popular colonial proverb in mid-17th century, is attributed to Guay.

The poem shows distinction between the speaker who is contemplative and sceptical and the neighbour who is stubbornly old-fashioned. The wall dividing them becomes a symbol of the separation of these ideas that might isolate these two stances, cutting off any possibility of actual conversation. The divide between the speaker and the neighbour is juxtaposed with the divide between the man-made wall and the natural world which continuously resists against this wall. The speaker, who is the symbol of the modern, rational man, is deeply aware that the

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wall is an archaic tradition and yet, the readers see that the speaker is involved in mending it year after year. This contradiction in the mind of the modern man is a subject of Frost's poems and one can read the speaker's dialogue with his neighbour as a reflection of the internal contradiction of the speaker.

It is interesting that the same wall that separates the neighbours also involves them in communication. There are subtle references to the speaker actually making arrangements for mending the wall and the speaker obviously finds much to converse with the neighbour. The yearly event of mending the wall offers the otherwise isolated neighbours in the rural environment an opportunity to interact and participate in a shared sense of community.

*Mending Wall* by Robert Frost presents some of the most pertinent themes and images of Frost's poetry. It is one of Frost's most famous poems and is used to present his thought-provoking stance on human limitation and the place of community in human life. By using the image of a wall that fences two neighbours, Frost is able to engage with both tradition and change, the human and the natural world as well as the contradictions of the human mind, all the while trying to explore a balance between isolation and communication.

### Writing Techniques

- **Meter and rhyme scheme:** *Mending Wall* is a simple poem in first person narrative. The poem does have iambic stresses but the structure is flexible, designed like a conversation. While there are no set rhyme patterns, Frost does use internal rhyme by utilising assonance.
- **Assonance:** Assonance provides internal rhyme in the poem through Frost's clever placing of ending terms. This can be seen in the resemblance of sound in instances like 'To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean, No one has seen'.
- **Consonance:** Similarly, consonance provides beauty of sound in instances like 'And set the wall between us once again'.
- **Enjambment:** Frost often employs enjambment in his poetry and *Mending Wall* is no exception. For example,  
*I have come after them and made repair  
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,  
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,  
To please the yelping dogs.*
- **Imagery and Symbolism:** The poem is filled with imagery and symbols that help the reader experience the setting and feel of the poem. Some examples include the visual imagery in 'He is all pine and I am apple orchard' as well as the recurring symbol of the wall/fence as separating the two neighbours but also coincidentally helping them communicate.

- **Metaphor:** When Frost writes ‘And some are loaves and some so nearly balls’, he is using metaphor to compares the wall’s boulders and blocks to loaves and balls through the similarity in their shape and appearance.

Walt Whitman and  
Robert Frost

### Check Your Progress

5. In which year was Robert Frost named the poet laureate of Vermont?
6. What are some of the common themes in Robert Frost’s poetry?

### NOTES

## 1.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

1. The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1855.
2. Walt Whitman explored various themes such as democracy, nature, war, etc. in his poetry
3. The ferry ride is a metaphor for time and its passage throughout the past, present and future.
4. The repetition of words, phrases, imagery and themes in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* symbolizes the cyclical nature of time.
5. In 1961, Robert Frost was named poet laureate of Vermont.
6. Some of the common themes in Robert Frost’s poetry are nature, rural life, and the dichotomy between rationality and imagination.

## 1.7 SUMMARY

- Walt Whitman was born in Huntington, Long Island, on the 31 May 1819, to Walter Whitman and Louisa Van Velsor. In 1842, he became the editor of the *Aurora* and from 1846 to 1848 he worked as an editor for the *Brooklyn Eagle*. By 1855, he had produced the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In 1865 *Drum-Taps* was published, followed by *Democratic Vistas* (1871), *Memoranda During the War* (1876) and *Specimen Days* (1882).
- Walt Whitman drew inspiration from varied themes such as democracy, nature, war, etc. For Whitman, poetry was the vehicle of democratic thought and expression. Representing the individual voice in his poems, Whitman’s poetry sought to make the diversity of American voices heard.
- Whitman maintained that the body and the soul were connected and it was the body that made the experience of its surroundings and the world possible.
- Whitman’s poetry is filled with celebratory descriptions of nature which surrounds the poet and the people in his poetry.

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- Having experienced the horrors of war closely, a number of Whitman's poems deal with the loss and pain of war.
- Whitman wrote in free verse, giving preference to Americanisms, colloquialisms and slangs to communicate the democratic voice of the common people. Repetition, anaphora, epiphora and parallelisms abound in his style of poetry.
- Walt Whitman's *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* describes the journey of man on a Brooklyn ferry traveling from Manhattan to his home at the end of his work day. Whitman contrasts the large canvas of time with the small details of the daily life of the speaker who lives in Brooklyn and works in Manhattan. He continues to address different parts of his surroundings and asks everyone to continue their routine as this beauty of everyday life gives him joy and pleasure.
- Whitman in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* uses the image of the ferry journey to indulge in a discussion of time and the position of human in relation to time. The ferry ride is a metaphor for time and its passage throughout the past, present and future. Whitman believes that such a comparison has comforting consequences as there is much to appreciate about the unchanging yet fluid nature of time and eternity.
- Robert Frost was born on 26 March 1874, in San Francisco, California, to William Prescott Frost Jr. and Isabelle Moodle. Frost's first poem *My Butterfly. An Elegy* was published in the New York Independent in 1894. In 1914, *North of Boston* containing some of his most popular poems including *Mending Wall*, *Home Burial*, *The Death of the Hired Man* and *After Apple-Picking* was published.
- Robert Frost explored nature, rural life, and the dichotomy between rationality and imagination in his poems.
- Nature for Frost is a matter of metaphysical thought which humans interact with. More often than not, Nature is a central character in Frost's poetry rather than being relegated to a background prop.
- The characters in Frost's poems are often involved in the conflict between rationality and imagination. This conflict plays out between the adult and child experience of the world.
- Most of the prominent figures in Frost's poems are isolated and detached from society, whether physically or intellectually. Frost uses isolation as a theme in various ways from an affirmative angle to a destructive one.
- The poem *Mending Wall* is about the yearly event of repairing the stone wall that exists between the property of the speaker and his neighbour. Every spring, the speaker and his neighbour find the gaps in the wall and get to work mending it. They keep their distance from each other respecting

the line of the wall that divides them, seeing that no rubble spills over to the other side.

- The poem shows distinction between the speaker who is contemplative and sceptical and the neighbour who is stubbornly old-fashioned. The wall dividing them becomes a symbol of the separation of these ideas that might isolate these two stances, cutting off any possibility of actual conversation.

Walt Whitman and  
Robert Frost

## NOTES

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### 1.8 KEY WORDS

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- **Meter:** It is the basic rhythmic structure of a verse or lines in verse.
- **Rhyme:** It is a repetition of similar sounds (usually, exactly the same sound) in the final stressed syllables and any following syllables of two or more words.
- **Metaphor:** It is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable.
- **Anaphora:** It is a rhetorical device consisting of the repetition of a sequence of words at the beginnings of neighbouring clauses, thereby lending them emphasis.
- **Epiphora:** It refers to the repetition of words at the ending of neighbouring clauses.

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### 1.9 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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#### Short-Answer Questions

1. How does Whitman convey the democratic voice of the American people?
2. What are some of the stylistic elements in the writings of Walt Whitman?
3. Write a short note on the poetic and literary devices employed in *Mending Wall*.
4. What are some of the introspective concerns explored in the poem *Mending Wall*?

#### Long-Answer Questions

1. Discuss the exploration of time and human experience in Whitman's *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*.
2. Explain the importance of nature in Robert Frost's poetry.
3. Critically analyse Robert Frost's *Mending Wall*.

**NOTES**

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**1.10 FURTHER READINGS**

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- Reynolds, David S. 2011. *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
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- Parini, Jay. 2004. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

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# UNIT 2 WALLACE STEVENS AND MARIANNE MOORE

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Wallace Stevens and  
Marianne Moore

## NOTES

### Structure

- 2.0 Introduction
- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 About the Author: Wallace Stevens
- 2.3 Critical Appreciation: *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*
- 2.4 About the Author: Marianne Moore
- 2.5 *Poetry*: Summary and Critical Analysis
- 2.6 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 2.7 Summary
- 2.8 Key Words
- 2.9 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 2.10 Further Readings

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## 2.0 INTRODUCTION

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The purpose of this unit is to introduce the reader to the American poets Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore. The poems *The Emperor of Ice-Creams* by Wallace Stevens and *Poetry* by Marianne Moore will be discussed in detail. Both these poets were experimental in their literary works and dealt with unique issues. While Stevens' poem is laden with imagery and symbols, Moore is known for her modernist poems. The aspects of their literary career and poetic style will also be examined.

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## 2.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the literary career of Wallace Stevens
- Examine Wallace Stevens' poem *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*
- Understand the literary influences on Marianne Moore
- Analyse Moore's poem *Poetry*

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## 2.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: WALLACE STEVENS

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Wallace Stevens was born in 1879 in Reading, Pennsylvania. His family belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church and when Stevens became eligible he was enrolled in parochial schools. From 1904 to 1907, Stevens worked for a number of New York law companies. He was appointed as a lawyer for the American Bonding

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Company in 1908. After winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1955, Stevens was offered to teach at Harvard. From 1922 to 1940, Stevens visited Key West Florida many times and stayed at the Casa Marina, a hotel on the Atlantic Ocean. This place had a tremendous influence on Stevens' poetry which is evident in a variety of his works, especially poems published in his initial collections such as *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order*.

It was at the age of thirty-five that Stevens wrote his first major literary work. He wrote his most distinguished literary works after the age of fifty. His first book of poetry which was a volume of rococo inventiveness entitled *Harmonium* was published in 1923.

### Poetry

- *The Snow Man*
- *Harmonium*
- *Ideas of Order*
- *Owl's Clover*
- *The Man with the Blue Guitar*
- *Parts of a World*
- *Transport to Summer*
- *The Auroras of Autumn*
- *Collected Poems*

### Prose

- *The Necessary Angel*

### Posthumous collections

- *Opus Posthumous*
- *The Palm at the End of the Mind*
- *Collected Poetry and Prose*
- *Selected Poems*

*The Emperor of Ice-Cream* (1922), one of the most known poems of Wallace Stevens exhibits the typical hue of fact and philosophy of modern life. It is a short and enigmatic poem of sixteen lines which is condensed in two stanzas.

According to Stevens, 'The poem must resist the intelligence/ Almost successfully...' So he wanted the readers to be troubled by perusing it. His idea of composing it in a riddle-like manner is clearly evident in the choice of diction, theme and representation of thoughts in *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*.

Stevens believed that — 'A poem should stimulate the sense of living and of being alive.' The poem is about the funeral of a woman and it depicts modern life,

ethnic society of a certain area of people, their culture, terse use of word-play, mysterious circumstances, playful imagination, stark reality of life and much more.

It is difficult to comprehend the basic theme of the poem. However, one may conjecture intelligently that there are two themes lurking behind the cleverly contrived two stanzas of *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*.

The poem explicitly suggests that life should be lived to the fullest. The woman who died had lived it fully, and those who are in the funeral are also living it to the fullest. So, we must not forget the fact that life is short and sweet like an ice-cream which melts soon. Before it melts, we should snatch our share of pleasure from it. The second and more profound theme here would be that every human being should refrain from frivolity of life and ponder seriously over our acts to spend life wisely. All beauties perish, just like the dead woman whose wake is being mentioned in this poem. All material possessions are left behind in this world and we cannot carry our possessions to the other world where we are finally sent. Hence, it is our good deeds and good character that people remember when we die. We must try to achieve that end of life which is respectful, or else it will melt into nothingness without giving us our real place and name.

The setting of the poem has been derived from the personal life of the poet. Wallace Stevens was fond of enjoying his holidays in Florida's Key West. Many Cubans worked in that place in the cigar factories. He observed how African-Americans enjoyed ice-cream during funerals. It might be that the poet used this image as the main theme of his poem to depict a certain ethnic Latin-American culture. The poem is imperative in tone and its vocabulary is uncommon. The eighth line of the first stanza is repeated for ending the poem. The images are coarse and hint at the desire for sexual pleasure. Even the description of the dead lady has a sexual connotation. The people present for celebrating the funeral are in a light mood. Here, the images symbolize lasciviousness. The last two lines of both the stanzas rhyme together as couplet.

The speaker is an omniscient narrator and there is definite emphasis on his/her tone everywhere. It is through the narrator's eyes that we see this poor dead woman's wake. The poem is about the instructions given by someone at the funeral of a lady. Its apt and suspense-creating vocabulary exudes a sense of peculiarity which is a unique characteristic of the poem. A woman is dead and people are humming around to arrange her funeral. Her age is not mentioned. We also do not see any relative of that woman. Whether it is the culture or demand of the modern society, in any case, this funeral does not seem like lamentation. Nor does the poem look like an elegy. The overall impression of the poem is obscure and bizarre. It was published in Stevens' collection of poems called *Harmonium* in 1923. It not only sounds outré, but also a timeless monument of modern existence in a certain corner of our world.

The title of the poem is also very strange and it is difficult to understand what it signifies and how it connects with the original theme of the poem. It just gives us a

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funny picture that a great and valiant ruler of a large kingdom is sitting in a throne arrayed in all pomp and splendour and his identity is seen as being the king of subjects which are ice-creams. Or, one might say that a king loves pleasures of life so much so that he is associated with ice-cream. The image is strangely modern as eating ice-cream in a funeral is not a traditional concept. Ice-cream itself is a recent thing. Images applied here, are both exotic and intriguing. They baffle more rather than provide any kind of information. A reader at first glance will be surprised to hear what is said in *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*. The first stanza is about the kitchen and the lobby whereas the second one is about the bedroom.

The poem is a masterly crafted piece of literary art exhibiting illuminating wordplay which misleads readers as there are subtle meanings hidden in the poem. The poem is a dramatic sequence of a poor lady's wake. The conscious camera or the eye of the speaker leads us to scenes one by one.

It focuses first on cigar smokers, then moves to the hefty man required for preparing curd in the kitchen, after that follow the young girls assigning the boys their task of bringing flowers, and then goes to the final place where the dead woman is lying, waiting to be covered decently. It finally instructs to light her body as well as the room. The speaker is nowhere mentioned but his/ her dominating omnipresent spirit has a frightening presence. There is an authoritative thrust in the narrator's tone throughout the poem. The narrator's voice does not seem to be sad anywhere. However, the description of her closet and her naked body is full of pathos. Rather, the narrator's voice has zest for life and is tempted by amusements which are transitory (the image used for preparing curd has lust mixed with it). The images of movement of whipping curd and dawdling wenches have something to do with eroticism.

It is true this wake is arranged without show or pomp. It should look simple and the mourners should wear their regular clothes. The ice-cream is used as a symbol of life's short-lived and necessary pleasures. Also, it refers to what Stevens told R. P. Blackmur— 'of the materialism or realism proper to a refugee from the imagination.' Although the poem is clad in 'deliberately commonplace costume' as per Stevens, it was one of his favourite poems which exhibits 'essential gaudiness of poetry.' The words 'be' and 'seem' define magnitude and brilliance of its theme. They also hint at mystery. The poem uses 'ice-cream' in the 'kitchen cups' and this metaphorically conveys that too much pleasure is dangerous and it can mislead a person to a bad path. 'Let the lamp affix its beam' on the woman means people present should look at her keenly. They should scrutinize her. It may be that the speaker hinted towards the character of the dead woman. The statements are enigmatic and the literal sense overlaps many others which can be guessed. This obscures the meaning of the poem. The rhyme scheme is irregular. The use of end line is to show an emphasis. The lines have either eight or nine syllables. They are iambic in measurement. The poem does not have a regular metre. The poem is abstract as the central image of 'the Emperor of ice-cream' is vague, mysterious and non-traditional.

### Check Your Progress

1. Name any two prominent works of Wallace Stevens.
2. In which year was *Harmonium* published?

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## 2.3 CRITICAL APPRECIATION: *THE EMPEROR OF ICE-CREAM*

*Call the roller of big cigars,  
The muscular one, and bid him whip  
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.  
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress  
As they are used to wear, and let the boys  
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.  
It be finale of seem.  
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.  
Take from the dresser of deal,  
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet  
On which she embroidered fantails once,  
And spread it so as to cover her face.  
If her horny feet protrude, they come  
To show how cold she is, and dumb.  
Let the lamp affix its beam.  
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.*

### Interpretation

#### Stanza- 1

The poem begins with someone's order-giving tone 'Call.' Throughout the poem, this speaker keeps the same tone of definite authoritativeness. The imperative mood and tone suggests that the voice is that of a man. However, it is uncertain. No clue has been given till the end of the poem about it, nor is the identity of the speaker revealed. The instruction is for the 'roller of big cigars' which may be a man who has greater physical might than others present over there. He is a muscular man who has been summoned to whip curds in small kitchen cups. The imagery used here stands for exciting sexual desires. Both 'cups' and 'curds' are in plural number. There is an enjambment here: 'bid him whip/In kitchen cups.' At the beginning of the poem, we are suggested of the strong and male-dominating environment where cigars are being smoked, although the occasion is quite contrary. The image of a strong male hand for mixing curd in the kitchen cups is common to

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food-making as it is generally seen that men cook on such occasions when a great mass of people have to dine. The image 'concupiscent curds' means sexual desire. Again the speaker requests the young girls to remain in a manner that is usual to their daily clothing. Let them be slow in manner and dressed as they normally are. The image 'such dress' may refer to both: a revealing dress (as earlier suggested for concupiscence too); or, it might be their everyday dress and not anything special which is desired for the occasion. Stevens brings focus to another place in the house where the young boys and girls are present. It is normally seen that the young people are more energetic. Here, the girls are requested to be as lazy and inactive as they are in their regular life. No special stirring is required. The speaker says that things should remain natural and realistic. The boys are told to bring fresh flowers in 'last month's newspapers.' The new flowers are told to be packed in an old wrapper. This is also a regular feature of our daily life. We never use the same day's newspaper for wrapping up something. Generally, we search for the last month's paper because that is not required anymore. The poet has put the contrast of past and present in a stately phraseology here: 'The Emperor'/'ice-cream,' 'muscular one'/'in kitchen cups,' 'flowers'/'last month's newspapers.' They all exhibit sharp contrast and are juxtaposed with each other for creating a peculiar sense of perfection. All the while, we are also reminded of poverty here. The poet seems to be talking about a lower or middle class society where occasions are less formal in style. Our actors here are those who live things naturally and close to reality.

In the final couplet of the first stanza, the speaker, who is expected to be either a family member or a neighbour (however, this fact is not mentioned), makes a funny declaration. The speaker says that the ceremony should not seem formal. Let everything look realistic and devoid of unnecessary pomp. Let the final ceremony, or the end too (of that lady), be realistic and natural. Let only ('be be') the impression of reality prevail. The last emphatic line perhaps means that a person can be an emperor only by achieving the pleasure of life to the fullest. The image of ice-cream which gives pleasure to our palate is ephemeral. It suggests that human life is short.

So, one who lives it best, is that who obtains maximum pleasures here. This closing line may be a serious comment on humanity and the modern life where people do not look after and care for others' needs. They just live for the sake of selfish gains. Another contrasting idea could be that the speaker is suggesting that even a serious matter such as death should be taken in stride and hence, people should behave normally. Hence, we should try to avail pleasures as much as we can. On the other hand, the same lines can imply that the speaker is mocking the serious situation of death. Also, those participating in the ceremony are lighthearted people who have no sense of responsibility. Their life is not affected even by death. In the end, the poet mockingly observes that for them, pleasure is the most important activity. The eating of ice-cream metaphorically suggests fulfilling desires which tempt us. Life does not imply running after desires and wishes. It is rather a

serious activity. The clever words in this poem may mean that life is deep and full of sensibility. We have greater responsibility towards our fellow beings. Therefore, it is not running after sexual pleasures or mere worldly gains. This existence has many hidden meaning. It is not to be wasted in pleasures. Material life and accumulations are immaterial. They do not last more than our existence which too is ephemeral. Thus, the first stanza implies two meaning. First that we should live in reality and avail pleasures of life as nature and customs allow us. Secondly, life is short-lived and we must not waste it in deriving materialistic pleasures. We should not give undue regard to the person who possesses immense wealth and material pleasures. The last couplet is philosophical and conveys the main idea of the poem, though in a mysterious way.

### Stanza- 2

In the second stanza, the speaker orders to open the dresser of pine wood. The dresser is old and its three glass knobs are missing. Inside that dresser, there is a sheet on which she had embroidered fantails once upon a time. The knowledge of the speaker about this dead woman shows that he knew her closely. Hence, the speaker desires to decorate her with the thing which the lady loved most. Or, may be the poor lady had only one decent sheet in her home which can be used for covering her. The speaker orders to spread that fantail embroidered sheet over her countenance in a manner such that it is covered perfectly. The poem began with the instruction which was about looking after the kitchen or preparation of the menu. The second instruction was for the girls who were asked to remain in their normal clothes. Then the boys were told to bring flowers to decorate. Now, it gets closer to the climax. The attention is all in the central room of the dead lady where she is lying. How she has to be clothed is instructed further here. The fact that the sheet is decent but not big enough to cover her whole body reveals her condition of poverty. So are her 'horny feet.' The instructor says to cover her face fully. If her horny feet protrude out of that small sheet, let it open. They are poking out which suggests their being skinny. It means she was poor. The unembellished image 'horny' for a poor woman's feet gives quite an unsympathetic picture. The speaker asserts that it is important to cover her face. If her feet forcibly come out, they will only ascertain the fact that she is dead, cold and dumb. This image reinforces the fact that a dead person does not return to see how the body is treated. Whether you treat it with love or scorn or hatred, it does not matter. The body does not feel any difference. She is dead and dumb. She cannot speak and tell whether her feet should be covered or not.

*'If her horny feet protrude, they come*

*To show how cold she is, and dumb.'*

The next instruction is to let the lamp light every corner of this room. In other words, it means let life shine over all. 'Lamp' and 'beam' might be used as symbols of life and its movement here. Or, they may suggest that on this occasion, the room should be properly lighted to observe all the activities clearly. Another

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meaning is that lamps should focus on the dead to have a clear picture of the lady.

Again the concluding line of the first stanza is repeated here. The only king is the person who has lived life fully. The invisible instruction-giver remains nonchalant in spirit. To the dead woman, his address is harsh rather. The speaker uses unsympathetic words for the dead. The instruction is for the guests to arrange her wake. This speaker is personally close to the dead lady because he knows what is in her dresser. He is familiar with the interiors of her house. The poet probably gives a message that life comes and life goes from this world, but those who live this life fully without wasting time are the most important people. To be born or to die is natural and usual. Take life normally and enjoy it. Do not let life slip out of your hand.

Enjoy it to the fullest. The poem ends here. The art of Stevens is such that the mood of the poem cannot be ascertained. We cannot for sure say whether his subject is treated with sarcasm here, or it is the genuine description of a certain section of society. Also, we cannot say whether his poem is about seeking only pleasure oriented life, or it conveys us to be serious about life. It might suggest both.

### Critical Appreciation

*The Emperor of Ice-Cream* is a renowned poem from Wallace Stevens' first collection of poetry *Harmonium*. The poem, first published in 1922, is a short and descriptive poem of 16 lines. The title suggests that the poem is complex and ironical, presumably indicating that just like an ice cream cannot escape the sun, so do human beings who cannot resist death. Like other poems of Wallace, *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* is full of humour, imagery, word play and thematic tension.

The poem is written in third person narrative. The narrator appears to be gathering a group of people for creating and attending a wake for a poor woman. In some cultures, it is common to celebrate the life of a person who has passed away. The celebration is generally carried out with drinks and food after a time of mourning. The financial constraints are evident throughout the poem. In the first stanza, we see that a muscular person is called for to whip up the desserts by hand as there is not enough money to arrange for an electric mixer. Moreover, due to unavailability of expensive and good quality crockery, the desserts would be served in 'kitchen cups'. The common people who will attend this celebration will come in their regular clothes and not in formal clothing. In addition, the flowers will not be decorated in vases but would be brought in 'last month's newspapers'. Each of these details signifies that there is nothing special or decorative about this death.

Several critics have expressed their views on the structure, language, theme and several other significant aspects of this poem. The following section highlights the views of literary critic Helen Vendler:

'At the heart of many of Stevens' poems is harsh and unpalatable experiences revealed only gradually through his intense stylization. The famous poem, *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*, resisted explication for some decades, perhaps because no one took the trouble to deduce its implicit narrative from its stylized plot. (The

Russian formalist distinction between “story” and “plot” is often useful for this and other Stevens’ poems.) The basic “story” of “The Emperor” is that of a person who goes to the house of a neighbour, a poor old woman, who has died; the person is to help “lay out” (arrange for decent viewing) the corpse in the bedroom, while other neighbours are sending over home-grown flowers, and yet others are preparing food, including ice cream, for the wake.’

‘Stevens “plots” this story into two equal stanzas: one for the kitchen where the ice cream is being made, one for the bedroom where the corpse awaits decent covering. He “plots” it further by structuring the poem as a series of commands from an unknown master of ceremonies, directing—in a diction of extreme oddness—the neighbours in their funeral duties: “Call the roller of big cigars, / The muscular one, and bid him whip / In kitchen cups concupiscent curds. / . . . // Take from the dresser . . . / . . . that sheet / . . . / And spread it so as to cover her face.” Both the symbolic kitchen stanza (life as concupiscence) and the symbolic bedroom stanza (death as final) end with the same third-order refrain echoed by the title: “The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream”. Faced with life (however slovenly and appetitive) in the kitchen and death (with its protruding horny feet) on the bed, one must, however unwillingly, acquiesce in the reign of life.’

‘We cannot know what personal events prompted this 1922 poem, apparently set in Key West, but it derives resonance from Stevens’ mother’s death ten years earlier. What is certain is that it represents symbolically, with the Procrustean bed of its two rooms, the bitter moment of choosing life over death, at a time when life seems particularly lonely, self-serving, lustful, and sordid. Art is exposed as too scanty in its powers to cover up death; the embroidered sheet (a figure for the embellished page), if it is pulled up to cover the dead woman’s face, reveals her “horny feet”, which show “how cold she is, and dumb”. In choosing to “let the lamp affix its beam”, as in a morgue, and in acquiescing to the command, “Let be be finale of seem”, Stevens makes his momentous choice for reality over appearance.’

Another eminent literary critic and author Milton J. Bates believes, ‘That Stevens could write a pure poem without recourse to Symbolist metaphysics or exoticism is brilliantly demonstrated in a piece like *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*. . . The poem affixes its relentless beam upon the common, even repellent details of the woman’s room and her corpse. In a voice that suggests the sideshow barker rather than the unctuous minister or funeral director, the speaker of the poem insists that the naturalistic ‘be’ replace the religious or romantic ‘seem’. He calls for a wake devoid of pomp and ceremony; the mourners (or are they celebrants?) are to wear their workaday clothes and one of them, the muscular cigar maker, will serve ice cream—a symbol not only of life’s ephemeral pleasures but also, as Stevens told R.P. Blackmur, ‘of the materialism or realism proper to a refugee from the imagination’. Not that *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* is an unimaginative poem.

Though Stevens spoke of its ‘deliberately commonplace costume’ when he chose it as his favourite in 1933, he also said that it seemed to him to contain something of the ‘essential gaudiness’ of poetry. These remarks seem contradictory until one remembers that Stevens, in keeping with a fundamental precept of pure poetry, typically inverted the usual hierarchy of subject and style. Since poetry is

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the true subject of a pure poem, the ostensible subject is, relatively speaking, mere ‘costume’. Such costume is not dispensable, however. ‘Poetry is like anything else’, Stevens told Latimer; ‘it cannot be made suddenly to drop all its rags and stand out naked, fully disclosed.’ Consequently, though the ‘essential gaudiness’ of *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* lies in its expressive diction and oratorical flair, ‘The Emperor’ does have clothes: the woman’s wake. Because its costume is so prosaic—as compared, for example, with *Domination of Black*—the poem is a triumph of attitude over reference. Ostensibly an endorsement of ‘be’, it testifies still more eloquently to the power of ‘seem’. One is not surprised to learn that Stevens, when he tried to recall the inception of the poem years later, could remember the ‘state of mind’ which gave rise to it but not the external occasion.’

Like in several other poems of Stevens, language plays a very important role in this poem. For instance, the reference to ‘concupiscent curds’ in line 3 appears like a poetic oxymoron (a conjunction of incongruous or contradictory terms). However, the poet is highlighting the fact that something as basic and common as milk may be made desirable. If the milk is whipped properly by a ‘muscular one’, it may be turned into an ice cream, which can be savoured by the common people as a sweet and delicious dessert.

Besides, some words have also been used as witticisms in the poem. For instance, in line 14, ‘dumb’ refers to the lack of intelligence of the dead woman, and signifies her appearing silent and mute as the grave. The use of ordinary images for creating an extraordinary scene is another device which is common in the poem. For example, the first image is of the person making the ice cream. This person is presumed to have a strong physique as he also makes hand-rolled cigars, a special art during Stevens’ time. The second image refers to the ‘wenches’ who will be attending the wake. A wench refers not only to a serving girl, but also connotes a woman of loose character. However, the most important image of the poem is definitely ‘the emperor of ice-cream’. This metaphor is complex and indefinite enough to be a literary symbol rather than simply a metaphor.

### Check Your Progress

3. Give an example of enjambment in the poem *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*.
4. What does the image of ‘concupiscent curds’ mean in the poem *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*?

## 2.4 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: MARIANNE MOORE

Marianne Craig Moore was born on 15 November 1887 in Kirkwood, Missouri, U.S. Her parents separated before she was born; Moore and her brother, John Warner Moore were brought up by their mother, Mary Warne Moore. She was born in the manse of the Presbyterian Church. Moore’s maternal grandfather was the pastor of the church. Growing up under his influence, Moore was a devoted

Presbyterian and as a result, her poems engage with the theme of strength and adversity. In 1909, Moore graduated from Bryn Mawr College. While she was at Bryn Mawr, she had begun writing short stories and poems for the campus literary magazine, *Tipyn O'Bob*. This is the time when she knew she wanted to take up writing. From 1911 to 1914, she worked at Carlisle Indian Industrial School as a teacher.

In 1915, Moore's first published work appeared in 'The Egoist' and Harriet Monroe's 'Poetry'. In the next few years, Moore moved to Greenwich Village where Moore met with many avant-garde artists. She had by then dedicated herself to writing poetry which was well-received by the likes of Ezra Pound, H.D. and T. S. Eliot. Soon enough, her poetry was influenced by imagism. In 1921, her first book of poems, *Poems*, was published by H.D. and Bryher. This was followed by *Observations* (1924) which won the Dial Award. She was editor of *The Dial* from 1925 till 1929. In 1951, Moore's *Collected Poems* was published which won her the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize and the Bollingen Prize. By now, Moore was an established poet whose work was read and praised widely.

Her translations of La Fontaine's fables was published in 1954, followed by *Predilections* (1955) and *Idiosyncrasy and Technique* (1958). She went on to publish her work in various magazines and collections. She was inducted into the New York State Writers Hall of Fame in 2012.

### Inspiration and Major Themes

Moore experimented with her poetry style and explored themes of religion in her poems. Some of the characteristic feature of her poems are given below:

- **Religion:** Moore's Presbyterian background influenced her and her poetry. Her Christian faith stressed that strength could be achieved through surviving trials and adversity. The themes of strength and struggle are often present in her poems.
- **Poetics:** Moore was deeply involved in the process of creation of poetry and her most famous poem, *Poetry*, examines the nature and creation of poetry. She expressed the prominence of the delightful effect of poetry over meter and other structural aspects.
- **Experimentation:** As someone who abandoned adherence to structural organization in poetry, Moore's poetry is radically different from the English tradition. Her poetry is characterized by bold experimentation in meter, rhyme and structure. Moore paid attention to the experimentation in form, and was involved in revising and editing her poetry.
- **Imagism:** While Moore wasn't an Imagist poet, her poetry was influenced by its style due to her friends and peers, including Pound and H.D., who were Imagists. Her writing would condense a number of themes and images into a single, compact image. Moore believed precision and honest language in poetry complemented the quality of the poem and made poetry worthwhile.

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- **Modernism:** Her poetry displayed a certain freedom which is characteristic of modernist poetry. Her poems were intertextual and contained references to other sources. Moore was involved in constant experimentation, abandonment of traditional norms and search for new forms of expression throughout her writing career.

### Writing Style

Marianne Moore's writing style was modernist and full of experimentation. Her poems involved the reader in coming to an understanding of moral and intellectual complexities from the close examination of images and objects that constituted the poetry. Her poems were syllabic so that the stanza was shaped by its syllabic constitution and used indentation to express parallels. The stanza rather than the line was of importance in her writing. These poems were written in free verse with instances of experimentative, eccentric and unusual meters. Moore employed conciseness and precision of language and felt that poetry required skill and honesty more than strict adherence to structure and form. She believed that poems should have a musicality and preferred unaccented rhyme. She was a relentless editor of her own poems, often revisiting and revising them again and again.

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## 2.5 POETRY: SUMMARY AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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*I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.*

*Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it, after all, a place for the genuine.*

*Hands that can grasp, eyes*

*that can dilate, hair that can rise*

*if it must, these things are important not because a*

*high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are*

*useful. When they become so derivative as to become unintelligible*

*the same thing may be said for all of us, that we*

*do not admire what*

*we cannot understand: the bat*

*holding on upside down or in quest of something to*

*eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under*

*a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a*

*flea the base-*

*ball fan, the statistician—*

*nor is it valid*

*to discriminate against "business documents and*

*school-books”; all these phenomena are important. One must make a distinction*

*however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the result is not poetry,*

*nor till the poets among us can be*

*“literalists of*

*the imagination”—above*

*insolence and triviality and can present*

*for inspection, “imaginary gardens with real toads in them,” shall we have*

*it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,*

*the raw material of poetry in*

*all its rawness and*

*that which is on the other hand*

*genuine, you are interested in poetry.*

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### Summary

The poem begins by the speaker saying, in the poetic voice of Moore, that she ‘too’ dislikes ‘it’, already asking the reader to engage with this poetic voice by connecting the ‘it’ in the first line to the title of the poem *Poetry*; the subject matter is displayed through this participatory engagement. Even though the poem is structured as a conversation with the reader, it is also an internal conversation in the poet’s mind where Moore is speaking to herself and constantly involved in rethinking her opinion and changing her stance on poetry through her writing of poetry. Reading poetry makes Moore realize that it does have a place in life and one can find genuineness in it. Just like the human body with its hands, eyes, and hair which all have their own tasks, poetry too has use rather than merely exciting fancy interpretations; unintelligible poetry which cannot be understood are neither useful nor likeable. Moore says this is true for everything. She then gives a list of various beings—a bat, elephants, a wolf, a critic, a baseball fan, a statistician—involved in some useful activity. The diversity in this list points to the fact that in this argument, all these activities are on the same plane even if it might not seem so to the common eye. The inclusion of the rigid critic twitching like a horse with a flea between animal tasks and entertainment of a fan and the work of numbers, is a particularly powerful comment on the exercise of criticism and critical reading of literature. Speaking of literature, the speaker says that all kinds of production is important and ‘business documents and school-books’ should not be dismissed either. However, the speaker stresses a distinction here that all these things merely written about is not poetry. Engaging in such an exercise is the trivial task of writers who can only be called ‘half poets’. Poets for Moore must be ‘literalists of the imagination’ whose creative poetry should be able to transform the stuff of imagination into an experience of reality.

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### Analysis

*Poetry* is the most famous and celebrated poem of Marianne Moore. However, this poem was constantly revised by Moore as she continued to work on it for nearly five decades. The poem can be found in a number of versions of which 1967 version is the shortest with three lines in total. The longer version published in 1924 was later used as a kind of supplementary endnote to shorter version in *Complete Poems* (1967) which only added to its complicated nature. The poem used here is from *Others for 1919: An Anthology of the New Verse* (1919) which was slightly modified in the 1924 version. A study of the various versions offers an interesting analysis of Moore's poetic concerns throughout her life. The three-line version which prompted a huge reaction from critics and readers alike is—

*I, too, dislike it.*

*Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it, after all, a place for the genuine.*

Moore, in fact, enjoyed presenting idiosyncratic style and the version was presented along with Moore's comments that 'Omissions are not accidents'. Though this version does not contain many of aesthetic concerns and sharp imagery, the version given above provides an understanding of Moore's literary and stylistic leanings.

The poem is an exercise in modernist writing with its various versions culminating in the skillful placing of the 1924 five stanza version as back matter to the three line version. The poem is filled with allusions, citations and quotations some of which are stylistically placed by Moore to celebrate the sense of intertextuality in the poem. The first line 'I too, dislike it' has been taken from a recorded conversation between Samuel Butler and a young boy who said he did not like poetry. The 'raw material of poetry' is a phrase quoted from a review of G.B. Grundy's 'Ancient Gems in Modern Settings' published in the *Spectator* on 10 May 1913, where the reviewer had said, 'All appeal to emotions which endure for all time, and which, it has been aptly said, are the true raw material of poetry'. The phrase 'literalists of imagination' is a reference to W. B. Yeats' criticism of William Blake—'The limitation of his view was from the very intensity of his vision; he was a too literal realist of imagination, as others are of nature...'. Moore admired Blake's writing. The references and sources are meant to suggest the enduring quality of poetry where images and themes are passed down from one poet to another. Not all references are serious as some are ironic and meant in jest.

The reader is invited to follow cues while Moore indulges in unconventional and experimental writing. The tone is conversational and informal. The reader is encouraged to look at the purpose of poetry through an unconventional list of images. The inclusion of the critic at the particular juncture in the list is witty while the plethora of images with their confluence of sight and sound are placed specifically

to engage the readers and their senses. The humorous tone is contrasted with her harsh dismissal of half-poets who cannot produce poetry as their writing does not have any of the genuineness required for true poetry. The ‘literalists of the imagination’ must produce powerful images like Moore’s most thought-provoking ‘imaginary gardens with real toads in them’. The toad which is usually not used as aesthetic symbol is the being that helps make the image of the garden accessible and real. This is what poetry should subscribe to.

Moore is very self-critical and self-conscious as a poet while writing *Poetry* and tries to capture the ideal and the real through the various versions of her poem. *Poetry* by the American modernist poet, Marianne Moore, is considered the most striking poem of her career. The poem continues to excite curiosity and its various versions present a unique case to its readers and critics. In dealing with the themes of what poetry should be and what a poet must write towards, *Poetry* is an enjoyable piece of writing that delights and criticizes at the same time. It shows Moore’s clear break from the English tradition and is successful in establishing a novel and experimental approach to writing.

### Writing Techniques

Given below are the important features of Moore’s writing style in the poem *Poetry*:

- **Meter and rhyme scheme:** Moore’s poetry does not follow a formal meter or set rhyme scheme. More than meter or rhyme which she feels are not essential to poetry, a poem should portray genuineness. She experimented with unusual meters and her poetry is often syllabic.
- **Symbols and images:** The poem is filled with symbols and images including the various animals. These animals are symbol of reality which poetry should interact with rather than being divorced from it. Perhaps the most powerful image is that of ‘imaginary gardens with real toads in them’ which continues to spark discussions amongst critics.
- **Recurring motif:** The literary world is a recurring motif that occurs in the poem. References to the ‘immovable critic’, ‘the half poets’ and the ‘literalists of the imagination’ showcase Moore’s message to critics and readers alike that poetry shouldn’t simply exist in the realm of artificiality.
- **Allusions:** In using quotes and references, the poem is filled with allusions to the social and historical context of Moore and her project on poetry. The poem references, Butler, Yeats and Blake, among other sources.

### Check Your Progress

5. Which work of Marianne Moore won the Dial Award?
6. Which recurring motif does Moore use in her poem *Poetry*?

### NOTES

## NOTES

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## 2.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

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1. Wallace Stevens' prominent literary works were *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order*.
2. *Harmonium* was published in 1923.
3. An example of enjambment in the poem *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* is 'bid him whip/In kitchen cups.'
4. The image of 'concupiscent curds' refers to sexual desire.
5. Marianne Moore's *Observations* (1924) won the Dial Award.
6. Moore used the motif of the literary world in the poem *Poetry*.

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## 2.7 SUMMARY

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- Wallace Stevens was born in 1879 in Reading, Pennsylvania. His prominent literary works were *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order*.
- *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* (1922), one of the most known poems of Wallace Stevens, is a short and enigmatic poem of sixteen lines which is condensed in two stanzas. The poem was published in Stevens' collection of poems called *Harmonium* in 1923.
- The speaker of the poem *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* is an omniscient narrator and it is through the narrator's eyes that we see this poor dead woman's wake. The poem is a masterly crafted piece of literary art exhibiting illuminating wordplay which misleads readers as there are subtle meanings hidden in the poem. The poem is a dramatic sequence of a poor lady's wake. The conscious camera or the eye of the speaker leads us to scenes one by one.
- The poem *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* begins with someone's order-giving tone 'Call.' Throughout the poem, this speaker keeps the same tone of definite authoritativeness. The last emphatic line perhaps means that a person can be an emperor only by achieving the pleasure of life to the fullest. The image of ice-cream which gives pleasure to our palate is ephemeral. It suggests that human life is short.
- The poem began with the instruction which was about looking after the kitchen or preparation of the menu. The second instruction was for the girls who were asked to remain in their normal clothes. Then the boys were told to bring flowers to decorate. The poem finally focuses on the dead woman who is lying, waiting to be covered decently.
- Marianne Craig Moore was born on 15 November 1887 in Kirkwood, Missouri, U.S. She was born in the manse of the Presbyterian Church.

Moore's maternal grandfather was the pastor of the church. Growing up under his influence, Moore was a devoted Presbyterian and as a result, her poems engage with the theme of strength and adversity.

- Moore experimented with her poetry style and explored themes of religion in her poems. Her poetry is characterized by bold experimentation in meter, rhyme and structure. While Moore wasn't an Imagist poet, her poetry was influenced by its style due to her friends and peers, including Pound and H.D., who were Imagists.
- Marianne Moore's writing style was modernist and full of experimentation. Moore employed conciseness and precision of language and felt that poetry required skill and honesty more than strict adherence to structure and form.
- The poem *Poetry* begins by the speaker saying, in the poetic voice of Moore, that she 'too' dislikes 'it'. Moore, therefore, is already asking the reader to engage with the poetic voice by connecting the 'it' in the first line to the title of the poem *Poetry*.
- The inclusion of the rigid critic twitching like a horse with a flea between animal tasks and entertainment of a fan and the work of numbers, is a particularly powerful comment on the exercise of criticism and critical reading of literature.
- The poem is an exercise in modernist writing with its various versions culminating in the skillful placing of the 1924 five stanza version as back matter to the three line version. The poem is filled with allusions, citations and quotations some of which are stylistically placed by Moore to celebrate the sense of intertextuality in the poem.

## NOTES

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## 2.8 KEY WORDS

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- **Modernism:** In the fine arts, modernism specified a break from the existing conventions and instead a search for new styles, techniques and forms of expression.
- **Imagism:** It was an early-20th century Anglo-American literary movement which promoted precise imagery and clarity of language.
- **Allusion:** It is an indirect or passing reference to another source.

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## 2.9 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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### Short-Answer Questions

1. How does Wallace Stevens deal with the idea of death in the poem *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*?

## NOTES

2. Write a short note on the image of ice-cream in the poem *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*.
3. What are some of the modernist themes in Marianne Moore's writings?
4. What does the phrase 'literalists of the imagination' refer to?

### Long-Answer Questions

1. Critically analyse the poem *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*.
2. Discuss the use of intertextuality in the poem *Poetry*.
3. Examine the concerns regarding poetry put forward by Moore in her poem *Poetry*.

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## 2.10 FURTHER READINGS

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- Patell, Cyrus R. K. 1994. *The Cambridge History of American Literature: Volume 4, Nineteenth-Century Poetry 1800-1910*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.
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## UNIT 3 SYLVIA PLATH

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### Structure

- 3.0 Introduction
- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 About the Author: Sylvia Plath
- 3.3 *Mirror*: Summary and Critical Analysis
- 3.4 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 3.5 Summary
- 3.6 Key Words
- 3.7 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 3.8 Further Readings

### NOTES

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### 3.0 INTRODUCTION

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The objective of this unit is to introduce the reader to the poetic style and concerns of Sylvia Plath. This unit will critically analyse Plath's poem *Mirror*. Sylvia Plath is one of the most memorable and admired poets of the 20th century and is known for charting a new territory for post-war poetry in English. Through her poems, she revealed the contradictions that lurked under the surface of the American way of life. Known for her confessional style of poetry, she dealt with the subject of death, motherhood, aging and other issues in her poetry.

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### 3.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the literary style and concerns of Sylvia Plath
- Explain confessional style of poetry
- Analyse Plath's poem *Mirror*

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### 3.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: SYLVIA PLATH

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Sylvia Plath was born on 27 October 1932, in Boston, Massachusetts, to a German immigrant college professor, Otto Plath, and one of his students, Aurelia Schober. After her brother, Warren, was born, the family moved to Winthrop where eight-year-old Plath began her early journey into poetry by publishing a poem in the children's section of 'Boston Herald'. This was followed by a flurry of awards and publications in various magazines and newspapers. At age 11, Plath also began keeping a journal. Her life changed suddenly when in 1940, her father died due to health complications. This event affected Plath's life considerably and her poetry is deeply influenced by it.

## NOTES

A bright student, Plath attended Smith College and was editor of 'The Smith Review'. She was soon awarded a guest editorship at 'Mademoiselle' magazine. However, during her undergraduate years, Plath began to suffer from severe depression which would plague her for most of her life and ultimately result in her untimely death. At 20, Plath attempted suicide by taking sleeping pills. She survived and was hospitalized, undergoing electro-shock therapy. She was able to recover to finish her degree and travel to Cambridge University, England, under a Fulbright scholarship, where she continued to write and contribute to the student newspaper 'Varsity'. In 1956, she met Ted Hughes whom she subsequently married. After a short stint at teaching at Smith College, Plath switched to being a receptionist during the day and attending Robert Lowell's creative writing seminars during the evening where she met Anne Sexton, both of whom would encourage Plath in her confessional writing. In 1960, Plath published her first collection of poetry titled *The Colossus*, a few months after giving birth to her daughter Frieda. In 1961, she completed her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, and in 1962, her son Nicholas was born. Plath soon discovered Hughes was having an affair with Assia Wevill and the couple separated with Plath returning to London with her children. In the last couple of years of her life, Plath wrote expansively, writing most of the poems of her posthumous poetry collection, *Ariel*. But, she also suffered from severe depression and ill-health. She succumbed to suicide on 11 February 1963, a few weeks after *The Bell Jar* was published. Her body was found at her home and it was ruled that she died due to carbon monoxide poisoning after having put her head in the oven.

### Inspiration and Major Themes

Given below are the major themes of Sylvia Plath's poetry:

- **Death:** Throughout her literary career as well as in her personal life, Plath wrestled with the idea of death. The theme of death appears in most of the poems of Plath. Plath tried to bring out the multifaceted nature of death and its constant emergence in everyday life. Her father's death often surfaces in her poems as do related images of burial and mourning. The fascination with death at times is dealt with by exploring murder, and suicide and its relatedness to self-hatred and self-destruction. Death also appears as a release from the struggle of life, a natural offer of transcendence and freedom of the mind from the body, and finally, as a place of rest. Plath is ambivalent in her negotiation of death in her poetry. At times, death is celebrated with exhilaration, but at other times, death is shrouded in despair, anger, fear and horror.
- **Nature:** Plath often uses imagery and symbolism from nature in her poetry. The sea, animals, flowers as well as mystical spaces are strewn across her poems. Images of water portray varying themes of power, unpredictable

nature of life, loss and loneliness, mesmerizing beauty, dangerous mortality or at times a blunt reflection of the passage of time and human life. Like death, nature too has a certain ambivalence in these writings embodying a creative potential that can either help express Plath better or cause some unpredictable disaster.

- **The Self:** Plath used her literary talent to talk about her personal life, her experiences, her turbulent thoughts, her worries and struggles and her poetry is often called ‘confessional’ as a result. She tried to express herself in her writing by giving voice to her experiences but also by seeking to make sense of them. Her rage and grief at her failed relationships also found a voice in her writing. This exploration of the self became a rumination on the idea of the self, standing at the threshold of the personal and the social. Plath teased out the conflicted nature of the self due to this position and laid bare the concerns of the self in her time.
- **The Body:** Plath was mesmerized by the physicality of human life. The body’s relation to mortality and death is one of her primary concerns. She often explored the body through themes of motherhood, wounds, pain, operation, and death. She also tried to examine the relationship of the body to the self and played around with the binary of the mind and the body. The body fascinates but the body also suffocates and cages, in Plath’s poems.

### Writing Style

Sylvia Plath was known for her autobiographical and personal style of poetry which employed the use of the confessional ‘I’. The confessional style of poetry was a popular style in the United States during the late 1950s—early 1960s. Plath’s poems are simplistic and raw, often reminiscent of children’s rhymes. However, they are at the same time emotional and powerful.

One of the most overarching concepts that influence Plath’s writing style is the theme of death. Her poetry is filled with imagery and symbols of death, despair, anger and fear. In *The Savage God*, A. Alvarez wrote that Plath made ‘poetry and death inseparable. The one could not exist without the other’. Plath negotiates her psychological experiences of the ordinary, the everyday and the mundane into poetry. The images of desolation and loneliness refer to Plath’s fixation with death and self-destruction.

The self in Plath’s poetry is one that is constantly, almost surgically taken apart, examined, and then put together through her explosive creative energy. This self absorbs and personalizes the disasters of her times.

Lastly, her poetry interacts with novel ideas of womanhood and has often been seen to exhibit feminist traits through self-negotiation and a sharp criticism of patriarchy and its intersections with literature and civilization.

### NOTES

NOTES

**Check Your Progress**

1. Name the semi-autobiographical novel written by Sylvia Plath.
2. Why is Sylvia Plath's poetry often called 'confessional'?

**3.3 MIRROR: SUMMARY AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

*I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.  
Whatever I see I swallow immediately  
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.  
I am not cruel, only truthful,  
The eye of a little god, four-cornered.  
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.  
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long  
I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.  
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.  
Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,  
Searching my reaches for what she really is.  
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.  
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.  
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.  
I am important to her. She comes and goes.  
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.  
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman  
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.*

**Summary**

The poem *Mirror* is written in free verse and tells the experience of an inanimate object, a mirror, in first-person point-of-view. The poem is divided into two stanzas, of nine lines each, where the mirror as narrator speaks to the reader. The narrator begins by telling the reader about itself and then about the woman who gazes into it.

In the first stanza, the mirror describes itself as 'silver' or shiny in appearance and exact in nature. It establishes itself as truthful and impartial, free from prior biases of any sort, and says that it only reflects and incorporates in itself what it sees. It does not have human partialities of love or dislike or cruelty or kindness. This brings in an element of bluntness to its truth. It describes itself as the 'eye of a little god', impartial like a deity but also absolute and distant in its godly being. The grand scale comparison to a god is contrasted by the reminder of the mirror's

‘little’ ‘four-cornered’ physicality, referring to its actual shape and size. The mirror then describes its surroundings, moving from descriptions of its interior to the exterior. Since it is inanimate and fixed, its view is mostly fixed too. The spotted, pink wall opposite it makes up most of its world and the mirror says that it has looked so long at this wall that it has become a part of itself, of its heart. It is interesting to note, firstly, that for the mirror its exterior becomes a part of its interior, reminding one of its ‘swallowing’ nature. Secondly, the unbiased mirror which feels no love or dislike is now shown to have a heart and there is a longing and affection for the wall in its admission that ‘faces and darkness’ separate it from the wall. The image of the wall flickers, wavering from sight, because of these interruptions from people who come to see their faces in the mirror and the absence of light which clouds the mirror in darkness, making it impossible to see the wall. The mirror exhibits loneliness in its separation and treats these interruptions as mere flickers.

In the second stanza, the mirror is compared to a lake and with this comparison the mirror begins to speak as a reflecting lake. This is its second identity after the mirror in the previous stanza but this time instead of describing itself, it describes its object—the woman who gazes into this lake. The woman looks deeply and intently at the lake for her reflection. The lake comments that she is trying to find what she truly is but this is already a futile attempt because the lake like the mirror can only reflect and so it does in its blunt truthful nature. The truth of the lake is compared to candles and the moon. These are canonically common metaphors for women’s beauty, but the narrator says that these are liars, thereby rejecting these canonical comparisons. This indicates Plath’s attempt to create her own, new poetic tradition which is personal and inward-looking. The woman doesn’t seem to like her reflection and she cries as she is saddened by it. The woman’s anxiety is evident in the ‘agitation of hands’. The narrator says that despite this it is important to her because she comes back to the mirror every day in the morning. The passage of her daily images in the mirror have marked time and age. The woman used to be a young girl but that image of her is gone now and in place of it the image of an old woman. This advent of age is compared to a ‘terrible fish’ referring to the woman’s sadness at the loss of her youth and the unstoppable aging and mortality of which the mirror is a proof.

### Analysis

The poem *Mirror* first appeared in the ‘New Yorker’ in 1963 but was later published posthumously as part of the collection, *Crossing the Water; Transitional Poems* (1971). It displays a number of poetic techniques and literary themes that characterize her writing. Plath wrote the poem in 1961 during a turbulent part of her life which was coincidentally also a creatively productive period as she struggled with questions of life and death, emotions of grief, despair and anger. The poems of this period, including *Mirror*, showcase these struggles.

## NOTES

## NOTES

The poem, written from the mirror's point-of-view in first-person narrative seems light-hearted at first describing the truthful, unfailingly unprejudiced nature of the mirror, in the first stanza. As the poem moves towards the second stanza, the tone of the poem darkens as it begins to deal with issues of longing, loneliness and loss, and finally, openly with the despair and anxiety of aging and the loss of youth as well the unsaid but haunting spectre of mortality. The quick change of the tone of the poem mimics the quick change of youth to old age, an unwanted change which the mirror serves a reminder of.

The ambivalence of the mirror from being unbiased and honest to having a heart represents the confusing nature of life itself which Plath sought to understand, a question which agitates and finally, terrifies. This despair, confusion and anger at life which continually progresses towards death and mortality is symbolized in the image of a 'terrible fish' that rises towards the woman at the end of the poem.

Truth appears as one of the thematic concerns of the poem, first characterized in the blunt honesty of the mirror and then philosophized in the 'truth of life' which is mortality. The interiorization of the exterior by the mirror refers to the poetic sensibility of Plath who often sought to understand exterior things in relation to her personal life. The mirror, then, becomes a mirror of her writing which reflects her life and shows how much of lived experiences become swallowed by the experiencing person. However, the mirror also causes sadness and self-hatred in the woman in contrast to the satisfying lies of the candles and the moon. At the end, the poem leaves the reader with these contradictions and the horrifying image of the looming truth of mortality.

Sylvia Plath's *Mirror* is a rumination on the passage of time and its effect on humans, of the varying emotions and struggles that accompany aging and the ultimate harsh truth of mortality. The poem encompasses grand themes of truth and mortality in a deceptively simple fashion, relying on tone and emotion lurking beneath the surface imagery, through the narratorial voice of an everyday object like a mirror.

### Writing Techniques

The writing technique of Plath in the poem *Mirror* is discussed below:

- **Meter and rhyme scheme:** The poem is written in free verse but it does have an irregular rhyme scheme. It does not follow a formal meter. However, it shows internal symmetry in its composition and structure. It has two stanzas made of nine lines and seven sentences each which give it a solidity and clarity. The language of the poem is prosaic and does not subscribe to any strict poetic tradition.
- **Personification:** Plath uses personification in the poem to make the mirror speak. The mirror speaks in first person and describes itself in human terms, possessing human characteristics like a heart, performing human tasks like meditating and looking, and even possessing emotions like longing and loneliness at separation.

- **Metaphor:** The poem contains comparisons and metaphors. ‘Now I am a lake’ refers to the comparison of the mirror with a lake due to the reflecting nature of both of their surfaces and is an example of a clever metaphor by Plath. The reference to night by using ‘darkness’ is another such comparison.
- **Simile:** The last line of the poem contains a simile ‘like a terrible fish’ where old age is compared to a terrible fish.
- **Repetition:** While stylistically, Plath doesn’t use repetition as a poetic device, there is a repetitive imagery in the poem.

## NOTES

### Check Your Progress

3. Give an example of personification in the poem *Mirror*.
4. Give an example of simile in the poem *Mirror*.

## 3.4 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

1. Sylvia Plath’s semi-autobiographical novel is *The Bell Jar*.
2. Plath used her literary talent to talk about her personal life, her experiences, her turbulent thoughts, her worries and struggles, as a result of which her poetry is often called ‘confessional’.
3. Plath uses personification in the poem to make the mirror speak. The mirror speaks in first person and describes itself in human terms, possessing human characteristics like a heart, performing human tasks like meditating and looking, and even possessing emotions like longing and loneliness at separation.
4. The last line of plath’s poem contains a simile ‘like a terrible fish’ where old age is compared to a terrible fish.

## 3.5 SUMMARY

- Sylvia Plath was born on 27 October 1932, in Boston, Massachusetts, to a German immigrant college professor, Otto Plath, and one of his students, Aurelia Schober. Her life changed suddenly when in 1940, her father died due to health complications. This event affected Plath’s life considerably and her poetry is deeply influenced by it.
- During her undergraduate years, Plath began to suffer from severe depression which would plague her for most of her life and ultimately result in her untimely death. In 1956, she met Ted Hughes whom she subsequently married.

## NOTES

- In 1960, Plath published her first collection of poetry titled *The Colossus*, a few months after giving birth to her daughter Frieda. In 1961, she completed her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, and in 1962, her son Nicholas was born.
- Plath succumbed to suicide on 11 February 1963, a few weeks after *The Bell Jar* was published. Her body was found at her home and it was ruled that she died due to carbon monoxide poisoning after having put her head in the oven.
- Throughout her literary career as well as in her personal life, Plath wrestled with the idea of death. The theme of death appears in most of the poems of Plath. Plath is ambivalent in her negotiation of death in her poetry. At times, death is celebrated with exhilaration, but at other times, death is shrouded in despair, anger, fear and horror.
- Plath often uses imagery and symbolism from nature in her poetry. The sea, animals, flowers as well as mystical spaces are strewn across her poems. Images of water portray varying themes of power, unpredictable nature of life, loss and loneliness, mesmerizing beauty, dangerous mortality or at times a blunt reflection of the passage of time and human life.
- Plath used her literary talent to talk about her personal life, her experiences, her turbulent thoughts, her worries and struggles and her poetry is often called ‘confessional’ as a result.
- Plath was mesmerized by the physicality of human life. The body’s relation to mortality and death is one of her primary concerns. She often explored the body through themes of motherhood, wounds, pain, operation, and death.
- The confessional style of poetry was a popular style in the United States during the late 1950s—early 1960s. Plath’s poems are simplistic and raw, often reminiscent of children’s rhymes. However, they are at the same time emotional and powerful.
- The poem *Mirror* is written in free verse and tells the experience of an inanimate object, a mirror, in first-person point-of-view. The poem is divided into two stanzas, of nine lines each, where the mirror as narrator speaks to the reader. The narrator begins by telling the reader about itself and then about the woman who gazes into it.
- In the first stanza, the mirror describes itself as truthful and impartial, free from prior biases of any sort, and says that it only reflects and incorporates in itself what it sees.
- In the second stanza, the mirror is compared to a lake and with this comparison the mirror begins to speak as a reflecting lake. This is its second

identity after the mirror in the previous stanza but this time instead of describing itself, it describes its object—the woman who gazes into this lake.

- The poem, written from the mirror’s point-of-view in first-person narrative seems light-hearted at first describing the truthful, unfailingly unprejudiced nature of the mirror, in the first stanza. As the poem moves towards the second stanza, the tone of the poem darkens as it begins to deal with issues of longing, loneliness and loss, and finally, openly with the despair and anxiety of aging and the loss of youth as well the unsaid but haunting spectre of mortality.
- Sylvia Plath’s *Mirror* is a rumination on the passage of time and its effect on humans, of the varying emotions and struggles that accompany aging and the ultimate harsh truth of mortality. The poem encompasses grand themes of truth and mortality in a deceptively simple fashion, relying on tone and emotion lurking beneath the surface imagery, through the narratorial voice of an everyday object like a mirror.

## NOTES

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### 3.6 KEY WORDS

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- **Confessional poetry:** It is a style of poetry that is personal and describes individual experiences usually focusing on the self, the psyche and personal trauma but can also talk about broader social themes. This style was popularized in the United States during late 1950s—early 1960s.
- **Metaphor:** It is a figure of speech that is used to make a comparison between two things that aren’t necessarily or literally alike but have an induced resemblance due to the comparison.

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### 3.7 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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#### Short-Answer Questions

1. Write a short note on Plath’s literary career.
2. How does Plath deal with the element of death in her poetry?
3. What are some of poetic devices used in the poem *Mirror*?

#### Long-Answer Questions

1. Discuss the thematic concerns of Sylvia Plath in her poetry.
2. Critically analyse Plath’s poem *Mirror*.

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### **3.8 FURTHER READINGS**

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#### **NOTES**

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# UNIT 4 A.J.M. SMITH AND JUDITH WRIGHT

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A.J.M. Smith and  
Judith Wright

## NOTES

### Structure

- 4.0 Introduction
- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 About the Author: A.J.M. Smith
- 4.3 *Like an Old Proud King in a Parable*: Summary and Critical Analysis
- 4.4 About the Author: Judith Wright
- 4.5 *The Harp and The King*: Summary and Critical Analysis
- 4.6 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 4.7 Summary
- 4.8 Key Words
- 4.9 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 4.10 Further Readings

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## 4.0 INTRODUCTION

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The objective of this unit is to introduce the reader to the poetic style of Arthur James Marshall Smith and Judith Wright. This unit will discuss Smith's poetry through specific emphasis on his poem *Like an Old Proud King in a Parable*. A. J. M. Smith is one of the most celebrated Canadian poets and anthropologist. He was a member of the Montreal Group of poets who sought to revolutionise Canadian poetry by the use and application of modernist themes. The aim of this unit is to better understand the relationship between Smith and his work, and its continuing influence on Canadian poetry. Like A.J.M Smith, another writer who revolutionized poetry was Judith Wright. As an author of several poetry collections, Wright became one of Australia's leading poets whose works dealt with Australia and its environment. This unit will explore her poetic concerns through special focus on her poem *The Harp and the King*. Wright's poetry is emblematic of the changing landscape of Australia and Australian poetry.

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## 4.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the literary influences on A.J.M. Smith
- Critically analyse the poem *Like an Old Proud King in a Parable*
- Explain Judith Wright's contribution to Australian poetry
- Examine the poem *The Harp and the King*

## NOTES

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### 4.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: A.J.M. SMITH

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Arthur James Marshall Smith was born in Montreal, Canada, on 8 November 1902. From 1918 to 1920, he lived in England, where he became acquainted with contemporary poetry. In 1921, Smith returned to Montreal where he joined McGill University as an undergraduate. In 1924, he became the co-editor at the 'McGill Daily Literary Supplement', and in 1925 he co-founded the 'McGill Fortnightly Review' with F. R. Scott, which was aimed at revolutionizing Canadian poetry. The *Review* sought to encourage young writers to set new literary standards, indulge in modernist poetry by studying the writing of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, and abandon artificiality and provincialism in favour of cosmopolitan critical opinion. The 'Review' attracted young writers, including A. M. Klein, Leo Kennedy, and Leon Edel who were influenced by Smith and Scott's poetic vision. In 1932, Smith received a Ph.D. from University of Edinburgh, following which Smith set off on a project to promote novel and modernist poetry. He brought out an anthology of Canadian modernist poetry, with Scott (anonymously edited) and Leo Kennedy.

From 1936 to 1972, Smith was a professor at Michigan State University. He became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1941. In 1943, Smith's anthology *The Book of Canadian Poetry* which marks the beginning of a consolidated modern Canadian criticism was published. Smith continued to work in this direction and produced anthologies like *The Blasted Pine* (1957, 1967), edited with F.R. Scott, and *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English and French* (1960). Smith's poetry including the *The Lonely Island* (1936) were published in various collections such as the *News of the Phoenix* (1943), *Collected Poems* (1962), and *Poems: New and Collected* (1967). This showcased his endeavour to create a literature that captures the Canadian landscape, using powerful techniques and metaphysical aesthetic.

Smith was awarded the 1943 Governor General's Award for English-language Poetry or Drama' for *News of the Phoenix and Other Poems*, his collection of poetry published in the same year. He was awarded the Lorne Pierce Medal by the Royal Society of Canada in 1966. In recognition of his enduring contributions and influence on Canadian poetry, in 1972, Michigan State University established the A. J. M. Smith Award. This award felicitates Canadian poets.

#### Inspiration and Major Themes

Some of the major themes in A.J.M. Smith's poetry are as follows:

- **Montreal Group of Poets:** As part of the Montreal Group of poets (1920s-1930s), Smith was inspired by the need to bring about a renaissance in Canadian poetry. The Montreal Group included poets such as A. M. Klein, A. J. M. Smith, Leo Kennedy, Francis Reginald Scott, E. J. Pratt and Robert Finch. Smith championed the breaking of poetic convention and called for abandoning the more traditional picturesque landscape poetry in favour of

realistic themes, concrete images and free verse. He stressed on the need for identifying and honing a poetic style that would be ‘Canadian’ in its very conception and technique, and much of his poetry is testament to this.

*A.J.M. Smith and  
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- **Modernism:** The Montreal Group were inspired by the techniques of poets like Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden whose works and efforts were already revolutionizing poetry. The works of these writers had sparked off Modernist, Expressionist and Imagist poetic movements that stressed an urban, cosmopolitan sensibility. In this sense, modernism, expressionism, imagism influenced Montreal Group’s poetic oeuvre. In the fine arts, modernism specified a break from the existing conventions and instead searched for new styles, techniques and forms of expression. Smith’s poetry is defined by this endeavour to create and promote novel poetic expression, abandoning the stifling Victorian thematic and poetic concerns that were otherwise rampant in Canadian poetry.
- **Expressionism:** As an artistic style, expressionism championed subjective explorations of modern life. Expressionist works often express dissatisfaction, discontent and frustration at accepted norms and crude and hollow experiences. Smith’s poetry often talks of this unease of modern life and the heart’s wish to break free of norm and conventions. His poems are harsh criticisms of superficial pleasures and express the stifling bitterness and anger that comes out of being caged in by unsatisfactory tradition.
- **Imagism:** Imagism was an early-20th century Anglo-American literary movement which promoted precise imagery and clarity of language. Imagery in Smith’s poetry was never lofty but controlled and precise in its direct treatment of the subject. Smith also avoided strict adherence to metrical patterns for a more free verse style poetry using open language and concrete imagery.
- **Metaphysical poetry:** Samuel Johnson used the term metaphysical poets to describe a group of 17th-century English poets whose poetry employed inventive conceits and emphasized the spoken quality of their poetry. Smith wrote expansively on metaphysical poetry throughout his career and his poems have thematic intersections with it, combining emotion and thought in complex but witty metaphors. This also relates to the quasi-religious tone of Smith’s poetry which often borrows religious imagery utilized in romantic ways.
- **Poems on Poetics:** Smith’s poetry is deeply concerned with poetics, especially the project of Canadian poetry and a lot of his poems talk about the process of poetry, of making poems and becoming a poet. His struggle of renunciation as well as renewal of certain poetic forms regularly shines in poems which describe his experience of writing poetry as well as making demands of the new poet. There is a dramatic, quasi-religious leaning in the making of the poet and their duties for Smith. In this sense, Smith’s poetry is as much about Canada and its poetry as about the poet and their self.

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- **Death:** Death is a recurring motif in Smith’s poetry, though mostly utilized in a figurative sense. The fascination with death can be linked to Smith’s influences that stem from metaphysical poetry, modernism as well as quasi-religious imagery. There is a paradoxical celebration of a life away from worldly pleasures through a juxtaposition with images of death and barrenness.

### Writing Style

A. J. M. Smith rejected poetic convention and Victorian sensibility to identity and define a writing style that would defy Puritan consciousness and a colonialist, fantastical fear of the unknown. His writing style is thematically aligned with the Montreal Group of poets who, as mentioned above, sought to revolutionize Canadian poetry by championing metaphysical complexity, precise imagery, realistic themes and simple language.

Smith’s poetry on poetics often displays an interconnected imagery between the struggle and process of creating poetry and death, two concepts that Smith was continuously involved in understanding. Compton points to this fact, ‘The poems on poetics, though intimately connected with his poems on death, celebrate the results of poetic discipline — the song, the dance, the ceremonial moment, the feast — which can renew with “meadow . . . the northern stone”.’ In the essay ‘Patterns for Poetry: Poetics in Seven Poems by A.J.M. Smith’, Smith balances these two strains by using metaphysical, mythical and quasi-religious imagery to delve into the subjective life of the poet who is to undertake the grand task of poetry.

Smith’s poetry displays the use of simile and metaphor with emphatic punctuation to deliver the sharpness of comparison and sound. The poetic voice takes up disguises to appear as different figures in interconnected fashion throughout Smith’s poetry to tell the story of his craft along the axis of aestheticism and asceticism. His poetry is descriptive and symbolic but never falls into artificiality of expression.

### Check Your Progress

1. Name the poets who were part of the Montreal Group of Poets.
2. Name the modernist poets who inspired the Montreal Group of Poets.

## 4.3 *LIKE AN OLD PROUD KING IN A PARABLE:* SUMMARY AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

*A bitter king in anger to be gone  
From fawning courtier and dotting queen  
Flung hollow sceptre and gilt crown away,*

*And breaking bound of all his counties green  
He made a meadow in the northern stone  
And breathed a palace of inviolable air  
To cage a heart that carolled like a swan,  
And slept alone, immaculate and gay,  
With only his pride for a paramour.  
O who is that bitter king? It is not I.  
Let me, I beseech thee, Father, die  
From this fat royal life, and lie  
As naked as a bridegroom by his bride,  
And let that girl be the cold goddess Pride.  
And I will sing to the barren rock  
Your difficult, lonely music, heart,  
Like an old proud king in a parable.*

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### Summary

From the title itself, the poem *Like an Old Proud King in a Parable* announces itself as a poem of comparison, with the thematic core lying in the simile that compares the ‘I’ in the poem to ‘an old proud king in a parable’. A. J. M. Smith picks up an oft-appearing figure of parables—the figure of the ‘old proud king’ who out of his age and pride indulges in an extraordinary act which brings about a change of considerable consequence in the landscape around him, and compares him to his own person as a poet. Since the poem is framed as a parable, this also alerts one to look for hidden messages in an otherwise simple narrative of a king who rebels against his boring life.

In the first stanza, the readers are introduced to the king who is described as being bitter and angry due to his traditional and boring life in the court. The figures of royalty—the courtiers and the queen—give this king no pleasure. In third-person point-of-view, Smith describes that the king finds his courtiers ‘fawning’, and does not find their obsequious flattery appealing. Similarly, the king does not find the affections of the queen interesting and labels them as ‘doting’, that is, a kind of affection that is without depth of feeling but based on an uncritical fondness. In his frustration, it is evident that the king is wishing for something more exciting, something that even the emblems of power and royalty cannot satisfy. Thus, these emblems—the sceptre and the crown—are described as ‘hollow’ and ‘gilt’. Forsaking his ostentatious life, the king escapes from his traditional life of easy pleasure, turning away from the green counties of comfort but monotony and instead, creates a meadow in the ‘northern state’, choosing to make a palace out of thin air. Continuing on the comparison between the figure of the poet and the king, one can conjecture that the ‘northern state’ Smith describes here may refer to the northern parts of Canada which would be a striking contrast to the

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pleasurable green counties. These parts which are mostly mountain, snow and even wildlife, are something that would be associated with a tougher lifestyle than the royal life or a life in the green counties. However, this space is free from stifling tradition and frustrating monotony. This is a place of wildness and nature, where even the air is inviolable or pure, free from any kind of flattery or uncritical interest. This is where the poet feels free to use his creative power and create monuments of this new direction that Smith wants Canadian poetry to take.

The imagery here is of freedom and relief with the king breathing out a palace of air. This is the only kind of place where the king is ready to cage his heart because it is not a cage at all. His heart is singing happily like an excited swan and there is a celebration of even sleeping alone, away from the people of his earlier life. He only has his pride as a companion and he is satisfied with that.

Smith now brings in a poetic change in the short, second stanza where he asks in first-person, 'O who is that bitter king? It is not I.' By suddenly distancing himself from the king, Smith is employing depersonalization, to stand back and look at the figure of the king separately. However, in the very next lines, we see that this depersonalization has been ironic as now the king and the poet speak in the same voice, in first-person. The king now asks his 'Father', a stand-in for the authority of tradition which otherwise towers over the poet as a father-figure, to let him leave his royal life and to not stand in his way. He wants to let go of all outer appearance and superficial artificiality and become close to his natural self which has intellectual beauty even in the absence of worldly pleasures. Smith builds up this theme by the imagery of the naked king finding union with his pride.

The third stanza once again brings in the craft of the poet by stressing 'singing' and even though there seems to be barren rock in place of an audience and it is a difficult and lonely life, he is celebrating it because he is being true to his heart. The last line of the poem reinforces the comparison of the poet to the old proud king of a parable and stresses an ironic self-mockery at the rare possibility of acknowledgement of the poet's art in the face of his lonely endeavour.

### Analysis

The poem *Like an Old Proud King in a Parable* by A. J. M. Smith first appeared in the 'McGill Fortnightly Review' in the year 1926. The 'McGill Fortnightly Review' had been co-founded by Smith with F. R. Scott, in an attempt to revolutionize Canadian poetry. It sought to publish Modernist poetry and avoid conventional artificiality that had otherwise plagued Canadian poetry. This poem is a poetic testament to this ideal and carries forward the struggles and rewards of Smith's efforts to revolutionize Canadian poetry.

In the poem, Smith describes the story of a typical old, proud King of a parable, with a twist. The king abandons his kingdom, its traditions and worldly pleasures to seek an intellectual life of hardship and struggle which he feels will be rewarding in its liberation.

The poem, thus, in a way, describes the trajectory of Smith's life as a poet where he was dedicated in breaking poetic conventions in favour of a modernist approach which he felt was more natural for the times and context. Smith mirrors the two figures and their journeys by employing a simile in 'Like an old proud king in a parable'. The song that the king is happy to sing even in loneliness and barrenness refers to the poetry of a poet like Smith who dares to flout convention.

The framing of the poem as a 'parable' presents the figure of the king in the poem as a generic one, quite like the recurring royal figures in mythic, literary and popular discourse, and not an atypical, individual hero. However, the shift to the 'I' in the poem lends a subjective flavour to the narrative.

Secondly, the idea of the 'parable' carries within it a fabulousness which can be distant from reality, as well as have a spiritual or moral lesson, much like the Gospels. The call to the 'Father' has a quasi-religious beseechment to it, reminiscent of prayers to Christ and is characteristic of Smith mixing language and imagery to capture the diversity of thought in expression. The abdication of the kingdom and royal life for a life spent with 'the cold goddess Pride' is another example of Smith's usage of quasi-religious language where worldly pleasures are sacrificed. However, it must be noted that Smith's destination is intellectual pride and not necessarily a religious one despite the language used.

Lastly, Smith contrasts these images with the motif of the union between the poet/king and intellectual pride which stands at odds with the barren imagery in the poem, pointing to its metaphysical and figurative usage.

A. J. M. Smith's *Like an Old Proud King in a Parable* is a poem on poetics which is told through the story of a king. It is a testament to his enduring commitment to poetry and the project of revolutionizing Canadian poetry. As a result, this poem is filled with many of Smith's influences, themes and techniques, establishing a dialogue with his other works. This makes it an excellent text to understand Smith and his poetic style.

### Writing Techniques

The poetic devices used in the poem are discussed below:

- **Meter and rhyme scheme:** The poem is written in free verse but it does have an irregular rhyme scheme. The first stanza displays a kind of ABCBDEACF rhyme scheme. The second stanza, instead, shows an irregularity in the overall structure of the poem, as Smith tries to capture nuances of spoken word in his effort to naturalize Canadian poetry. The third stanza separately has a GGHH rhyme scheme while the fourth does not subscribe to a set rhyme scheme.
- **Simile:** The poem is structured as deriving out of a simile when Smith compares the life of the narrator, the 'I' of the poem, the poet, to an 'old, proud king in a parable'. In the poem, Smith continues in his usage of simile

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to bring forward similarities and the tone of the poem. He compares the heart's beat to the sound of an excited swan in 'carolled like a swan'. Free from the restrictions of convention, the king is 'As naked as a bridegroom by his bride'. The poem ends by echoing the simile, 'Like an old proud king in a parable'.

- **Metaphor:** Smith uses metaphor in the poem to describe 'pride', which is compared to a 'paramour' and a 'girl' while being described as a Goddess.
- **Depersonalization:** In the second stanza, Smith employs depersonalization to distance himself from the king in the poem in a sudden act of irony.
- **Personification:** Pride is personified in the poem in the line 'And let that girl be the cold goddess Pride' by referring to the emotion as a person.

### Check Your Progress

3. Who had founded the 'McGill Fortnightly Review'?
4. Why does Smith employ depersonalization in the poem *Like an Old Proud King in a Parable*?

## 4.4 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: JUDITH WRIGHT

Judith Wright was born in Armidale, New South Wales, Australia, on 31 May 1915, to Philip and Ethel Wright. After graduating school at New England Girls' School in 1929, she studied English, Philosophy, Psychology and History at the University of Sydney. Thereafter she worked in an advertising agency and at the University of Queensland where she worked with Clem Christesen to produce the literary magazine 'Meanjin'. By then, Wright's poetry was already appearing in magazines and journals and in 1946, *The Moving Image* by Judith Wright was published, followed by *Woman to Woman* in 1949. It was around this time that she moved to Queensland with novelist Jack McKinney and in 1950, their daughter Meredith was born. Wright married McKinney in 1962. In 1955, *Two Fires* was published and in 1966, her first collection of shorts stories *The Nature of Love* as well as the poetry book *The Other Half* was published. In 1967, Wright was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Wright was an environmentalist and was the founding member of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland, along with David Fleay, Kathleen McArthur and Brian Clouston. She was vocal in her support of the conservation of the Great Barrier Reef and the Fraser Island. She was also a social activist and campaigned for Aboriginal land rights. She participated in the march for reconciliation of non-indigenous Australians and Aboriginal people.

She was awarded the Christopher Brennan award for lifetime achievement in poetry as well as the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry (1991) and Australian Living Treasure Award (1998). She died in Canberra in the year 2000. The ACT government decided to give the Judith Wright Award (2005-2011) for a published book of poems by an Australian poet, and in 2007 Overland magazine started the Judith Wright Poetry Prize for New and Emerging Poets. Her legacy and influence on Australian poetry continues.

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### **Inspiration and Major Themes**

Some of the major themes found in Wright's work are as follows:

- **Australia:** Wright typically engages in Australian themes and setting in her poetry. In this her poetry is part of the larger movement of post-World War II Australian art, which sought to cement a particular idea of Australia and Australian artistic motivation. Her poems contain references to the relationship between settlers, indigenous Australians and the bush.
- **Environment:** As an environmentalist who championed various causes for the protection and preservation of the natural world, Wright places the relationship between humans and the environment in her poem in interesting ways. Environment also has a fruitful relationship with poetry and artistic creation. The imagery in her poem is often derived from Australian flora and fauna.
- **Poetry:** Wright's poetry is deeply engaged in poetics and the process and purpose of poetry. The forces and limitations of language and the mediation of poetry by the environment is a recurring subject in her poetry.
- **Conversational tone:** Wright's poetry creates a conversational tone through nuances of speech that are captured intimately in the verses. The subject of the poem is brought to the reader through this style to engage the reader in a conversation to which they are privy to through the experience of Wright's poetry.

### **Writing Style**

Judith Wright's poetry typically is related to Australia, its environment and its peoples. Thus, the images and references in her poem are, in a sense, 'Australian'. Wright utilizes modern, frank language which is interspersed with variations in the case of multiple speakers or voices in her poems. The effort is to be intimate and conversational and this is prominent in her writing style.

Wright uses skillful technique to discuss grand themes in an easy, engaging fashion. Her style is restrained and lyrical. Poetic elements like alliteration and assonance are found in her poems. In her subject matter, her poetry is against materialism and exploitation of native cultures. Her poems portray the variegated experiences of being human.

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## 4.5 THE HARP AND THE KING: SUMMARY AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Judith Wright's poem *The Harp and the King* presents an engaging discussion of time in all its thematic perplexity. In its engagements, *The Harp and the King* offers a fruitful viewpoint into Wright's poetic production. As an influential Australian poet, Wright's poetry also provides an entry point into 20th century Australian poetry in all its myriad literary sensibilities.

#### Summary

The poem introduces the reader to an old king who is without a throne. He is wracked with despair and desolation. Finding the emptiness in his heart unbearable, he calls to the harp so that he can fill his heart with music. He feels that music can save him from time's timelessness. He calls a world filled with timelessness a traitor because he does not want to suffer an endless agony which a timeless eternity will bring him. To free himself from this pain and the fear of an eternal suffering, the king wishes to stay in time and believe in mortality since after having lost everything to time, mortality is all that he has left.

The harp begins to speak in reply to the king and says that the subject of its song will be the praise of time. The unique quality of time is that it can change everything we know of as truth. Time can transform a period of barrenness, drought and death into life through the fertility of seeds and rain. From one situation to another, the very time that makes the king weary and despairing can carry hope. This is the mysterious nature of time and creation which is a part of its cycle. The king does not find comfort in the harp's song and sighs. He still feels empty and believes it is so because God has abandoned him too.

The harp continues to sing its praise of time. Time can transform a moment of sorrow and despair into hope, happiness and life. Time can make trees grow fruit and lead people to previously unknown truths and new loves. Unfortunately, the king cannot be convinced and feels that his condition is beyond redemption. He feels he has failed both God and his love. Having betrayed them, he sees no hope for himself. The seeds of love that could have bloomed in his heart are dying instead.

The harp brings both its song and the poem to a conclusion by saying that time with its transforming quality teaches the lesson of change. Even things that are true one moment might change another and hence, time teaches us the betrayal of truth. Time can make a soul suffer and deprive it of nourishment while making one advance on a similarly agonizing path. Time even teaches people to betray by following its example. The soul of a human is shaped by change and distance.

## Analysis

Judith Wright establishes a dialogue between two figures—the king and the harp—in her poem *The Harp and the King*. The king is a figure representing old age and loss whereas the harp represents time. The two figures speak in first-person and their dialogue is a discourse on time in its multi-faceted occurring. It is interesting that while the king is a human participant in this dialogue, the harp is an inanimate, musical object. And yet, the harp seems to be having the upper-hand in this dialogue. One must notice that even in the title the harp supersedes the king. In this sense, Wright seems to already be using her symbols to portray the dominance of time over humans no matter what their stature.

Wright philosophizes on time, issues of past, present and the future, the cyclicity of time, and human mortality and redemption. In its replies to the king, the harp asks the king to persevere in the face of time. Paradoxically, the king must believe in the betrayals of time because of which situations can change for the better. Time is both unchanging and uncontrollable from the point of view of humans like the king but it is also a force of change in nature.

The poem is filled with images and references to loneliness, barrenness and emptiness to portray the despairing condition of the king and the destructive effects of time. These images and references are contrasted by promises of fertility and life in the harp's song of praise sung in favour of time. While Wright provides ample details, the poetic voice itself remains at a distance from the speakers—the harp and the king—who are the main characters of the poem.

Since the harp, a creative instrument of song and music, provides ruminations on the nature of time, it can be noted that for Wright, poetry, or the song, is the vehicle for carrying truths of this scale and grand themes of time, mortality and redemption.

## Writing Techniques

The poetic devices used in the poem are as follows:

- **Personification:** The harp, an inanimate object, is personified by the poet to engage it in dialogue with the king. The harp talks and even sings.
- **Dialogue:** The poem is framed as a dialogue between two figures—the harp and the king. They speak in their own voices and are in midst of a conversation throughout the poem.
- **Alliteration:** The poem has several instances of alliteration, used by Wright in her skillful technique an example of which is 'Make me believe in my mortality'.

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### Check Your Progress

5. In which year was *Woman to Woman* published?
6. In which year was Judith Wright nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature?
7. Give an example of alliteration in the poem *The Harp and the King*.

## 4.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

1. The Montreal Group included poets such as A. M. Klein, A. J. M. Smith, Leo Kennedy, Francis Reginald Scott, E. J. Pratt and Robert Finch.
2. The Montreal Group were inspired by the techniques of poets like Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden whose works and efforts were already revolutionizing poetry.
3. The 'McGill Fortnightly Review' had been co-founded by Smith with F. R. Scott, in an attempt to revolutionize Canadian poetry.
4. In the second stanza of the poem *Like an Old Proud King in a Parable*, Smith employs depersonalization to distance himself from the king in the poem in a sudden act of irony.
5. *Woman to Woman* was published in 1949.
6. Judith Wright was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature in the year 1967.
7. The poem *The Harp and the King* has several instances of alliteration. Wright uses alliteration in the line 'Make me believe in my mortality'.

## 4.7 SUMMARY

- Arthur James Marshall Smith was born in Montreal, Canada, on 8 November 1902. In 1924, he became the co-editor at the 'McGill Daily Literary Supplement', and in 1925 he co-founded the 'McGill Fortnightly Review' with F. R. Scott, which was aimed at revolutionizing Canadian poetry. From 1936 to 1972, Smith was a professor at Michigan State University. He became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1941.
- Smith continued to work in this direction and produced anthologies like *The Blasted Pine* (1957, 1967), edited with F.R. Scott, and *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English and French* (1960). Smith's poetry including the *The Lonely Island* (1936) were published in various collections

such as the *News of the Phoenix* (1943), *Collected Poems* (1962), and *Poems: New and Collected* (1967).

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- As part of the Montreal Group of poets (1920s-1930s), Smith was inspired by the need to bring about a renaissance in Canadian poetry. The Montreal Group included poets such as A. M. Klein, A. J. M. Smith, Leo Kennedy, Francis Reginald Scott, E. J. Pratt and Robert Finch.
- The Montreal Group were inspired by the techniques of poets like Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden whose works and efforts were already revolutionizing poetry.
- Expressionist works often express dissatisfaction, discontent and frustration at accepted norms and crude and hollow experiences. Smith's poetry often talks of this unease of modern life and the heart's wish to break free of norm and conventions.
- Imagism was an early-20th century Anglo-American literary movement which promoted precise imagery and clarity of language. Imagery in Smith's poetry was never lofty but controlled and precise in its direct treatment of the subject.
- Smith wrote expansively on metaphysical poetry throughout his career and his poems have thematic intersections with it, combining emotion and thought in complex but witty metaphors.
- Death is a recurring motif in Smith's poetry, though mostly utilized in a figurative sense. The fascination with death can be linked to Smith's influences that stem from metaphysical poetry, modernism as well as quasi-religious imagery.
- The poem *Like an Old Proud King in a Parable* by A. J. M. Smith first appeared in the 'McGill Fortnightly Review' in the year 1926. The 'McGill Fortnightly Review' had been co-founded by Smith with F. R. Scott, in an attempt to revolutionize Canadian poetry.
- In the first stanza, the readers are introduced to the king who is described as being bitter and angry due to his traditional and boring life in the court. In his frustration, it is evident that the king is wishing for something more exciting, something that even the emblems of power and royalty cannot satisfy.
- Smith brings in a poetic change in the short, second stanza where he asks in first-person, 'O who is that bitter king? It is not I'. By suddenly distancing himself from the king, Smith is employing depersonalization, to stand back and look at the figure of the king separately.
- The third stanza once again brings in the craft of the poet by stressing 'singing' and even though there seems to be barren rock in place of an audience and it is a difficult and lonely life, he is celebrating it because he is being true to his heart.

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- In the poem, Smith describes the story of a typical old, proud King of a parable, with a twist. The king abandons his kingdom, its traditions and worldly pleasures to seek an intellectual life of hardship and struggle which he feels will be rewarding in its liberation.
- Judith Wright was born in Armidale, New South Wales, Australia, on 31 May 1915, to Philip and Ethel Wright. 1946, *The Moving Image* by Judith Wright was published, followed by *Woman to Woman* in 1949. It was around this time that she moved to Queensland with novelist Jack McKinney and in 1950, their daughter Meredith was born. Wright married McKinney in 1962. In 1955, *Two Fires* was published and in 1966, her first collection of shorts stories *The Nature of Love* as well as the poetry book *The Other Half* was published.
- In 1967, Wright was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature. Wright was an environmentalist and was the founding member of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland, along with David Fleay, Kathleen McArthur and Brian Clouston.
- Wright typically engages in Australian themes and setting in her poetry. In this her poetry is part of the larger movement of post-World War II Australian art, which sought to cement a particular idea of Australia and Australian artistic motivation.
- As an environmentalist who championed various causes for the protection and preservation of the natural world, Wright places the relationship between humans and the environment in her poem in interesting ways.
- Wright's poetry is deeply engaged in poetics and the process and purpose of poetry. The forces and limitations of language and the mediation of poetry by the environment is a recurring subject in her poetry.
- Wright's poetry creates a conversational tone through nuances of speech that are captured intimately in the verses.
- Judith Wright's poem *The Harp and the King* presents an engaging discussion of time in all its thematic perplexity. In its engagements, *The Harp and the King* offers a fruitful viewpoint into Wright's poetic production.
- The poem introduces the reader to an old king who is without a throne. He is wracked with despair and desolation. Finding the emptiness in his heart unbearable, he calls to the harp so that he can fill his heart with music. He feels that music can save him from time's timelessness.
- The harp begins to speak in reply to the king and says that the subject of its song will be the praise of time. The unique quality of time is that it can change everything we know of as truth. Time can transform a period of barrenness, drought and death into life through the fertility of seeds and rain.

- Judith Wright establishes a dialogue between two figures—the king and the harp—in her poem *The Harp and the King*. The king is a figure representing old age and loss whereas the harp represents time. The two figures speak in first-person and their dialogue is a discourse on time in its multi-faceted occurring.
- Wright philosophizes on time, issues of past, present and the future, the cyclicity of time, and human mortality and redemption. In its replies to the king, the harp asks the king to persevere in the face of time. The poem is filled with images and references to loneliness, barrenness and emptiness to portray the despairing condition of the king and the destructive effects of time.

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### 4.8 KEY WORDS

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- **Metaphysical poetry:** The term is used for the poetry composed by a group of 17th-century English poets. These poets employed inventive conceits in their poems and emphasised the spoken quality of their poetry.
- **Parable:** It is a simple story that carries within itself a spiritual or moral lesson.
- **Personification:** It is the attribution of human characteristics to non-human objects.

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### 4.9 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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#### Short-Answer Questions

1. How is A.J.M. Smith's poetry influenced by modernist poets?
2. How does Smith bring out the comparison between the poet and the king in the poem *Like an Old Proud King in a Parable*?
3. How are poetry and the environment related in Judith Wright's poetry?
4. What are some of the techniques that Judith Wright uses in her poetry?
5. What does the harp signify in the poem *The Harp and the King*?

#### Long-Answer Questions

1. Discuss the contribution of Smith to Canadian poetry.
2. Critically analyse the poem *Like an Old Proud King in a Parable*.
3. Discuss in detail the trajectory of Judith Wright's literary career.
4. Examine Wright's exploration of time in the poem *The Harp and the King*.

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## 4.10 FURTHER READINGS

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### NOTES

- Trehearne, Brian. 1989. *Aestheticism and the Canadian Modernists: Aspects of a Poetic Influence*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Compton, Anne. 1994. *A.J.M. Smith: Canadian Metaphysical*. Toronto: ECW Press.
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# UNIT 5 DEREK WALCOTT AND CHINUA ACHEBE

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Derek Walcott and  
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## NOTES

### Structure

- 5.0 Introduction
- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 About the Author: Derek Walcott
- 5.3 Critical Appreciation: *A Far Cry From Africa*
- 5.4 About the Author: Chinua Achebe
- 5.5 *Refugee Mother and Child*: Summary and Critical Analysis
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- 5.9 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
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## 5.0 INTRODUCTION

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This unit will introduce you to Saint Lucian poet Derek Walcott and African writer Chinua Achebe. Walcott's mixed ancestry find its expression in his literary works where he employs Caribbean dialects as well as English. This unit will discuss the key concerns presented in the poem *A Far Cry from Africa*. The unit will also discuss the literary career of Chinua Achebe who is also considered the father of modernist African literature for his outstanding literary works. Achebe was a prolific poet and writer who received much acclaim for his literary contributions. The selected poem titled *Refugee Mother and Child* will enable you to explore and appreciate Achebe as an African poet.

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## 5.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the literary career of Derek Walcott
- Examine the poem *A Far Cry from Africa*
- Explain the key concerns presented by Chinua Achebe in his writings
- Critically analyse the poem *Refugee Mother and Child*

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## 5.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: DEREK WALCOTT

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Derek Walcott was born in Saint Lucia, an island in the West Indies, on 23 January 1930. He started his career as a writer at the age of 14, when his first poem was

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printed in the local newspaper. He took training to be a painter but by the age of 18, he realized his passion was writing. In 1948, he published his first collection of poems, which consisted of 25 poems, and sold them on the streets himself.

Walcott's main stepping forward in the field of writing came in 1962 with the compilation of his poems in a collection titled, *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960*, a book which venerated the colonial past of the Caribbean and how it affected the time after the colonization. During an extensive and illustrious career, Walcott was loyal to the same premises of speech, influence, and position. His compilations comprised *Tiepolo's Hound* which was published in 2000. In 2004, *The Prodigal*, a dazzling collection of poems was published followed by *White Egrets* published in 2010, which also received the T.S. Eliot Prize. Walcott won many awards for his work as a poet and as a prominent playwright. In 1971, he won the Obie Award for his play *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. In 1992, Walcott received the Nobel Prize for his contribution in Literature. The Nobel committee described his effort as 'a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment.' MacArthur Foundation awarded Walcott the 'genius' award; he also received Royal Society of Literature Award, the Queen's Medal for Poetry and the inaugural OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature. In 2015, he was honoured with the Griffin Trust for Excellence in Poetry Lifetime Recognition Award. In 2010, he was appointed as a professor of Poetry at the University of Essex and continued on this post till 2013. The critics have considered him to be an influential and significant poet because of the Homeric epic poem *Omeros* which was published in 1990. *Omeros* is considered as one of Walcott's chief accomplishment by many critics.

### Features of Derek Walcott's Work

Over the years, Walcott spent much of his time in Boston, New York, and Saint Lucia. As a consequence, his work echoes Western norms and Island influences; the tone of his work on few occasions' witnessed a shift between the Caribbean dialect and English, and his English also impacted his West Indian heritage. The language of the poet has been commented by Arthur Vogelsang in Los Angeles Times Book Review in the following words, 'These continuing polarities shoot an electricity to each other which is questioning and beautiful and which helps form a vision altogether Caribbean and international, personal (him to you, you to him), independent, and essential for readers of contemporary literature on all the continents'. Walcott is recognized for his practical, direct sophistication, and great illustrations. A leading critic and poet, Sean O'Brien described the work of Walcott in following words, 'One of the handful of poets currently at work in English who are capable of making a convincing attempt to write an epic... His work is conceived on an oceanic scale and one of its fundamental concerns is to give an account of the simultaneous unity and division created by the ocean and by human dealings with it'. O'Brien described *Omeros* as a poetry which matches the standards of *Ars Poetica*. O'Brien opined that it is artistic creation which has its own meaning and nature. In an attempt to analyse Walcott's '*Selected Poems*', a renowned

poet, Glyn Maxwell opined that a powerful effect of Walcott's poem is created as all his poems deal with a strong theme. Maxwell has expressed his views in following words: 'The verse is constantly trembling with a sense of the body in time, the self-slung across metre, whether metre is steps, or nights, or breath, whether lines are days, or years, or tides'.

Walcott also achieved success as a playwright; his famous play, *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, was described by The New Yorker as 'a poem in dramatic form'. Walcott's plays often dealt with factors of the West Indian practice, which frequently focused on the socio-political consequences and understanding of post-colonialism. He has also portrayed different types of issues which deal with myths, metaphoric, traditions and ethical plays. In order to encourage plays and theatre, he along with his twin brother had established the Trinidad Theatre Workshop in 1950, and in 1981, he had also set up the Boston Playwrights' Theatre.

### Check Your Progress

1. Where was Derek Walcott born?
2. In which year was Derek Walcott awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature?

## 5.3 CRITICAL APPRECIATION: *A FAR CRY FROM AFRICA*

Derek Walcott's *A Far Cry from Africa* speaks of racial tensions and the colonial occupation in Africa. The poem shares the dilemma of the black poet. Walcott was awarded the Nobel Prize for his contribution in the field of literature. He was born in the British West Indies on an island, St Lucia. When he was growing, he became aware of his mixed ancestry as his grandfathers were white and grandmothers were black.

The theme of roots and divide become the source of his many poems. The poem *A Far Cry from Africa* was published in 1962. The poem explores the history of Kenya in the 1950s. After the upsurge of Mau Mau rebellion, the kikuyu tribe fought for eight years against settler colonists who were considered illegal trespassers by the natives. Colonialism ruptured the cultural past of the place through violence and cultural hegemony and racial prejudices. The poet feels very grieved and asks himself an awkward question-

*'How can I face such slaughter and be cool?'*

He has love for English language, but his blood has its roots in African family who have been oppressed by the English whose native language he needs to survive as a poet. The title of the poem seems to be ambiguous. It seems that he wants to indicate the reality that he lives on a far island of St Lucia away from Africa and his cry has a long distance to travel to reach to Africa. Or may be the ideal image of Africa is disappointed by the current reality of the colonialism. The poet says:

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*A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt  
Of Africa. Kikuyu, quick as flies,  
Batton upon the bloodstreams of the veldt.  
Corpses are scattered through a paradise.*

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The initial lines portray the poem's setting on the African plain and the country is contrasted with a lion. Kikuyu is the local clan in Kenya but the untainted depiction of the African plain moves rapidly and kikuyu is contrasted with the flies humming around. The heaven of Africa is covered with the carcasses. The images of parasite and worm is used to depict human substance. The casualties are happening by one or other means. The poet then creates the picture of upsurge of Mau Mau of kikuyu against the English in 1950s. They are unable to legitimize their activities. They were considered savages and as useless as the Jews were considered by the Nazis. They were also treated as deplorable. After creating this image, he comes back to the untamed land of Africa where different types of brutes were governing the place before African and European development existed. The whites tried to control and restrict the individuals who were portrayed as following the beat of the drum. They were treated as inhuman or wild or barbarians and savages. The poet denounces the comparison of Mau Mau upsurge with Spanish Common War (1936-39). These lines are hard to interpret. The pioneers of France and England wanted to maintain a distance from another war, so they signed an apathy agreement that was marked by twenty-seven countries which were supported by the military guides of Germany and Italy. But the republicans had no such support. They battled valiantly still lost. In the Mau Uprising, the animalized African fought against the supermen.

The poet is torn between the past and the present. He does not know how to feel about the Mau upsurge. He finds himself a product of both African and English legacy. He does not feel good about whatever happened in the past but as readers we can assume that Walcott will surrender neither Africa nor England.

Walcott brings to light the harrowing impact of colonization. The Jews were also killed in millions because of their ethnicity by Hitler. The poet sees a correlation with the West Indians who had their unforgiving encounter with Spain. The battle was equal to the gorilla's grappling with superman. The gorilla refers to the locals and the superman is the white men. He feels torn between his love for two cultures.

*The drunken officer of British rule, how choose  
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?  
Betray them both, or give back what they give?*

The blended identity of the poet and love for both places makes him unfit to choose. The ballad gives an image of remorselessness and viciousness with hunting down personality.

The poet feels grieved at the past of Kenya in 1950s. A nationalist uprising of Mau Mau led to the death of 13000 people, mostly Kenyans along with a huge number of animals. He decries man's inhumanity to enact justice through slaughter and how deaths were reduced to just numbers and statistics. This obscures the reality of the dead and their suffering whether they were the whites or the savages.

## Themes in *A Far Cry from Africa*

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The poem explores the history of Kenya in 1950s and the violence perpetuated by colonialism.

- **Split Identity:** The major theme of the poem is the split identity of the poet. He could not take side with either Africa or England. He has ambivalent feelings towards the Kenyan terrorists and the counter terrorists, the white colonial government. Both of them seem to be inhuman to him who have slaughtered the common men. Both are savages to him. Being a poet, he cannot favour either of them since the blood of both is running in his veins. He has love for English language, but his blood has its roots in African family who have been oppressed by the English, whose native language he needs to survive as a poet.
- **Colonialism:** Before colonization, Africa was like a paradise. This heaven is in juxtaposition with the corpses and death, and with this imagery the poet recreates the past and history.
- **Devastation and Slaughter:** The poet creates the picture of upsurge of Mau Mau of kikuyu against the English in 1950s. They are unable to legitimize their activities and were considered deplorable. The Mau Mau rebellion led to the death of a staggering 13,000 people.

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### Significance of the Title

The title of the poem seems to be ambiguous. It seems that Derek Walcott wanted to indicate the reality that he lived on a far island of St Lucia away from Africa and so his cry had a long distance to travel to reach to Africa. Or may be the ideal image of Africa is disappointed by the current reality of colonialism. The title of the poem also includes an idiom, 'far cry' which means an impossible thing. But there are many meanings of this phrase. He is writing from far about an African subject.

He is writing from an island which is a distant place from Africa literally and metaphorically. It also seems that the poet hears the poem as a far cry coming from all the way across thousands of miles of ocean. The poet also uses animal imagery in the poem. He depicts slaughter and bloodshed and the humans have been turned into beasts and savages. Violence is perpetrated on the basis of colour.

Violence in kikuyu or violence in 'paradise' led to devastation in the African land. The poet feels divided and split at the end of the poem because of his mixed ancestry. He does not find any escape. He could not take side with either Africa or England.

### Style in *A Far Cry from Africa*

*A Far Cry from Africa* speaks of racial tensions and the colonial occupation in Africa. The poem shares the dilemma of the black poet.

There is no regular rhyme scheme in the poem. The poem has full rhyme as well as slant rhymes. The major meter followed in the poem is iambic pentameter.

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As mentioned above, the title of the poem includes an idiom ‘far cry’. The poet also uses animal imagery in the poem. Walcott uses religious symbols in the poem. He uses the juxtapositions of heaven and corpses. He also connects life and death in the poem. The poet uses cacophony in ‘kikuyu quick’. We can see the use of alliteration in ‘Batten upon the bloodstreams’, ‘colonel of carrion cries’. Anaphora is also used in ‘How can I...How can I’. The poem has scattered rhyme scheme ABABBC and forced rhyme such as ‘again’, ‘Spain’, etc.

### Check Your Progress

3. In which year was *A Far Cry from Africa* published?
4. Give an example of anaphora in the poem *A Far Cry from Africa*.

## 5.4 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: CHINUA ACHEBE

Chinua Achebe was an extraordinary Nigerian poet, critic, novelist, and professor. He was born in November 1930 as Albert Chinuamulogu Achebe to Janet Anaenechi Iloegbunam, leader of a church group, and Isaiah Okafo Achebe, an evangelist and a teacher. Achebe’s family was very spiritual and that is the reason why he always dealt with the themes of Christianity, traditional practices, and family in his works.

He belonged to a village near Odigi and was part of the Igbo tribe, one of the most important tribes in Africa who are known for their rich cultural history and hardworking skills. Other African writers like Edward Blyden, Aime Cesaire, and Paul Robeson belong to the Igbo tribe as well. He was an exceptionally bright student who did his schooling in 1939 at St. Philips Central School and later on studied in the Central School in Nekede. Afterward, he got admission into both Government College as well as Dennis Memorial Grammar School. However, he chose to study at Government College where the students needed to learn English and all the other regional languages were prohibited. He also got a merit scholarship to study medicine from the University of Ibadan in 1948, but he chose subjects of humanities like Theology, history, and English Literature. He lost his financial scholarship because he abandoned the subject of Medicine to study humanities and had to pay his tuition fees.

As a literature student, he was highly critical of the way Europeans described the land and people of Africa like Cary’s *Mister Johnson*. He started publishing works from his University days and graduated with a second class degree. *In a Village Church* was the first short story written by Achebe that dealt with Christian and Nigerian ideals. A similar kind of subject was discussed in his later works also. He had also published stories like *Dead Men’s Path* and *The Old Order in Conflict with the New* during his student days. After completing his studies, he started teaching for a brief time at the Merchants of Light School which was followed by his work at Nigerian Broadcasting Service in 1954. At the same time,

Achebe kept producing brilliant works of literature and also experimented with Nigerian fiction.

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His most popular novels are *Anthills of Savannah*, *Things Fall Apart*, *A Man of People*, and *Arrow of God*. He also compiled collections of African poetry such as *Another Africa*, *Don't Let Him Die and Beware*, and *Soul Brother and Other Poems*. Apart from novels and poems, he was also acclaimed for writing short stories and Children's fiction like *Marriage is a Private Affair*, *Dead Men's Path*, and *Contemporary African Short Stories*. As The African Writers Series' general editor, he also wrote literary essays like 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*' in 1975.

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As far as his personal life is concerned, Achebe was married to his NBS colleague Christiana Chinwe Okoli (Christie) in 1961 and the couple had four children, a daughter named Chinelo in 1962, then his sons Chidi and Ikechukwu Achebe were born followed by the birth of his last child Nwando, who also became an award-winning feminist writer. At the beginning of their courtship period, Achebe's first masterpiece *Things Fall Apart* came out in 1958 which was critically appreciated as the greatest work in African literature. After writing his second novel *No Longer at Ease*, in 1960 he was granted a Rockefeller Fellowship which was the peak of his literary career.

Achebe got the opportunity to do a comprehensive study about the social, cultural, and political issues arising in Africa by traveling around the continent for six months. In addition to this, he got the chance of going to the United States of America after receiving a Fellowship for Creative Artists. In a literary conference for African writers in English held in 1962 at Makerere University College, Achebe shared the stage with other eminent figures like Wole Soyinka, Kofi Awonoor, and Langston Hughes. He was a great friend of Christopher Okigbo, a Nigerian poet with whom he established the Citadel Press for young readers. Unfortunately, in 1967 he lost Okigbo during the Nigeria-Biafra War and was saddened by the death of his dear friend when he wrote *A Wake for Okigbo*.

The writer also worked for two different publications, *Okike* and *Nsukkasope*, after the war, which showcased the oral customs and indigenous stories of the Igbo tribe. In 1972, Achebe joined the University of Massachusetts, where he discussed the critical perspectives of his homeland as depicted in the western scholarship. Finally, he returned in 1976 only to teach at the University of Nigeria as he wanted to study more about the Igbo tradition as well as renew *Okike's* publication. Soon after in 1979, he was honoured with the first Nigerian National Merit Award for his contribution to the field of academia. Chinua Achebe was presented with more than thirty awards as well as fellowships, but the most significant honour he received was in 2007 for the Commonwealth Poetry Prize and the Man Booker International Prize. At the age of eighty-two, the master of African Literature died in March 2013 after suffering from a short illness in Boston.

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### Writing Style of Chinua Achebe

Achebe's work comprises several folk tales, oral traditions, and ethnic narratives that revolve around the Igbo community. He incorporated different elements of folk and oral literature in his poetry and novels; in the first novel *Things Fall Apart* he includes the folktale element of the Sky and the Earth. It makes the narrative of the plot very interesting to the readers and they can also analyse the theme of his writings properly. Apart from oral literature, he evokes the idioms, similes, and proverbs from the African continent to make his audience aware of the cultural practices of his community. This is reflected in his works like *Things Fall Apart*, *Anthills of Savannah*, or *Arrow of God*. Moreover, the writer also included the characteristics of traditional dancing and folk songs in his works. Women are shown to be humming the traditional songs of the Igbo tribe; similarly, the Christian missionaries sing hymns. The extensive use of traditional methods is aimed at showing the ethical values of modern Western society.

Achebe showcased his mastery of English Literature in his writings. He altered the English syntax and idioms to form a new kind of literature for his readers which represented the multi-ethnic Nigeria context. He used the literary devices of imagery, metaphors, and symbolism in his work to showcase the true conditions of the African people and analysed the reasons why his heritage disappeared after colonisation.

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### 5.5 REFUGEE MOTHER AND CHILD: SUMMARY AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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*No Madonna and Child could touch  
that picture of a mother's tenderness  
for a son she soon would have to forget.  
The air was heavy with odours  
of diarrhoea of unwashed children  
with washed-out ribs and dried-up  
bottoms struggling in laboured  
steps behind blown empty bellies. Most  
mothers there had long ceased  
to care but not this one; she held  
a ghost smile between her teeth  
and in her eyes the ghost of a mother's  
pride as she combed the rust-coloured  
hair left on his skull and then –  
singing in her eyes - began carefully  
to part it...In another life this  
must have been a little daily  
act of no consequence before his*

*breakfast and school; now she  
did it like putting flowers  
on a tiny grave.*

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### Summary of the Poem

The poem *Refugee Mother and Child* begins with the scene of a mother holding her child in a refugee camp with the same kind of compassion that is portrayed in the paintings of Mother Mary holding Jesus Christ. According to the speaker, neither the Biblical imagery of tenderness nor any other act of love can surpass the pathos of the refugee mother in a camp. It can be presumed that her child is not going to survive for a long time as in the third line it is mentioned that ‘for a son, she soon would have to forget’. Despite knowing the reality, she is filled with immense love and tenderness for her son. However, she may have to deal with the bitter truth and learn to lead a life without her child. In every culture, a mother is held supremely high as she has the divine right of giving birth. In the poem, the depiction of ‘a Madonna and a holy child’ is compared with Jesus Christ and his mother Mary. All the painters of the Renaissance period used to paint the religious images of Mary with little Christ or Christ on the cross. The poet wants to assert that although the painting of a Madonna and the holy child is perceived as the highest level of motherhood in the world, the picturesque representation of a mother caring for her sick son in a refugee camp outshines any other painting as it is poignant in reality.

Next, the poet showcases the aura of death, illness, and disease that revolves around the camp. The inhabitants have to live in dire conditions, as the air is too ‘heavy’ with the pungent smell of ‘unwashed children’ suffering from diarrhoea. They cannot be treated properly as there are no medical facilities nearby and the children cannot be given a bath as well. Ironically, most of the children are malnourished as their ribs are ‘washed out’ due to ‘empty’ bellies. The poet tries to argue that hunger has caused intense malnourishment in the children and that’s why their stomach has become inflated.

It is terrifying to imagine the ‘dried up’ bottoms of children as they struggle to walk in ‘laboured steps’. The children are not even capable of doing basic activities like walking properly on their own; they have turned into just skin and bones. Disease and despair have become a normal way of life for most of the mothers in the camp, as they have already stopped worrying about the health of their children. Due to destitution, the mothers are obligated to become emotionless and ignorant towards their families. They only await death now as they cannot cope with the poor living conditions and famine. Nonetheless, one mother cannot fall under this category, as she still cares for her beloved son. There is a trace of a ‘ghostly’ smile between her teeth on one hand and a ghost of motherly pride in her eyes on the other. This suggests that she is trying to fake a smile, by disguising her internal pain. Her smile seems very pale or weak, to the extent that the poet compares it with a ghostly smile. It can also be implied that the woman kept the ghost of her happy memories with her son when everything was normal.

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She has a motherly pride with which she combs her son's hair on his 'skull'. It is paradoxical to note that the poet has used the word 'skull' rather than 'head' which means that the child is extremely impoverished; also his 'rust' coloured hair suggests that he suffers from kwashiorkor, a disease caused due to protein deficiency. How she executes this duty makes the readers speculate that in a normal scenario, combing the hair of a child is seen as a very basic activity done by every mother. However, the way she is combining her dying son's hair resonates with the idea that she is placing flowers on a little grave. Achebe is articulating that combing her son's hair is a kind of final goodbye for the mother as he is already dead. He stresses the line 'in another line', which can be inferred in numerous ways. First of all, it can mean reincarnation, as there is a Buddhist belief that souls are born again after physical death. Thus, if the mother was born again in a different time, then combing the hair of her son before school would seem like a daily activity. Then, secondly, it also connotes to the fact that maybe the mother did not have to suffer from the death of her child in a refugee camp in another life. A person isn't born as a refugee; they are forced to leave their homes after man-made or natural calamity and seek shelter in some other country. Therefore, it can be presumed that the mother mentioned in the poem became a refugee after the Nigerian Civil War, alluding to the historical context of Achebe's poem. It is a very realistic poem that discusses the heart-wrenching situation and deplorable state of a refugee mother who tends to her dying child till the very end.

### Themes in the Poem

The prominent themes of the poem have been discussed below:

#### 1. Motherly Love

The foremost theme of this poem is the bond shared between a mother and her children. Achebe's *A Refugee Mother and Child* denotes the bravery and perseverance of a struggling mother during a time of crisis like war. After an unlikely occurrence of events, her life is completely transformed and she is left in a state of trauma. However, contrary to the other refugee women in the camp who leave their children in the hands of fate, the titular character doesn't give up easily. Despite knowing that her child might not be able to survive in the refugee due to lack of treatment or facilities, she keeps looking after him by fulfilling all his needs.

Although she is fearful that she will be left alone after her child passes away, she hides her pain by disguising it with a 'ghost smile'. In the first line of the poem, Achebe alludes to the Biblical picture of Jesus Christ and his mother Mary. A parallel is drawn between Christ's act of resurrection for humankind and the refugee mother's sacrifice for her son. Just like Christ, a mother can also go to any extent to save her children from any calamity. The conditions of a refugee camp are generally unhygienic and unclean, that's the reason why the mother feels sceptical about her child's overall well-being. She reminisces about her life before the war had taken place and cherishes all the wonderful time she had spent in her child's company. Achebe also comments subtly on the harsh reality of all those mothers

who might have lost their children in various kinds of war. The refugee mother agonises at her condition as she cannot do anything to treat her child or alleviate his sufferings. This poem highlights the fact that people take everything for granted and don't cherish the little moments in life until everything is taken away.

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## 2. Repercussions of Violence and War

The theme of war plays an important role in the poem, *A Refugee Mother and Child*. Any type of war can have a lot of negative consequences which can lead to the destruction of nations, infrastructure, economy, and families. The poet depicts the actual scenario that takes place after the war in a refugee camp, where people have to struggle even for the basic amenities of staying alive. The most terrifying effect of a war is the breakdown of a familial household where parents are separated from their children. In the hour of crisis, camps are usually established to provide medical aid as well as accommodation to people who are the victims of natural disasters or ethnic violence.

The historical context of the poem is the Nigerian Civil War that was popularly known as the Biafran War. It was a civil war fought for three years from July 1967 to January 1970 between the Republic of Biafra and Nigeria. This war was responsible for the deaths of many people in Nigeria. Achebe supported the cause of the Igbo people who were demanding an independent state in Biafra and even wrote a work in 2012 named as *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*. Achebe also described the brutality of the war which led to widespread suffering, sickness, and deaths of many people in his poetry.

### Narrative Style of the Poem

Chinua Achebe's poetry is a reflection of the socio, economic, and cultural developments of the African society. In most of his writings, he explores the indigenous cultures of the African people and how they presume their national identity after the colonial period. The poem *A Refugee Mother and Child* revolves around the reality of war and its effects on the lives of common people. They tend to live in an unpredictable environment, where they don't have a sense of future or permanence. In this poem, Achebe deals with the life of a mother who has been displaced from her home after the war and reflects on the predicament of her child who is extremely sick.

The poem has freestyle, as it is not properly structured into various stanzas. The style of writing followed by Achebe is similar to prose, as all the lines form complete meanings. By leaving some space between the lines, Achebe gives a kind of poetic feel to his writing. Also, it is integral to observe that the poem does not follow any specific rhyme scheme, rhythm, or a meter. As far as the language is concerned in the poem, Achebe uses vernacular language which is easier for the readers to understand properly. The simplicity of the language makes it more appealing to read, as powerful allegorical references are drawn from real life. Achebe writes the poem from a third person's narrative, to comment on the pathetic living conditions of the people in a refugee camp. From the starting itself, the poem

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has a melancholic tone which reflects the plight of a refugee mother who is unable to save her child's from impending death.

Achebe has used the literary technique of imagery throughout the poem, which makes it passionate and heart-wrenching. All the images drawn in the narrative are highly realistic rather than being grandiloquent. The poem opens with the imagery of Mother Mary with her child, Jesus Christ who had sacrificed his life for the sake of humanity. Universally, the image of Mary with Christ is perceived as an epitome of motherhood and unconditional love. The poet wants to draw a parallel between the portrait of 'Madonna with the Holy Child' and the Refugee Mother with her dying child. He wants to ignite a sense of humanity and compassion in his readers by arguing that the imagery of the refugee mother even surpasses the pain of Mother Mary. He continually uses the terms like 'washed out ribs', 'unwashed', 'laboured steps' and 'dried up bottoms', etc. to sensitize the readers by depicting the tribulations of children staying in the refugee camps. Nevertheless, Achebe also includes the imagery of 'ghost smile' to imply that the refugee mother is hiding her agony by faking a smile for the sake of her son. For the refugees, all their dreams or hopes for the future seem to have been shattered. They don't have any motivation to live anymore or look after their children as they are under immense trauma. The pathetic plight of the mother is made more evident when Achebe uses the imagery of 'rust coloured hair on his skull' which makes it clear that her son is going to die soon as his skull is visible.

Ultimately, he juxtaposes the act of placing flowers on a grave to combing the hair of a child. In everyday life, this would have been a normal scenario where a mother is shown to be combing her child's hair. However, in the context of this poem, it is evident that she is paying her last respects to her son by placing flowers on the grave. This is the most grotesque imagery used by Achebe, which is almost horrifying and realistic at the same time. Therefore, by incorporating images from day to day life and using simple kind of language, Achebe makes his poem relatable to every individual.

Chinua Achebe's poem *Refugee Mother and Child* highlights the predicament of the refugees, who have lost everything after wartime or a natural disaster. The poem illustrates the pathetic narrative of poverty, disease, and power politics. Achebe also discusses the miseries of a mother and the title also is driven around the same theme. The poem touches the innermost aspects of the reader's heart and evokes a sense of humanity and sensibility. The visual representation of the poem talks about the sacrifices and tribulations of every mother, who suffers from pain after the death of her young child. It establishes Achebe as a sentimental poet, who evokes the suffering of the marginalized people. The poet has a multidimensional perspective towards wars, where he critically analyses the brutality and agonies of refugees. There are so many underlying themes like motherly love, poverty, and death discussed in the poem. Achebe uses the technique of imagery throughout the poem to set the melancholic tone for the readers. It's important to cherish every moment we have with our loved ones without taking anything for granted.

### Check Your Progress

5. Name some of the prominent African writers who belonged to the Igbo tribe.
6. Name the literary work written by Achebe in memory of Christopher Okigbo.
7. Which work of Achebe espouses Achebe's support for an independent state in Biafra?

### NOTES

## 5.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

1. Derek Walcott was born in Saint Lucia, an island in the West Indies, on 23 January 1930.
2. In 1992, Walcott received the Nobel Prize for his contribution in Literature.
3. *A Far Cry from Africa* was published in 1962.
4. In Walcott's poem, anaphora is used in the line 'How can I...How can I'.
5. Chinua Achebe, Edward Blyden, Aime Cesaire, and Paul Robeson belonged to the Igbo tribe.
6. Saddened by the death of his dear friend Christopher Okigbo, Achebe wrote *A Wake for Okigbo*.
7. Achebe supported the cause of the Igbo people who were demanding an independent state in Biafra and even wrote a work in 2012 named as *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*.

## 5.7 SUMMARY

- Derek Walcott was born in Saint Lucia, an island in the West Indies, on 23 January 1930. Walcott's main stepping forward in the field of writing came in 1962 with the compilation of his poems in a collection titled, *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960*, a book which venerated the colonial past of the Caribbean.
- In 2004, *The Prodigal*, a dazzling collection of poems was published followed by *White Egrets* published in 2010, which also received the T.S. Eliot Prize. Walcott won many awards for his work as a poet and as a prominent playwright.
- In 1992, Walcott received the Nobel Prize for his contribution in Literature. MacArthur Foundation awarded Walcott the 'genius' award; he also received Royal Society of Literature Award, the Queen's Medal for Poetry

## NOTES

- and the inaugural OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature. *Omeros* is considered as one of Walcott's chief accomplishment by many critics.
- Derek Walcott's *A Far Cry from Africa* speaks of racial tensions and the colonial occupation in Africa. The poem shares the dilemma of the black poet. The poem which was published in 1962 explores the history of Kenya in the 1950s.
  - After the upsurge of Mau Mau rebellion, the kikuyu tribe fought for eight years against settler colonists who were considered illegal trespassers by the natives. Colonialism ruptured the cultural past of the place through violence and cultural hegemony and racial prejudices. The poet in the poem *A Far Cry from Africa* creates the picture of upsurge of Mau Mau of kikuyu against the English in 1950s. They are unable to legitimize their activities.
  - The poet is torn between the past and the present. He does not know how to feel about the Mau upsurge. He finds himself a product of both African and English legacy. He does not feel good about whatever happened in the past but as readers we can assume that Walcott will surrender neither Africa nor England.
  - There is no regular rhyme scheme in the poem *A Far Cry from Africa*. The poem has full rhyme as well as slant rhymes. The major meter followed in the poem is iambic pentameter. The title of the poem includes an idiom 'far cry'. The poet also uses animal imagery in the poem. Walcott uses religious symbols in the poem. He uses the juxtapositions of heaven and corpses.
  - Chinua Achebe was an extraordinary Nigerian poet, critic, novelist, and professor. He was born in November 1930 and was part of the Igbo tribe, one of the most important tribes in Africa who are known for their rich cultural history and hardworking skills. Other African writers like Edward Blyden, Aime Cesaire, and Paul Robeson belong to the Igbo tribe as well.
  - Achebe's popular novels are *Anthills of Savannah*, *Things Fall Apart*, *A Man of People*, and *Arrow of God*. He also compiled collections of African poetry such as *Another Africa*, *Don't Let Him Die and Beware*, and *Soul Brother and Other Poems*. Apart from novels and poems, he was also acclaimed for writing short stories and Children's fiction like *Marriage is a Private Affair*, *Dead Men's Path*, and *Contemporary African Short Stories*. He also wrote literary essays like 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*' in 1975.
  - Achebe's first masterpiece *Things Fall Apart* came out in 1958 which was critically appreciated as the greatest work in African literature. After writing his second novel *No Longer at Ease*, in 1960 he was granted a Rockefeller Fellowship which was the peak of his literary career.

- Achebe's work comprises several folk tales, oral traditions, and ethnic narratives that revolve around the Igbo community. He incorporated different elements of folk and oral literature in his poetry and novels; in the first novel *Things Fall Apart* he includes the folktale element of the Sky and the Earth. Apart from oral literature, he evokes the idioms, similes, and proverbs from the African continent to make his audience aware of the cultural practices of his community.
- The poem *Refugee Mother and Child* begins with the scene of a mother holding her child in a refugee camp with the same kind of compassion that is portrayed in the paintings of Mother Mary holding Jesus Christ. It can be presumed that her child is not going to survive for a long time as in the third line it is mentioned that 'for a son, she soon would have to forget'.
- Next, the poet showcases the aura of death, illness, and disease that revolves around the camp. The inhabitants have to live in dire conditions, as the air is too 'heavy' with the pungent smell of 'unwashed children' suffering from diarrhoea. They cannot be treated properly as there are no medical facilities nearby and the children cannot be given a bath as well.
- Due to destitution, the mothers are obligated to become emotionless and ignorant towards their families. Nonetheless, one mother cannot fall under this category, as she still cares for her beloved son. However, the way she is combining her dying son's hair resonates with the idea that she is placing flowers on a little grave. Achebe is articulating that combing her son's hair is a kind of final goodbye for the mother as he is already dead.
- The historical context of the poem is the Nigerian Civil War that was popularly known as the Biafran War. It was a civil war fought for three years from July 1967 to January 1970 between the Republic of Biafra and Nigeria. This war was responsible for the deaths of many people in Nigeria. Achebe supported the cause of the Igbo people who were demanding an independent state in Biafra and even wrote a work in 2012 named as *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*.

## NOTES

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### 5.8 KEY WORDS

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- **Idiom:** It is an expression whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words in it.
- **Iambic Pentameter:** It is a line of verse with five metrical feet, each consisting of one short (or unstressed) syllable followed by one long (or stressed) syllable.
- **Cacophony:** It refers to a mixture of harsh and inharmonious sounds.
- **Anaphora:** It is a rhetorical device that consists of repeating a sequence of words at the beginnings of neighbouring clauses, thereby lending them emphasis.

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## 5.9 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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### NOTES

#### Short-Answer Questions

1. What are some of the themes explored in *A Far Cry from Africa*?
2. Write a short note on the significance of the title 'A Far Cry from Africa'.
3. What are some of the literary devices used in the poem *A Far Cry from Africa*?
4. How is the combing of the son's hair in *Refugee Mother and Child* similar to placing flowers on a grave?
5. Write a short note on the historical context of the poem *Refugee Mother and Child*.

#### Long-Answer Questions

1. Discuss the exploration of racial tension and colonialism in the poem *A Far Cry from Africa*.
2. Examine Walcott's assessment of the Mau Mau Rebellion in *A Far Cry from Africa*.
3. Analyse Chinua Achebe's poem *Refugee Mother and Child* as a celebration of motherhood.

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## 5.10 FURTHER READINGS

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## UNIT 6 JEAN ARASANAYAGAM: *IN THE MONTH OF JULY*

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*Jean Arasanayagam:  
In the Month of July*

### NOTES

#### Structure

- 6.0 Introduction
- 6.1 Objectives
- 6.2 About the Author: Jean Arasanayagam
  - 6.2.1 *In the Month of July*: Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 6.3 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 6.4 Summary
- 6.5 Key Words
- 6.6 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 6.7 Further Readings

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### 6.0 INTRODUCTION

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This unit will introduce you to the life of Jean Arasanayagam and her poem. Jean Arasanayagam is a poet and writer of fiction and non-fiction. She deals with the socio-political issues plaguing Sri Lanka. *In the Month of July* is a poem which is an account of a man who was attempting to get away from his chasers and in the bargain gets attacked by a mob resulting in his death. Arasanayagam's work has been published widely in Sri Lanka and abroad.

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### 6.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the literary career of Jean Arasanayagam
- Critically analyse the poem *In the Month of July*

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### 6.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: JEAN ARASANAYAGAM

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The English language poet and creative writer Jean Arasanayagam was born in Kandy, Sri Lanka in 1931. Most of her work focuses on the religious and ethnic unrest prevailing in Sri Lanka. The poet's husband, Thiyagarajah Arasanayagam and her two daughters, Devasundari and Parvathi are all acclaimed writers. Jean Arasanayagam is regarded as a prominent postcolonial writer of Sri Lanka. In her writing career, she has published many internationally acclaimed poems. Her poems are a critical political analysis of the problems of racial discrimination and political violence which are prevalent in modern Sri Lanka due to the searing enmity between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority. In 1984, Jean Arasanayagam received the National Award for Literature. Arasanayagam belonged to the Burgher family

## NOTES

and got married to a Tamilian; this led to a situation of identity crisis as the Tamil linkage after her marriage made her a casualty of the ethno-political violence during 1983. The riots started in the month of July and her family like many others had to live in refugee camps in order to stay safe. Her poetry has always been influenced by the varied experiences of her life. However, the events of 1983 completely changed the themes and outlook of her poems. The poems written after 1983 deal with the issue of identity crisis in the country and the shocking moments associated with the outbreak of violence in the country. Her poems often try to deal with her personal status in the country which does not consider her as a citizen.

Arasanayagam's renowned poem *The Ruined Gopuram* describes the destruction of the Hindu temple. The poem describes the way the temple was turned into ruins and gives details of the sufferings and pain of the people during this destruction. The poem primarily highlights the belief of people in spite of suffering misery.

Arasanayagam poems are descriptive to such an extent that they evoke intense and emotional feelings among the readers. The opening lines of her poems are very impactful and *The Ruined Gopuram* is no exception. In just few words, the poet is able to portray the destruction which took place at the once beautiful landscape. The unusual atmosphere is highlighted by 'white sands and palmyra fonds', 'freakishly black'. The words used by the poet are brilliant, for example, "Beside the broken walls". The word 'broken' signifies the deplorable condition of the complete event. The poet's imagery is very powerful. The shift in the scenes is supported by strong images.

The poet employs excellent symbolism and words which add depth and glamour to her poems. Her style of diction is par excellence as it is able to generate strong emotions amongst the readers. The poet is able to transfer the feeling of chaos to her readers with the skillful use of poetic devices.

Besides writing emotionally strong poems, Arasanayagam has written poems like *Garden*. *Garden* is recognized as a significant work of the poet and is closely associated with the Biblical themes of the Garden of Eden denoting enticement, immorality and eviction. The poem's visual imagery is linked with other themes such as colonialism and quest for true identity.

About her poetry, Jean Arasanayagam says, 'Much of my work begins as a self-questioning, as a kind of private dialogue with myself'. The poet criticizes people who think for the wellbeing of their blood relations and do not care about the rest of the people. Through her poems she wants to arouse humanitarian feelings so that the hearts of people are filled with compassion, empathy and thoughtfulness as she strongly believes that these qualities will help in removing feelings of hatred and racial discrimination among the people. Jean Arasanayagam has been able to maintain her popularity through her literary works.

*In the Month of July* is another poem which is as expressive as her other poems especially *The Ruined Gopuram*. The poem is a part of the collection

titled *Apocalypse* published after the riots of 1983. The poet's description of the man who dies while escaping his pursuers is able to convey the agony of people during the unrest of 1983. The poet remembers the aiming game which children played with stones. In this poem these pebbles have been transformed into bullets causing the death of the man. The individual in the poem becomes a victim of ethnic riots. He was in the process of getting away from the people who were trying to kill him but got attacked by a larger group and died.

Jean Arasanayagam:  
*In the Month of July*

## NOTES

### 6.2.1 *In the Month of July: Summary and Critical Appreciation*

The poet starts the poem by remembering the game of pebbles played by children. She further adds that although the game just involved throwing stones but it required some amount of skill – ‘Skillfully tossing them from back of hand to palm requiring a certain skill’. The pebbles are replaced by stones and rocks as the children grow old. The stones are able to smash the skulls. The innocent childhood game is no longer harmless fun as it has developed into a weapon for killing people.

The man climbs a tree in order to escape the mob but the mob begins to aim stones at him which makes him fall from the tree, thus, killing him. A man fleeing from the mobs, ‘... climbed a tree / The mob aimed stones at him / Until they got him down’ and the poet in these lines depicts the extent of violence and inhuman behaviour which was displayed by people during the riots. The poet's remark that the man was slippery with blood just goes on to tell that he was already badly hurt and almost dead when he fell from the tree – ‘slippery with blood, his body already battered’. Through these words the poet tries to amplify the inhumane behavior of the mob.

### Critical Analysis of the Poem

*In the month of July*, the poet tries to draw a connection between the pebble throwing game played in the childhood and the stone pelting during riots. The poet was very disturbed by the riots and she remembers the minutest of its details. Her poem tries to reflect upon her personal identity crisis along with the tortures faced by people. Death is a recurring theme of her poems in the collection as she had personally witnessed violent killings and barely survived the riots of July 1983.

According to Sri Lankan poet and writer, Reginald Siriwardena most of poems in *Apocalypse* 83 indicate the ‘collective sense of horror and tragedy’ (qtd. in Sjöbohm 38) and point towards the poet's personal experience and talk about her fears and vulnerable state of mind.

The poet has equated the constant exercising of violence on the Tamils to a game— a fun activity or an entertaining sight. She is trying to depict that violence is an inherent aspect of human nature and how the innocent game of throwing pebbles has got converted into throwing of stones with the potential to kill human beings. The mob is able to kill the man by throwing stones at him which once again depicts the strong inhuman aspect of human nature. Most of the people in the mob did not even know the man on the tree.

## NOTES

The image of the victim being slippery with blood even while he was on the tree conveys the poet's attempt to highlight the extent of violence. The exhibition of violence has taken the form of sacrificial reflection which took place during ancient times. Through her poetic devices in the poem the poet not only wishes to criticize the discrimination but also wants to present her understanding of few of the actual events which are a part of history and have been presented by other writers as well. She has attempted to provide her version of the riots. The events in her poems are not a figment of her imagination. The fiction created around historical events can have many interpretations as remarked by Hayden White. According to White, historical as well as fiction writers create 'a verbal image of 'reality' as the writers are at liberty to project their own perception. There is no way to authenticate the various versions as they are merely the reproduction of the writer's mind and self-interpretation.

Her poems make the readers relive the events which took place in the year 1983. The poet has made a self-admission that

*Nothing's important but the poems  
I have written, the lives I have lived  
In each of them Which once destroyed  
Can never be remembered*

In these lines, the poet emphasis that poems help her in keeping her memories alive and she will be able to remember the stories behind the death of so many innocent people. Her poems on violence during that period provide evidence against all those manipulative political figures who try to justify the racial riots in one way or the other.

Therefore, her poems can be identified as her declaration of resistance, her efforts to speak against the wrong and the public procrastination against the defilement of minority rights. She has used several narrative and metaphorical techniques in order to increase the effect of ferocity in her poem *In the Month of July*. She has outrightly accused people who approved violence in the name of ethnic discrimination. They were the ones who pulled the shots from behind the scenes and ignored the loss to life and property. These political minds were selfishly looking for personal gain.

### Check Your Progress

1. When and where was Jean Arasanayagam born?
2. In which year did Jean Arasanayagam receive the National award for Literature?
3. Name some of the prominent poems of Jean Arasanayagam.

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### 6.3 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

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Jean Arasanayagam:  
*In the Month of July*

1. Jean Arasanayagam was born in Kandy, Sri Lanka in 1931.
2. In 1984, Jean Arasanayagam received the National Award for Literature.
3. Jean Arasanayagam wrote poems such as *The Ruined Gopuram*, *Garden* and *In the Month of July*.

### NOTES

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### 6.4 SUMMARY

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- The English language poet and creative writer Jean Arasanayagam was born in Kandy, Sri Lanka in 1931. Most of her work focuses on the religious and ethnic unrest prevailing in Sri Lanka. The poet's husband, Thiyagarajah Arasanayagam and her two daughters, Devasundari and Parvathi are all acclaimed writers.
- In 1984, Jean Arasanayagam received the National Award for Literature. Arasanayagam belonged to the Burgher family and married a Tamilian; this led to a situation of identity crisis as the Tamil linkage after her marriage made her a casualty of the ethno-political violence during 1983.
- The events of 1983 completely changed the themes and outlook of Arasanayagam's poems. The poems written after 1983 deal with the issue of identity crisis in the country and the shocking moments associated with the outbreak of violence in the country.
- Arasanayagam's renowned poem *The Ruined Gopuram* describes the destruction of the Hindu temple. *Garden* is recognized as a significant work of the poet and is closely associated with the Biblical themes of the Garden of Eden denoting enticement, immorality and eviction.
- *In the Month of July* is a part of the collection titled *Apocalypse* published after the riots of 1983. The poet's description of the man who dies while escaping his pursuers is able to convey the agony of people during the unrest of 1983.
- The poet starts the poem by remembering the game of pebbles played by children. The pebbles are replaced by stones and rocks as the children grow old. The stones are able to smash the skulls. The innocent childhood game is no longer harmless fun as it has developed into a weapon for killing people.
- The poet's remark that the man was slippery with blood just goes on to tell that he was already badly hurt and almost dead when he fell from the tree- 'slippery with blood, his body already battered'.

## NOTES

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### 6.5 KEY WORDS

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- **Colonialism:** It is the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically.
- **Sinhalese:** This term is used for people who were originally from northern India and now form the majority of the population of Sri Lanka.

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### 6.6 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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#### Short-Answer Questions

1. Write a short note on the life and works of Jean Arasanayagam.
2. What were the major influences on the life of Jean Arasanayagam?
3. Write a short note on Arasanayagam's poem *The Ruined Gopuram*.

#### Long-Answer Questions

1. Discuss the significance of the title of the poem *In the Month of July*.
2. Critically analyse the poem *In the Month of July*.

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### 6.7 FURTHER READINGS

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**BLOCK - II**  
**PROSE (ESSAY)**

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*Ralph Waldo Emerson  
and Irving Babbitt*

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**UNIT 7 RALPH WALDO EMERSON  
AND IRVING BABBITT**

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**NOTES**

**Structure**

- 7.0 Introduction
- 7.1 Objectives
- 7.2 About the Author: Ralph Waldo Emerson
  - 7.2.1 Thematic Concerns in Emerson's Works
  - 7.2.2 Narrative Style of the Author
- 7.3 'The American Scholar'
  - 7.3.1 Narrative Style of the Essay
  - 7.3.2 Themes in the Essay
- 7.4 About the Author: Irving Babbitt
- 7.5 'The Critic and the American Life'
- 7.6 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 7.7 Summary
- 7.8 Key Words
- 7.9 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 7.10 Further Readings

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**7.0 INTRODUCTION**

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This unit will introduce the readers to the American writers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Irving Babbitt. Emerson is recognized for his exceptional literary contribution in the world of academia. Emerson was a prolific writer, essayist, and poet who received much acclaim for his literary contributions as well as his ideas regarding transcendentalism. The essay titled 'The American Scholar' will enable the readers to discover and appreciate the importance of Emerson as an American writer. Therefore, the unit will begin with a brief study on the life and works of Ralph Waldo Emerson followed by a comprehensive analysis of the text.

This unit will also delve into the life and works of Irving Babbitt, especially with regards to his work titled, 'The Critic and The American Life' - a work that talks about criticism in the American landscape. He was a conservative American critic, who emphasized upon thorough self-reflection.

## NOTES

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### 7.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss in detail the life and literary works of Ralph Waldo Emerson
- Examine the ideas put forward in the essay ‘The American Scholar’
- Explain the philosophy New Humanism and the ideas of Irving Babbitt
- Analyse the central idea of the essay ‘The Critic and the American Life’

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### 7.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: RALPH WALDO EMERSON

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Ralph Waldo Emerson was born on 25 May 1803 to Reverend William Emerson and Ruth Haskins. His father, William Emerson was the chaplain of the Massachusetts Senate and the pastor of the First Unitarian Church of Boston. Emerson was referred to by everyone in his family as Waldo, which was his second name. After the death of William Emerson in 1811 from stomach cancer, he was raised by his mother and Aunt Mary Emerson who had a great influence on his life. Even after living in a state of near-poverty, Emerson was able to complete his primary education at the Boston Public Latin School.

He wanted to serve as a reverend just like his father, so in 1826 he joined the Harvard Divinity School after which he was qualified to preach. In 1827, he started developing symptoms of tuberculosis and in the same year he met his first wife, a seventeen-year-old poet Ellen Tucker. Their marital harmony couldn’t last long as Ellen died in less than two years of their marriage due to tuberculosis. Subsequently, in 1826 he began his ministerial career at the church but couldn’t continue it for a longer period as he didn’t agree with some of the orthodox practices. Saddened by his wife’s death, he went on a tour to Europe, where he met the greatest thinkers of the nineteenth century like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Stuart Mill, William Wordsworth, and Thomas Carlyle who eventually became his good friends. Later on, in 1833 he returned to America where he started giving public lectures on ‘the uses of natural history’ and other diverse subjects like human culture, literature, or history. He got married to his second wife Lydia Jackson in 1835 and later settled down in the region of Concord in Massachusetts.

He published his first book, *Nature* in 1836 which comprised the whole idea of his philosophy but it wasn’t a very successful work. In the next year, he presented a lecture at Harvard known as ‘The American Scholar’ which became very renowned and its copies were sold all over the country. He also became a part of the Transcendental Club, where he met intellectuals like Margaret Fuller, Alcott, and Henry David Thoreau. He started working as the editor of ‘The Dial’ which was a representation of the transcendent movement. Afterward, he published

a series of essays in two volumes, including ‘The Over-Soul’ and ‘Self-Reliance’ in 1841. He was also recognized as a great poet who published a collection in 1846 called *Poems*. He renewed his career as an orator and travelled to England in 1847 to write and gather information for the English Traits. Finally in 1850 *Representative Men* came out. In the later part of his life, he became an eminent poet, essay, philosopher, and social thinker. It can be estimated that he presented over fifteen hundred lectures all over the nation but eventually in 1882 he died due to getting sick from pneumonia.

*Ralph Waldo Emerson  
and Irving Babbitt*

## NOTES

### 7.2.1 Thematic Concerns in Emerson’s Works

Transcendentalism was a philosophical, literary, and religious movement that started in the 1830s in New England. The transcendental philosophy was a mixture of anti-Puritanism, anti-rationality, eastern ideologies, and English romanticism. Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher coined the term ‘transcendentalism’. According to Kant, there was a need to transcend reason to understand the true meaning of reality. The core philosophies behind transcendentalism were the potential perfectibility of mankind, the significance of God within every person, and the unification of God and nature. Furthermore, Emerson extolled the ideas of self-reliance and individualism from the philosophy of transcendentalism. He argued that ‘nothing is at last sacred but integrity of your mind’. For him, an individual who remains truthful to personal vision and follows intuition will turn into an ideal person. He blended spirituality with transcendentalism which eventually turned into a more exploitative theory of nature. It was a difficult task for Emerson to translate his grand ideas into language and that’s the reason why he resorted to the technique of imagery in his essays.

Another theme prevalent in Emerson’s writing is individualism. The writer asserted that people cannot identify all the capabilities they have; therefore they should govern themselves rather than being controlled by society. He perceived that nature played an important part in telling an individual how to act as well as grow without external obstacles. The philosophical ideas on individualism led him to develop the transcendental group, whose ideas are imperative in contemporary society also. In his essay, ‘Self-reliance’, the writer argues that individualism is nothing but an unshakeable and profound trust in one’s intuitive nature. Individualism can revolutionize American society by transforming several lives by creating great leaders and not just by initiating a mass movement.

### 7.2.2 Narrative Style of the Author

Ralph Waldo Emerson is one of the most admired writers of the nineteenth century in America, and his style of writing is remarkably different from other essayists of his time like Arnold, Addison, or Hazlitt. He was mainly a transcendentalist philosopher who propagated that God governs the entire universe. The essays written by him in English are very lengthy in comparison to other authors. Therefore,

## NOTES

Emerson's essays are perceived by many critics as lectures or orations in terms of form. For example, 'The American Scholar' consists of fifteen pages where Emerson discusses the responsibilities of the scholar. The sections in Emerson's essays are loosely constructed without following any logical structures. He labels the impact of nature as well as books on the mind of the scholar. He was an eminent scholar as his vision was far-sighted. His essays like 'The Poet', 'Self-reliance' and 'The Oversoul' argue about the sublime ideas of transcendentalism.

Some of the critics contend that Emerson's essays lack syntax as all the sentences are loosely formed. He is also accused of not incorporating the coherence of ideas in his essays, as all the paragraphs contain a different idea which makes the argument somewhat illogical and difficult to understand. His writings are seen as chaotic with too many philosophical ideologies. Despite his artistic flaws, one cannot deny that his writings are full of wisdom. He wanted to inspire the intellectuals of his nation so that they can work towards making America a great nation. Along with Walt Whitman and Thoreau, he also propagated the concepts of self-reliance, dependence on nature, and individualism that embodied America during the nineteenth century. Therefore, after reading his essays or poems, the readers can assert that Emerson was an eloquent orator, intellectual, and a great writer.

### Check Your Progress

1. In which year was *Nature* published?
2. Who coined the term 'transcendentalism'?

## 7.3 'THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR'

Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered the speech on 'The American Scholar' to the Phi Beta Kappa Literary Society on 31 August 1837 at Harvard University. He was invited to give a lecture on this topic in place of another speaker who could not come at that time. It was a sacramental day, where prayers were offered to a priest and a band played songs in the background before the lecture began. The oration went on for one hour and fifteen minutes and Emerson got a mixed response from the audience, as some were extremely surprised or confused and the others were amused by his rhetorical skills. He was quite confident while speaking and felt that he was playing the audience 'on an organ'.

O.W. Holmes, an American Jurist called the speech 'our intellectual Declaration of Independence'. Some of the listeners praised Emerson's dreamy, unintelligible and misty style that was an amalgamation of Carlyle, Coleridge, and Swedenborg. Later in the year, the speech was published. It gives an insight into Emerson's philosophical ideas and is widely known as the 'Declaration of Independence' in American history. It was also published as 'Man Thinking: An Oration' in 1844 in London.

‘The American Scholar’ can be divided into two sections. The first section incorporates an account of all the influences required to educate the American Scholar. Further, this section is sub-divided into three main parts, each dealing with the influence of Nature, books, and action. Then, the second section of the essay describes the duties of an American Scholar. Lastly, Emerson ends the lecture after analyzing the state of affairs in America during that era. He also gives a prophetic utterance regarding his nation’s future by saying: ‘A nation of men will exist for the first time because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which inspires all men.’

At the starting of the essay, Emerson argues that ‘our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close.’ The American Scholar must utilize the opportunity of producing great writings in the period of American Literary Independence. He wants the scholar to transform into a man of broad culture, ideas, and action from being a mere student of books. He wants the scholar to read and sing about American history rather than harvesting his mind on other lands. Emerson discusses the different sources of education available to the scholar like nature, books, and one’s actions. After getting educated by these sources, the scholar will turn into a ‘Man Thinking’ or man of culture rather than being a book worm. This specialist called ‘Man Thinking’ will find that his responsibilities are summed up in the act of ‘self-trust’. He would realize after trusting himself that he is fit to do all the work for his country at this age. As an American, he should particularly feel more fortunate. The significance of a single man increases here as the spirit of the age becomes more democratic and individualist. Thus, the scholar will no longer feel the need to imitate or be deferential and timid in front of the European authors or letters of men, since he would be able to talk about the chronicles of his own country, America. He would be treated like a ‘hero in the true sense of the world’ as the ‘huge world would come round to him’.

Firstly, Nature has the most crucial impact on the scholar’s development. According to Emerson, the scholar should expose his soul in front of Nature and let the natural effect flow into his body so that nature can further mould his soul for the better. Hence, he will get awareness regarding the unification of the human soul and the soul of nature, where both souls are derived from the source of inherent divinity.

The scholar from childhood itself starts analyzing nature as he is surrounded by it and tries to classify everything he can witness. This ‘unifying instinct’ may direct the scholar to find connections between various objects. Eventually, the American scholar will understand that everything including human beings ‘proceeds from one root’. Therefore, the young scholar will be able to understand himself as well as mankind after studying nature.

Books demonstrating the ‘mind of the past’ are the second kind of influence over the scholar. The writer suggests the scholar to read as many books as possible,

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however, he also warns the latter to free his mind from the dominance of books. If a scholar wants to turn into 'Man Thinking' or a hero, then he should not be dependent entirely on books as they are just ordinary tools of his transformation. In the past, people wrote books as they wanted to give their interpretation on society and the world they lived in. But, according to the changes taking place in every society, the scholar has to write new books for the future generation. Instead of just analyzing the great works studied in college, he should be able to think as well as create new pieces of writings. Young scholars should not be over-influenced by eminent writers like Locke, Bacon, and Cicero as they can turn into a 'satellite rather than remaining a system'. However, books can help bind humankind if read carefully as they reveal the reality of life.

The writer discusses the importance of action as the third influence in the development of the scholar. He argues that living in society and actively contributing to its work enhances the scholar's ability to produce excellent academic works. He scrutinizes the people who feel that scholars can't do any practical work as they are already occupied in writing or thinking something. Emerson asserts that just like the 'ebb and flow of the sea', any kind of action can be turned into a complete thought. He suggests the idea that 'a great soul will be strong to live as well as strictly to think'. If a scholar can learn the necessity and dignity of labour, then he will turn into a hero or 'Man Thinking'. The hero must be culturally independent and shouldn't depend upon books of the past and books of other nations. Emerson wants the scholar to learn the language of both the upper classes and the 'field and work-yard' so that every class can relate to his work.

Next, Emerson talks about the set of duties that ought to be followed by the scholar. Self-realization as well as self-trust must be acquired as the most important duty that a scholar should perform. He should not be affected by popular opinion even if it is supported by the most respectable leaders of the society. There is only 'one soul' that motivates every man including the self-reliant man. The writer's assertion of the cultural independence of America was much appreciated by the readers. He believed that self-trust was integral for all people despite their nationality. The scholar must be able to liberate himself from the false deceptions that hide the trust, and he should guide and cheer others. He should also free himself from false notions like cheap popularity or greed for the sake of fame. Emerson argues that even if the scholar has to face several difficulties at the beginning like living in solitude or poverty, he should not be discouraged and must overcome them fearlessly. Ultimately, he should liberate himself from any kind of fear or weakness.

The writer motivates the American scholar to realize his responsibilities by saying 'he is the world's eye. He is the world's heart. He is to resist the vulgar prosperity that retrogrades ever to barbarism, by preserving and communicating heroic sentiments, noble biographies, melodies verse, and the conclusions of history. Whatsoever oracles the human heart, in all emergencies, in all solemn hours has uttered as its commentary on the world of actions- those he shall receive and

impart. And whatsoever new verdict Reason from her inviolable seat pronounces on the passing men and events of today-this he shall hear and promulgate'. The writer reaches the height of grandiloquence after asserting his ideas about the American Scholar. Emerson says that it is the responsibility of the scholar to inspire and guide the actions of men, by telling them what is right or acceptable. He argues 'if he is free and brave he will be heroic, and success would be his on the long run'. The scholar must follow the duty given to him by Emerson and also encourage other men to learn it. Only then he would be idolized as a guide, hero, and leader of mankind. Lastly, Emerson discusses the artistic revolution that will be initiated by the scholars who will unite the nation by writing works that reflect the trends and reality of American life rather than European culture during the nineteenth century. Emerson wants the writings produced by the American Scholar to connect all the individuals by 'a divine soul that inspires all men'.

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### 7.3.1 Narrative Style of the Essay

Ralph Waldo Emerson is renowned for his epigrammatic style of writing, whether it is in the form of poetry or prose. His narrative style is characterized by lengthy sentences, proverbial words, condensation, and concentration of ideas. It can be presumed that his writing style was inspired by Francis Bacon, as he also writes sentences that are compact as well as pithy. For example, in 'The American Scholar', Emerson uses sentences like: 'Books are the best of things, well used; abuser, among the worst' or 'a great soul will be strong to live, as well as strong to think'. After reading the sentences of his prose, the readers can speculate that the writer's style is supremely figurative.

He incorporates various literary devices like similes, allusions or metaphors, and pictorial or vivid imagery throughout his prose. Emerson used literary devices to emphasize the scholar's role in the American society. He wants future scholars, writers, and artists to glorify American history rather than take inspiration from European ideals. He includes metaphor in his oration while depicting the society of 1837, which became 'compartmentalized' as individuals started doing specific duties as the farmers worked only on the farm and so on.

He compares American society to a 'fountain of power that has been distributed to multitudes', when criticizing the impact of job specialization. Another literary device used in the prose is a simile as Emerson compares a burning star in the sky to the future of poetry. Also, he uses the technique of repetition to highlight that men are not necessarily ordained to pursue one profession by saying that 'man is not a far, professor or engineer, but he is all'. He uses repetition to emphasize his philosophy that man is capable of doing multiple things at the same time. Emerson makes use of allusions to writers of the past in his text like Bacon, Pope, Johnson, and Carlyle, etc.

The readers are already acquainted with the works of these great writers mentioned by the author. However, there are some problems related to his writing

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style as well, for example, his lack of logical connection between two different sentences makes it tremendously difficult for the readers to comprehend what he is trying to explain.

Emerson was an advocate of artistic movements like transcendentalism as well as the American Renaissance during the 1830s. Thematically, the works written by Emerson argue for the unique creation of American identity. He wants the scholars of American society to search for a meaningful connection with nature, books, and self-action. As only after building a relationship between all three aspects, the scholar would be able to inspire the fellowmen to turn America into a great nation.

Although, his ideology is also inspired by English romanticism as he wants the people to find a link with nature. But, Emerson wants the scholars to stop imitating the writers of the past, and create something original on their own. He asserts that the cultural dependency on European society should end immediately to gain intellectual freedom. In the essay, he reiterates that the three influences on Man thinking or the scholar are nature, books, and actions. Moreover, he wants the scholar to realize his duties towards the citizens of America. Through cultural and intellectual nurturing, any man can turn into Emerson's idol of the hero or an American Scholar.

### 7.3.2 Themes in the Essay

Given below are some of the important themes of the essay 'The American Scholar':

#### (i) Impact of Nature

One of the most important themes in Emerson's essay is nature and its role in an individual's life. *The American Scholar* deals with the notion that by studying nature, an individual can know more about humanity as well as himself. Emerson wants the scholar to explore different aspects of nature prevalent in America so that he can develop a new literary tradition that is specific for his society. Nature, for Emerson, plays the foremost role in educating the scholar.

According to Emerson, the 'young mind' of the scholar perceives every object individually, but after studying nature he can understand the connection between various things. After inheriting the 'unifying instinct', the scholar starts understanding himself and his place in natural world. The writer asserts that if a person is able to understand oneself after analysing nature, then he can also understand other people in a better way. Nature is a reflection of society as it unifies different individuals irrespective of their race, class, religion, culture, or gender. The scholar should be able to impart his knowledge about nature to other people also, and perhaps he should be able to create something original that is relevant in contemporary society.

Nature, as argued by Emerson is intertwined deeply with humankind and henceforth is the primary influence on the American scholar. If the scholar studies nature accurately, then he will be able to create an art form or literary narrative that will motivate readers belonging to different walks of life. Also, America as a newly established nation was relatively unexplored; so if the scholar studied his society properly then he would be able to motivate a generation of writers that would write about the American society in the nineteenth century.

### (ii) National Identity

‘The American Scholar’ published by Emerson in 1837 was aimed at leading the nation into a new phase of artistic development that inspired philosophers, radical thinkers, authors, and poets to create new forms of literature. Emerson’s scholar must form a distinct cultural identity for the Americans, which should reinstate equality amongst all the social classes.

Throughout the narrative, he argues that Americans should make a unique identity for themselves that is different from the European or English ones. He wants to inspire his countrymen to detach all their links to the European cultures as even after gaining independence, America was still dependent on other nations. He wants an artistic revolution to take place and the scholars should be self-reliant and courageous to make a change. The scholar should not produce material just for the upper classes but also for the working classes which promotes racial equality of the nation. He wants the divine soul to inspire all the men for the creation of American artistic identity. Therefore, forming a national identity among different people is an integral duty for the scholar.

#### Check Your Progress

3. When and where was the speech ‘The American Scholar’ delivered?
4. Name some of the prominent writers of past that Emerson refers to in ‘The American Scholar’.

## 7.4 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: IRVING BABBITT

Irving Babbitt was a literary critic and a scholar from America who was known as a cultural critic of his time. He graduated from Harvard University and taught Comparative Literature as well as French at Harvard University from 1894 until his death in 1933.

Irving was a very productive and well-known essayist, professor and critic of his time. He was a staunch critic of the Romantic Movement and by that logic, also disliked the movements that came as a result of romanticism— naturalism and realism. His criticism was not limited to the literary field but he also critiqued the

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American education system in his *Literature and the American College* (1908) that opposed vocational studies. He emphasized the need to study classical literature. As a professor, he was well loved and followed by famous literary names such as T. S. Eliot and George Santayana.

Irving was born in Ohio to Edwin and Augusta Babbitt. As a teenager, Babbitt sold newspapers in New York City. He stayed in Ohio for a while with friends where he worked at the violin branch. He also worked as a police reporter in Cincinnati, Ohio. With financial support from his uncle, Babbitt joined Harvard College in 1885, where he graduated with a four-year degree in classical literature. After graduating, he started at Montana College as a classics teacher. He earned enough money to attend Sanskrit and Pali classes in Paris, France. In 1893, he returned to Harvard. He was a professor of Romance language at Williams College, but returned to Harvard to teach French and comparative literature until his death in 1933. In his books and speeches, Babbitt castigated sentimentality, materialism and disregard for the past while promoting self-discipline and self-control. Babbitt married one of his former students, Dora May Drew in 1900. The couple had two children named Edward and Esther. In 1926, he was elected as a member of the French Company. He was elected a member of the American Council on American Science and American Studies in 1930, and received a bachelor's degree from Bowdoin University in 1932.

As an opponent of the Romantic Movement, Babbitt criticized the works of the French philosopher Rousseau in his work *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919). In this, he talked about the impact that Rousseau had on the 20<sup>th</sup> century thought. He criticized the French philosopher by pointing out how romanticism ruined the course of study. He was a follower and believer of classical studies.

Babbitt is often described a follower of two very famous literary entities—Aristotle and Edmund Burke. His ideas and thoughts regarding the concept of humanism emphasized upon broad knowledge about different areas of studies. He is often credited with founding a new philosophy known as 'New Humanism'—a conservative thought aimed at pointing out the gap between the university education that existed during his time and the ideal kind of liberal arts education that, according to him, should be focused on traditional arts. Babbitt was a great supporter of classical literature and was heavily influenced by the ideas of writers like Thomas More. He put human reason above human emotions and emphasized that not only literature but education system as a whole should focus more on developing students' power of reasoning and logic instead of telling them to focus on mundane ideas.

Babbitt's most famous work titled *Democracy and Leadership* talks about the humanistic point of view and discusses the politics from that outlook. He believed that unfettered human emotion leads to ignorance towards moral character and its

growth. He believed that moral character is the most important thing and individual conscience can be the only beacon to the growth and development of a deteriorating society. According to him, the quality of high moral character can be the only saving grace. Unchecked romanticism and majoritarianism would lead to the downfall of the American nation.

It is important to note that his views and philosophies were in line with Classical Liberalism. He rejected sentimentalism and romantic ideas that were prevalent during his time. Babbitt was highly regarded as a professor and as a critic especially during his middle years. Although there were many conservative supporters in his early years, as he grew older, many people turned against him and criticized his ideas. Moreover, in his later years and especially, after his death, the wave of support for the theory of New Humanism saw a steady decline.

Irwin Babbitt was sceptical of the concept of democracy. Every social system must strive for the principle of self-regulation, says Babbitt, and democracy has the least power to achieve it. The idea that wisdom remains in the minds of many was put forward by Babbitt. He does not believe that society can be saved by reforming the basics. Between leadership lessons, he promised that ‘all reforms must begin from the beginning’. He said that in a world of idealism where all citizens have internal control, a separate government will be a monarchy. But he did not believe in such a performance. Worse, Babbitt did not trust the U.S. leadership.

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## 7.5 ‘THE CRITIC AND THE AMERICAN LIFE’

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The essay ‘The Critic and the American Life’ talks about the critic and the American education system. Irving Babbitt emphasizes the role of the critic in thinking with reason. According to the author, the critic needs to be someone who can lead others to the path of reason and higher moral character.

Babbitt was a major believer in the fact that Liberal Classical Arts was the light that would guide others towards a more reasonable and less sentimental ideas. As a professor of Classics, Babbitt felt very strongly that the American education system needed to improve in order to bridge the gap between its current reality of education system and the ideal dream of classical literary education.

Babbitt hoped to impose a uniform standard of behaviour on state, just as it was imposed on individuals. Countries must also identify their higher selves and act accordingly with the rest of the world. The natural worship of material power can be dangerous as nations as well as individuals can succumb to self-flattery.

Patriotism, says Babbitt, manifests itself in expansion, violence and imperialism. He acknowledges that nationalism is ‘the most dangerous of all the sham religions of the modern age’. But Babbitt wrote that a just state would always

*Ralph Waldo Emerson  
and Irving Babbitt*

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‘mind its own business’. Babbitt, however, discovered that the United States had failed in this experiment; in 1916 Woodrow Wilson had denied ‘involvement in fraud’ in Mexico and his actions in the First World War. ‘More than any modern American, he has tried to expand our thinking beyond our country’s borders’, Babbitt said.

Conservative critics often made their case along Burkean lines. As a result, Pat Buchanan had many problems with the neoconservative ideas. He believed that we would be interfering ‘in the affairs of other nations whose institutions are shaped by their own history, culture, traditions and values, not ours’.

### Check Your Progress

5. Which work of Irving Babbitt criticized French philosopher Rousseau?
6. Name the philosophy that Irving Babbitt is often associated with?

## 7.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

1. *Nature* was published in 1836.
2. Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher, coined the term ‘transcendentalism’.
3. Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered the speech on ‘The American Scholar’ to the Phi Beta Kappa Literary Society on 31 August 1837 at Harvard University.
4. Emerson refers to writers like Bacon, Pope, Johnson, and Carlyle in ‘The American Scholar’.
5. Babbitt criticized the works of the French philosopher Rousseau in his work *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919).
6. Babbitt is often credited with founding a new philosophy known as ‘New Humanism’.

## 7.7 SUMMARY

- Ralph Waldo Emerson was born on 25 May 1803 to Reverend William Emerson and Ruth Haskins. He published his first book, *Nature* in 1836 which comprised the whole idea of his philosophy but it wasn’t a very successful work. In the next year, he presented a lecture at Harvard known as ‘The American Scholar’ which became very renowned and its copies were sold all over the country.
- Emerson became a part of the Transcendental Club, where he met intellectuals like Margaret Fuller, Alcott, and Henry David Thoreau. He

started working as the editor of 'The Dial' which was a representation of the transcendent movement. Afterward, he published a series of essays in two volumes, including 'The Over-Soul' and 'Self-Reliance' in 1841.

*Ralph Waldo Emerson  
and Irving Babbitt*

- Transcendentalism was a philosophical, literary, and religious movement that started in the 1830s in New England. The transcendental philosophy was a mixture of anti-Puritanism, anti-rationality, eastern ideologies, and English romanticism.
- Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher coined the term 'transcendentalism'. According to Kant, there was a need to transcend reason to understand the true meaning of reality. The core philosophies behind transcendentalism were the potential perfectibility of mankind, the significance of God within every person, and the unification of God and nature.
- Emerson extolled the ideas of self-reliance and individualism from the philosophy of transcendentalism. He argued that 'nothing is at last sacred but integrity of your mind'.
- Another theme prevalent in Emerson's writing is individualism. The writer asserted that people cannot identify all the capabilities they have; therefore they should govern themselves rather than being controlled by society.
- 'The American Scholar' consists of fifteen pages where Emerson discusses the responsibilities of the scholar. The sections in Emerson's essays are loosely constructed without following any logical structures. His essays like 'The Poet', 'Self-reliance' and 'The Oversoul' argue about the sublime ideas of transcendentalism.
- Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered the speech on 'The American Scholar' to the Phi Beta Kappa Literary Society on 31 August 1837 at Harvard University. Later in the year, the speech was published. It gives an insight into Emerson's philosophical ideas and is widely known as the 'Declaration of Independence' in American history. It was also published as 'Man Thinking: An Oration' in 1844 in London.
- At the starting of the essay, Emerson argues that 'our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close.' He wants the scholar to transform into a man of broad culture, ideas, and action from being a mere student of books.
- Emerson discusses the different sources of education available to the scholar like nature, books, and one's actions. After getting educated by these sources, the scholar will turn into a 'Man Thinking' or man of culture rather than being a book worm.
- According to Emerson, the scholar should expose his soul in front of Nature and let the natural effect flow into his body so that nature can further mould his soul for the better.

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- Emerson talks about the set of duties that ought to be followed by the scholar. Self-realization as well as self-trust must be acquired as the most important duty that a scholar should perform.
- Emerson says that it is the responsibility of the scholar to inspire and guide the actions of men, by telling them what is right or acceptable. He argues ‘if he is free and brave he will be heroic, and success would be his on the long run’.
- Irving Babbitt was a literary critic and a scholar from America who was known as a cultural critic of his time. He graduated from Harvard University and taught Comparative Literature as well as French at Harvard University from 1894 until his death in 1933.
- Babbitt was a staunch critic of the Romantic Movement and by that logic, also disliked the movements that came as a result of romanticism— naturalism and realism. He emphasized the need to study classical literature.
- In his books and speeches, Babbitt castigated sentimentality, materialism and disregard for the past while promoting self-discipline and self-control.
- As an opponent of the Romantic Movement, Babbitt criticized the works of the French philosopher Rousseau in his work *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919).
- Babbitt is often described a follower of two very famous literary entities— Aristotle and Edmund Burke. His ideas and thoughts regarding the concept of humanism emphasized upon broad knowledge about different areas of studies.
- Babbitt is often credited with founding a new philosophy known as ‘New Humanism’— a conservative thought aimed at pointing out the gap between the university education that existed during his time and the ideal kind of liberal arts education that, according to him, should be focused on traditional arts.
- Irwin Babbitt was sceptical of the concept of democracy. Every social system must strive for the principle of self-regulation, says Babbitt, and democracy has the least power to achieve it.
- The essay ‘The Critic and the American Life’ talks about the critic and the American education system. According to Irving Babbitt, the critic needs to be someone who can lead others to the path of reason and higher moral character.
- Patriotism, says Babbitt, manifests itself in expansion, violence and imperialism. He acknowledges that land ownership is ‘a real threat to modern religion’.

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## 7.8 KEY WORDS

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- **American Renaissance:** It refers to the period from the 1830s to the end of the American Civil War, during which American literature became the expression of national spirit.
- **Transcendentalism:** It was a philosophical, literary, and religious movement that started in the 1830s in New England. The transcendental philosophy was a mixture of anti-Puritanism, anti-rationality, eastern ideologies, and English romanticism.
- **New Humanism:** It was an idea first founded by Babbitt that promoted the traditional study of reason and learning over sentimentality and human passion.
- **Romanticism:** It was a movement in arts and literature that emphasized subjectivity, passion and inspiration.

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## 7.9 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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### Short-Answer Questions

1. What is transcendentalism?
2. What are the duties of the scholar according to Ralph Waldo Emerson?
3. Write a short note on the narrative style of Ralph Waldo Emerson.
4. What is the philosophy of New Humanism?
5. Why was Irving Babbitt opposed to Romanticism?

### Long-Answer Questions

1. Analyse the ideas of transcendentalism in light of Emerson's 'The American Scholar'.
2. Examine the themes explored by Ralph Waldo Emerson in 'The American Scholar'.
3. Discuss the core ideas promoted by Irving Babbitt in the essay 'The Critic and the American Life'.

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## 7.10 FURTHER READINGS

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**BLOCK - III**  
**FICTION**

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**UNIT 8 KATHERINE MANSFIELD:**  
***BLISS***

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**NOTES****Structure**

- 8.0 Introduction
- 8.1 Objectives
- 8.2 About the Author: Katherine Mansfield
  - 8.2.1 Narrative Style of Mansfield
  - 8.2.2 Themes in Mansfield's Works
  - 8.2.3 Introduction to the Short Story
- 8.3 Primary Characters of *Bliss*
- 8.4 Themes in *Bliss*
- 8.5 Narrative Technique in *Bliss*
- 8.6 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 8.7 Summary
- 8.8 Key Words
- 8.9 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 8.10 Further Readings

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**8.0 INTRODUCTION**

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This unit will delve into the literary career of Katherine Mansfield and her short story *Bliss*. Born in New Zealand, Mansfield was the contemporary of modernist literary figures such as D.H Lawrence and Virginia Woolf. Most of her works were published after her death. Among her prominent works is the short story collection *Bliss and Other Stories*. This unit will discuss in detail the writing style of Katherine Mansfield and the various literary techniques used by her. The various themes and issues she employs in her short stories will also be further discussed. The short story *Bliss* will be critically analysed within the context of this unit.

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**8.1 OBJECTIVES**

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss in detail the literary career of Katherine Mansfield
- Examine the writing style of Katherine Mansfield
- Critically analyse the short story *Bliss*

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## 8.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: KATHERINE MANSFIELD

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Katherine Mansfield was an eminent short story writer of the twentieth century, who was regarded as a contemporary of modernist literary figures like D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce. Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp was born in an affluent family in New Zealand in 1888. She started writing in her school newspaper and literary journals from an early age. However, in 1903, she moved to London to study at Queen's College where she started contributing to the school magazine. Mansfield also travelled a lot between the years 1903 and 1906, and during this period she started writing many of her famous short stories, which got published later in 'Native Companion', an Australian Journal. She returned to London in 1908 when her literary career was at its peak. It can be noted from her biography that Mansfield had bisexual relationships with several women and men during her lifetime. She was impregnated by Garnet Trowell, whom she left in order to marry George Bowden, a singing teacher. It was speculated that on her wedding night itself, she ran away with her college girlfriend Ida Baker. Afterwards, she got married to the editor of 'Rhythm', John Middleton Murray but soon got separated as their relationship was volatile and dominating.

However, in 1917, Mansfield was diagnosed with pulmonary Tuberculosis and she moved to France to avoid wintertime in England. She wrote *Bliss and Other Stories* in 1918 in a state of depression during her stay in Bandol. Sadly, at the age of thirty-four in 1923, she lost her life after suffering a fatal pulmonary haemorrhage. Despite being a prolific writer of her age, most of her works weren't published before her death. Hence, John Middleton Murray took the responsibility of publishing as well as editing many volumes of her poems like *The Aloe*, *Novels* and *Novelists* along with short stories like *Something Childish* and, *The Dove's Nest* in 1923.

### 8.2.1 Narrative Style of Mansfield

Katherine Mansfield is idolised as the pioneer of modern short stories in English Literature. Most of her writings have been translated into fifty-five languages worldwide. Her writing style has been heavily influenced by Wilde's concept of art for art's sake and Chekhov's realism. Mansfield dramatizes the protagonists of her short stories in a way that enables the audience to understand them better. She gives a lot of importance to the setting of her story and tries to build congruence between the characters state of mind and their environment. She wants the audience to deduce the psychological aspects of her characters rather than just concentrating on the facts mentioned on the surface.

Some of the common narrative techniques used by Mansfield are the character's point of view, sense of time, the significance of names, and the use of symbolism. Point of view has been perceived as one of the best literary techniques

used by Mansfield. Her style is slightly different from the traditional techniques such as the use of the first person, third person, or the omniscient narrator. The stories are written by reflecting the inside as well as the outside of a protagonist's mind so that the audience are entirely focused only on one person and can neglect the role of other characters. Also, she treats time differently than the other writers, as it is shown to be overflowing, uncontrollable, and never-ending. Her stories constitute a period of a day or a few hours, as she delves mainly into the internal conflict of her characters. Lastly, the use of symbolism is also a major technique incorporated by Mansfield as every object or thing connects to the character's mind. For example, symbols like trees, plants, birds, animals and travel, etc. are popularly seen in her stories. Therefore, Mansfield's unique style of writing holds immense significance in the modern short story genre.

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### 8.2.2 Themes in Mansfield's Works

Mansfield was highly interested in depicting the themes related to class distinctions, role of women in society, alienation, psychological exploration of the human mind, etc. Modernism, as a movement, was thriving in the period when Mansfield was writing. It was seen as an opposition movement against the ideals of the Edwardian or Victorian age. After World War I, authors like Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence started discussing the themes of illusion versus reality, psychoanalytic theory, and models of feminism and unpredictability of human life in their works. Mansfield also took some inspiration from the greatest literary minds of the twentieth century and started writing on the internal dilemma of the human mind.

One of the most significant themes that we find in Mansfield's works is alienation and isolation. In the narratives she reflects how through the lack of love, compassion and detachment, most of her characters have to suffer from an inner dilemma in the modern world. Separation from the outside world only makes a person feel more isolated and alienated, where he or she starts questioning the meaning of one's existence itself. For instance, in *Millie*, upon finding a young murderer on a remote farm, a childless wife feels a sense of happiness as she was lonely for a long time. On the other hand, in *The Woman at the Store*, we can see how deprivation of a woman leads her to a murder, as she had been living a life without any kind of compassion and love. In *Bliss*, Mansfield discusses the emptiness that Bertha feels in her life, despite having a family. She is lonely and ultimately finds her happiness in blissful experiences of life.

Another theme that can be frequently analysed in Mansfield's writing is discrimination in terms of class and gender. *The Doll's House* highlights the suppression and violation of the poor section of society by the middle or upper-class people. The Kelvey children are mistreated by their teachers, friends and even the Burnells. Similarly, in *The Garden Party*, the author wants to illustrate the condescending attitude towards the Scotts. Mansfield usually employs young female protagonists to depict the brutality and uncharitable outlook of the privileged people in the society.

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Survival in an unpredictable world is another theme that the author wrote about in many of her writings. For example, in *Her First Ball*, the protagonist unravels the difficulties of adulthood whereas, in *The Garden Party*, Laura has to face the reality of poverty and death in a modern society. Mansfield wants her readers to be prepared for the hardships of a modern life but also subtly comments upon the loss of innocence in the process of growing up. Lastly, the most debatable theme discussed by the author is a psychological exploration of the human mind. Like most of the writers of her era, it can be assumed that even she was interested in the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud that focused on the conscious and unconscious aspects of an individual's mind.

### 8.2.3 Introduction to the Short Story

In Katherine Mansfield's *Bliss*, Bertha Young is introduced to the audience as a thirty-year-old woman who is often surpassed by moments of bliss or excitement. Despite being an adult, Bertha revels in childish behaviour. She feels the need to 'run' rather than walk; she laughs at anything, and plays games with ball or hoop just like a small child. She often tries to think about the appropriate role played by a woman, but periodically experiences moments of bliss like she might have swallowed the sunlight. According to her, the elite society is absolutely 'idiotic' in terms of their norms and regulations. She feels dejected many times as she cannot experience happiness or absolute bliss without restrictions from the society. Being from an upper-middle-class family in the 1900s, her life is governed by patriarchal norms. It was believed that women were incapable of making decisions during this era, and thus men had the supreme authority over their life decisions. Bertha fears that if she would reveal her true self in front of the world, then the so-called civilised people would label her as 'drunk or disorderly'. She also feels as if her body had been locked in a case as a rare fiddle.

After returning to her home one day, Bertha enquires from her maid whether the fruits have arrived on time for the party that night. Mary, the maid informs her that the fruits which she had ordered earlier have already arrived. Afterward, Bertha goes to arrange the fruit basket before her guests come for the party. Surprisingly in the dining room, she is again overwhelmed with the feeling of bliss as she looks at herself in the mirror after throwing off her coat. Bertha fears that if she 'dares to breathe' then the warmth of bliss will fan away. In her mind, she is constantly thinking about some 'divine' intervention to take place in her life. While she is arranging the fruits on the table, she ponders whether the colour combination of the fruits will be able to match with the carpet and whole decor of her dining area.

Nevertheless, Bertha also has alternative ideas in her mind. On one hand, she feels that the whole scenario might be 'absurd' and on the other hand, she feels that the final outcome of arranging the fruits is 'incredibly beautiful'. There are moments in between where she feels as if she is going through a phase of hysteria, as she starts laughing at the scenic beauty of the fruits. Next, Bertha rushes to her daughter's room to spend time with her. However, she notices that Little B is eating her supper from the Nurse's hand. The baby gets excited upon

seeing her mother, which ironically annoys the Nurse as she feels Bertha has interrupted in her work. She also informs Bertha about all the activities Little B did that day. Little B went to the park outside and played with a dog there. Upon hearing this, Bertha wants to scold the Nurse for putting her daughter's life into danger as it's not advisable for small babies to play with strange animals. However, Bertha feels powerless and timid in front of the Nurse as she isn't able to reproach her for her actions. Also, Bertha feels helpless as a 'poor little girl' upon seeing her daughter under someone else's supervision, as if the Nurse was a 'rich girl' who got to play with a spectacular doll. Bertha ponders over the kind of society she lives in where a mother cannot look after her child properly and needs a stranger to care for the child instead. Bertha is suddenly consumed with a motherly instinct as she is delighted to see her daughter's smile and decides to feed the baby herself. The Nurse, however, detests the idea by arguing that this might overexcite the baby and she may not eat her supper properly. Upon great insistence, the Nurse leaves the baby alone with her mother. Bertha loves playing with Little B and feeding her, like any other mother. She experiences a similar kind of bliss after spending time with her daughter like she did earlier during the day. However, she doesn't know how to deal with this feeling of absolute bliss.

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After bonding with her daughter for a brief time, Bertha starts wondering about her evening party and about all the guests she has invited. The first pair of guests is Mr. Knight and Mrs. Norman Knight. Mr. Knight is starting a theatre whereas his wife is interested in interior decorating. The next guest is Eddie Warren, a prominent writer who has published a book on poetry. The last guest is Bertha's friend Pearl Fulton, whom she falls in love with as she finds something strange in her. The narrator informs the reader that Bertha wants to maintain a close friendship with Miss Fulton but she is reserved in nature and doesn't allow people to invade her private space. Unlike Harry, she doesn't think Miss Fulton to be damaged or cold but wants to know her better personally. Harry jokingly says that the reason behind her mysterious facade is a 'good stomach' and nothing else. Bertha adores this mocking attitude and jovial nature of her husband.

Besides, while decorating the drawing-room, Bertha is shocked to see her hugging the cushions passionately as the blissful moment resurfaces again. Upon looking at the glowing pear tree from her garden window under the moonlight, she realises that the tree is a symbol of her own life. She experiences the warmth in her bosom caused by the utter bliss, as she starts thinking about her life. She consoles herself by saying that she has everything in her life as she is young and is blessed with a loving husband and a sweet daughter. She starts feeling restless and dizzy after overthinking about her life, as a result of which she gets too tired to get dressed for the evening. She is brought back to her senses by the arrival of her party guests. The Knights enter the party first, and it can be observed that they address one another as Mug and Face in front of others. Mrs. Knight informs the hostess that her bright dress attracted many people towards her on the train journey. The next person to arrive is Eddie Warren, who starts by complaining about how he was in the company of a sinister driver. After Harry arrives, Bertha becomes

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aware that Miss Fulton hasn't made her appearance at the party yet. Finally, after Miss Fulton enters the house, all the people sit together for dinner where they discuss topics such as theatre, food and, a man named Michael Oat. The audiences can again see how Bertha feels a sense of tenderness towards the 'decorative group of guests' present in her party. Simultaneously, she also contemplates about the silver image of a pear tree shining under the moon. Looking straight into Miss Fulton's eyes, Bertha feels that the two women share an unusual kind of bond which cannot be experienced in the company of any man. Later on, Miss Fulton inquires if they have a garden and Bertha mistakenly considers this some sort of 'sign' for their association. She shows the beautiful pear tree to Miss Fulton from the window overlooking the garden and assumes that the two women have formed a perfect understanding of each other.

Towards the end of the evening, Miss Fulton and Bertha join the other guests over coffee. Harry's attitude in offering a cigar to Miss Fulton is seen as indecent by his wife as she feels he strongly dislikes having her over to their house. She feels offended by her husband's rudeness towards her dear friend and feels that Miss Fulton is also upset after this incident. She thinks that if Harry got to know Miss Fulton in the same way she does, then definitely he would have found her to be a 'wonderful' person. Bertha suddenly realises that after guests will leave the party, she would have to share the bed with Harry with whom she doesn't share a sexual intimacy as they are more like good pals. For the first time ever in her life, Bertha has a longing to maintain a sexual relationship with her husband which was absent in the previous years of their marriage. This desire ignites a sense of fear in her as she doesn't know how to tackle it efficiently. They always have been in love with each other as friends but she didn't desire him in 'that way'.

The guests start bidding goodbye to Bertha one by one, as the Knights tell her that they ought to catch the train on time before it gets late in the night. Eddie and Miss Fulton also decide to leave soon and share a taxi. As Miss Fulton goes to take her overcoat from the drawing-room, it can be noted that Harry comes after her. Bertha assumes that maybe he wants to apologize to her friend for being rude to her during the party. Eddie however, distracts her by asking for a compilation of poetry that contains a line, 'Why must it always be tomato soup?' As Bertha comes to the drawing-room, to her dismay she finds Harry standing close to Miss Fulton and saying that he adores her immensely. She observes her husband whispering the word 'tomorrow' in Miss Fulton's ears, as she happily nods her head. She feels cheated both by her husband and her dear friend who have been constantly lying to accomplish their personal motives. Harry also asks Miss Fulton whether she wants to go back in her personal cab. Before leaving the house, Miss Fulton presses Bertha's hand gently by whispering 'Your lovely pear tree'. After Eddie and Fulton leave, Harry goes to lock their house while Bertha runs towards the garden thinking about what will happen in her blissful life now. She feels that Eddie and Fulton symbolise the cats she saw on the lawn earlier in the evening which suggests the destruction of her dreams and hopes.

*Bliss* written by Katherine Mansfield in 1918 significantly exemplifies the social attitudes towards gender roles, women's sexuality, and bourgeois lifestyle in the early modern period. The author criticises the societal norms of the early twentieth century, where subjects on sexuality, women's liberty, and homosexuality were restricted. Women had to conform to the laws of propriety and were expected to be relegated only to the space of the household. The character of Bertha Young is a caricature of upper-class women in British society who were not free to choose their partners, nurture their children, or openly talk about their inner feelings. The author delves into the innermost psyche of Bertha, which leads her to isolate herself from others. The narrative deals with a psychological space rather than focusing on the physical setting. Mansfield immerses into the soul of her protagonist by rejecting the conventional plot, as she realises the reasons for her alienation. It also signifies a fictitious model, whereby a woman realises her double isolation caused by her husband's affair with the woman she loves. Mansfield attempts to negate the bourgeoisie way of living, where women refuse to look into the complexities of their lives and live in an imaginary world of dreams. Bertha doesn't realise till the end the emptiness of her married life, her husband's unfaithfulness, the eccentricity of her friends, and the detachment from her daughter. *Bliss* holds its relevance even for the contemporary audience as women find themselves in a similar kind of predicament faced by Bertha Young.

## NOTES

### Check Your Progress

1. In which year was *Bliss and Other Stories* published?
2. Who published the works of Katherine Mansfield after her death?
3. Name some of the major influences on Katherine Mansfield's writing style.

## 8.3 PRIMARY CHARACTERS OF *BLISS*

The prominent characters in the short story *Bliss* have been discussed as follows:

### 1. Bertha Young

Bertha Young is the protagonist of the short story *Bliss*. She believes that she is happily married to Harry and has a lovely daughter known as Little B. As an upper-middle-class woman, her life is governed by the laws of propriety and domestic space because during the twentieth century, women weren't allowed to go outside the realm of gender roles. From the beginning itself, we can observe that Bertha has a timid and gullible personality as she cannot control people around her including her employees. She is unable to take care of her daughter, even though she loves her immensely as during that era it was a trend to keep nannies to look after children.

As we get a deeper understanding of the narrative, we realise that the picture of a perfect mother or a wife is only at the surface level. As a modern woman, she

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feels that it is important to have good education and a fashionable group of friends. She is also interested in learning about different artistic trends and social movements and therefore attempts to build a rapport with sophisticated companions like the Knights, Eddie Warren and Miss Fulton.

As far as her marital relationship goes, it is more like friendship rather than a sexual relationship. She imagines that she shares a kind of understanding with Harry, where they don't feel the need to get attracted to each other. However, all her dreams of a perfect household are shattered when she realises that her husband is having an affair with Miss Fulton, her close friend. It is worthwhile to note that Bertha is romantically attracted to Miss Fulton, but she cannot come to terms with the ground reality as during that period homosexuality was considered to be a taboo. Bertha finds bliss only in ignorance; she paints a happy picture of a perfect household and doesn't really acknowledge her real emotions due to the restrictions imposed by society.

### 2. Pearl Fulton

Pearl Fulton is described to be a friend of the protagonist, Bertha Young in Mansfield's *Bliss*. She has been invited over to a dinner party organised by Bertha in the evening where she arrives fashionably late. It is also critical to note that Miss Fulton is highly duplicitous, as on one hand she pretends to be a friend of Bertha and on the other, she commits adultery with Harry, her friend's husband. Throughout the story, the readers aren't informed much about personality as she is extremely reserved and somewhat ambiguous in nature.

The readers can't really understand her inner state of mind as the story is narrated through Bertha's perspective only; therefore we can only judge her by looking at her outer appearance. Her name justifies her personality, as she is wearing a silver outfit for the party. The narrator tells the readers that she is reflecting in her silver dress in the same manner as the pear tree is shining under the moon. Bertha however is attracted towards her friend throughout the story and assumes that they share a kind of mutual understanding. Nevertheless, in the climax of the story, we get to know about her affair with Harry and that was the only reason why she was trying to be friends with Bertha in the first place.

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## 8.4 THEMES IN *BLISS*

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Some of the prominent themes dealt with in the short story *Bliss* are discussed below:

### 1. Modernity

Modernity is one of the most important themes discussed by Mansfield in her short story *Bliss*. Bertha Young can be perceived as a perfect replication of a modern woman in terms of her relationships with her daughter, friends and, even husband. She doesn't have a good matrimonial union with her husband Harry, as

they do not seem to share any sexual intimacy which is essential for any relationship. Rather than being lovers, they can be idolised more like good friends or ‘pals’ in the story. Ironically, Bertha has assumed that the lack of sexual attraction between her and Harry is one of the characteristics of a successful ‘modern’ marriage. This is perhaps one of the main reasons why Harry feels the need to step outside the sanctity of a marriage union and commit the heinous act of infidelity with Miss Fulton. Therefore, the theme of modernity keeps resonating in the narrative consequently.

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### 2. Ignorance is Bliss

One of the most interesting themes in Mansfield’s short story is ‘Ignorance is Bliss’, where the author discusses the various kinds of anxieties a middle-aged woman faces in her life. Bertha Young realises the futility of leading a superficial happy life, and a series of events unfold throughout her day. She has a modern relationship with her husband, who is more like a friend to her. She doesn’t seem to be attracted by Harry even after so many years of marriage. Bertha remains ignorant to the reality that she is sexually attracted to women rather than men. Throughout the story, she wants to get close to her friend, Pearl Fulton. She feels comfortable in her company and wants to build a special bond with her, and that’s the reason she invites Pearl to the house party she organises that evening. She experiences moments of bliss from time to time in her day, but she isn’t aware of the actual reason for this different feeling. Initially, Bertha assumes that her bliss comes from her comfortable and wealthy upper-class lifestyle as she has everything one dreams of in their lives. However, she has to wake up from her ignorance after she realises that both her friend and husband are having an affair behind her back. Unfortunately, after this revelation, she wakes up from her blissful state. Thus, the theme of ignorance is bliss is essential to understand the plot effectively.

### 3. Marital Relationship

Katherine Mansfield discusses the theme of marriage in her short story *Bliss* by representing two pairs of couples, the Knights and the Youngs. Mr. Norman Knight and Mrs. Knight seem to share a great rapport with each other and share a strong relationship filled with love as well as compassion. They are popularly known as face and mug, by their friends and family which highlights their closeness even more. Even at Bertha’s party, they arrive together which portrays the bond of togetherness and marital love they share. However, on the other hand, we have the modern representation of a marriage union in the form of Harry and Bertha Young.

The narrator points out that she has always been in love with her husband but not in a romantic way, as she considers him to be a good pal who shares a mutual understanding with her. She has never felt attraction towards her husband sexually, which is perhaps the main reason why he cheats on her with Miss Fulton in the first place. Their marriage not only lacks romance in essence but also a sense of trust, as Harry is not able to share his true feelings with Bertha. He doesn’t

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feel interested in the life of her little daughter as he says that he will only get involved in her life once she finds a lover. This reveals that Harry is completely detached from the perfect image of the household made by Bertha. Therefore, marriage as an institution fails at every level in this story as both Bertha and Harry aren't true to each other.

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### 8.5 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN *BLISS*

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Katherine Mansfield's short story *Bliss* is written from a third person's point of view. The audience can only interpret the plot from Bertha Young's perspective, as everything happens inside and outside her mind itself. Mansfield has employed literary tools like interjections, exclamations, and questions to strengthen the point of view of her protagonist. Throughout the narrative, the audience can observe the inner dilemma of Bertha's mind, where she is constantly analysing her life and assuring herself by saying how wonderful her life has been. This significantly suggests that Bertha is reluctantly trying to fill a void in her life by claiming to live a blissful and perfect life. There are various instances from the narrative which proves that she is hiding something from the audience. For example, Bertha keeps assuring herself by saying that she has an understanding partner, sweet child, decent house, ample money, and decorative modern friends. She tries to equate happiness by saying that they have a 'new cook who makes superb omelettes' or that she has a 'wonderful little dressmaker'. Bertha, however, cannot acknowledge the emptiness she feels in her life. Like any other upper-middle class woman, she also cannot take care of her beloved child as it was not considered to be ideal. On the other hand, Mansfield uses the tool of symbolization to reflect on Bertha's incomplete life.

Satire is one of the most-used literary devices in the short story, which is used to ridicule the unrealistic nature of British modernism. All the characters in the story like the Knights, Eddie Warren, Harry, or Miss Fulton are described as being thrilling and modern individuals, yet they end up discussing ridiculous topics. The characters consider themselves to be extremely artistic and belonging to a bourgeois kind of lifestyle. However, they cannot understand the meaning of the artistic beauty of nature. Although Mrs. Knight is keen on interior designing she does not have a sense of personal style as she wears a dress printed with banana peels. She also wants to decorate her client's house around a motif of fish and chips which seems ironic. Another absurd character is Eddie Warren, who claims to be a well-known poet but is still unable to speak properly. The kind of poetry he likes suggests the grotesque implication of his preferences. All the people just pretend to talk about artistic ideas to look fashionable and elite in contemporary society.

Another literary device used by Mansfield is imagery. Mansfield has profoundly induced the figure of a pear tree in the story to represent Bertha's life. The protagonist initially believes that her life is fulfilling, rich, and complete like the 'wide open blossoms' of the pear tree. In the later part of the story, it is the tree that connects the two women in a special bond. It has reflects the symbol of Miss

Fulton's life as she is wearing a silver dress and is radiating in the same manner as the pear tree shines under moonlight. The pear tree perhaps can also personify a masculine figure like Harry, who unifies both Bertha and Miss Fulton together in an unusual connection. Thus, Mansfield employs numerous narrative techniques in her short story to make it interesting for the readers and stories are a reflection of the modernist society of the twentieth century.

*Katherine Mansfield: Bliss*

## NOTES

### Check Your Progress

4. How is the marital life of the Knights in *Bliss* different from that of the Youngs?
5. How does Mansfield use satire as a literary device in the short story *Bliss*?

## 8.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

1. *Bliss and Other Stories* was published in the year 1918.
2. John Middleton Murray took the responsibility of publishing as well as editing many volumes of Katherine Mansfield's poems after her death.
3. Katherine Mansfield's writing style was heavily influenced by Wilde's concept of art for art's sake and Chekhov's realism. Mansfield also took some inspiration from the greatest literary minds of the twentieth century and started writing on the internal dilemma of the human mind.
4. Mr. Norman Knight and Mrs. Knight seem to share a great rapport with each other and share a strong relationship filled with love as well as compassion. They are popularly known as face and mug, by their friends and family which highlights their closeness even more. However, on the other hand, we have the modern representation of a marriage union in the form of Harry and Bertha Young.
5. Satire is one of the most-used literary devices in the short story, which is used to ridicule the unrealistic nature of British modernism. All the characters in the story like the Knights, Eddie Warren, Harry, or Miss Fulton are described as being thrilling and modern individuals, yet they end up discussing ridiculous topics. An example of this is Mrs. Knight who is keen on interior designing but does not have a sense of personal style as she wears a dress printed with banana peels.

## 8.7 SUMMARY

- Katherine Mansfield was an eminent short story writer of the twentieth century, who was regarded as a contemporary of modernist literary figures like D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce.

## NOTES

- Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp was born in an affluent family in New Zealand in 1888. It can be noted from her biography that Mansfield had bisexual relationships with several women and men during her lifetime. She got married to the editor of 'Rhythm', John Middleton Murray but soon got separated as their relationship was volatile and dominating.
- Mansfield wrote *Bliss and Other Stories* in 1918 in a state of depression during her stay in Bandol. Despite being a prolific writer of her age, most of her works weren't published before her death. John Middleton Murray took the responsibility of publishing as well as editing many volumes of her poems like *The Aloe*, *Novels* and *Novelists* along with short stories like *Something Childish* and, *The Dove's Nest*.
- Mansfield's writing style has been heavily influenced by Wilde's concept of art for art's sake and Chekhov's realism. Mansfield also took some inspiration from the greatest literary minds of the twentieth century and started writing on the internal dilemma of the human mind.
- One of the most significant themes that we find in Mansfield's works is alienation and isolation. Another theme that can be frequently analysed in Mansfield's writing is discrimination in terms of class and gender. Survival in an unpredictable world is another theme that the author wrote about in many of her writings.
- Katherine Mansfield's *Bliss* was published in the year 1920. Bertha Young is introduced to the audience as a thirty-year-old woman who is often surpassed by moments of bliss or excitement.
- After returning to her home one day, Bertha enquires from her maid whether the fruits have arrived on time for the party that night. She then goes to spend time with her daughter Little B.
- After bonding with her daughter for a brief time, Bertha starts wondering about her evening party and about all the guests she has invited. The first pair of guests is Mr. Knight and Mrs. Norman Knight. The next guest is Eddie Warren, a prominent writer who has published a book on poetry. The last guest is Bertha's friend Pearl Fulton, whom she falls in love with as she finds something strange in her.
- Bertha feels that she shares an unusual kind of bond with Miss Fulton which cannot be experienced in the company of any man. Towards the end of the evening, Miss Fulton and Bertha join the other guests over coffee. The guests start bidding goodbye to Bertha one by one, as the Knights tell her that they ought to catch the train on time before it gets late in the night. Eddie and Miss Fulton also decide to leave soon and share a taxi.
- As Bertha comes to the drawing-room, to her dismay she finds Harry standing close to Miss Fulton and saying that he adores her immensely. She observes her husband whispering the word 'tomorrow' in Miss Fulton's ears, as she happily nods her head. She feels cheated both by her husband

and her dear friend who have been constantly lying to accomplish their personal motives.

- *Bliss* written by Katherine Mansfield in 1918 significantly exemplifies the social attitudes towards gender roles, women's sexuality, and bourgeois lifestyle in the early modern period. The author criticises the societal norms of the early twentieth century, where subjects on sexuality, women's liberty, and homosexuality were restricted.
- Modernity is one of the most important themes discussed by Mansfield in her short story *Bliss*. Bertha Young can be perceived as a perfect replication of a modern woman in terms of her relationships with her daughter, friends and, even husband.
- One of the most interesting themes in Mansfield's short story is 'Ignorance is Bliss'. Bertha remains ignorant to the reality that she is sexually attracted to women rather than men. However, she has to wake up from her ignorance after she realises that both her friend and husband are having an affair behind her back.
- Katherine Mansfield discusses the theme of marriage in her short story *Bliss* by representing two pairs of couples, the Knights and the Youngs. Mr. Norman Knight and Mrs. Knight seem to share a great rapport with each other and share a strong relationship filled with love as well as compassion. However, on the other hand, we have the modern representation of a marriage union in the form of Harry and Bertha Young.
- Katherine Mansfield's short story *Bliss* is written from a third person's point of view. The audience can only interpret the plot from Bertha Young's perspective, as everything happens inside and outside her mind itself.
- Satire is one of the most-used literary devices in the short story, which is used to ridicule the unrealistic nature of British modernism. All the characters in the story like the Knights, Eddie Warren, Harry, or Miss Fulton are described as being thrilling and modern individuals, yet they end up discussing ridiculous topics.
- Another literary device used by Mansfield is imagery. Mansfield has profoundly induced the figure of a pear tree in the story to represent Bertha's life. In the later part of the story, it is the tree that connects the two women in a special bond. The pear tree perhaps can also personify a masculine figure like Harry, who unifies both Bertha and Miss Fulton together in an unusual connection.

## NOTES

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### 8.8 KEY WORDS

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- **Psychoanalytic theory:** First developed by Sigmund Freud, it is a theory of personality organization. This theory stresses that all people possess unconscious thoughts, feelings, desires, and memories.

## NOTES

- **Feminism:** It is the belief that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men.
- **Satire:** It is a literary device used to ridicule the vices, follies, abuses and shortcomings of people, society, organizations, etc.

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### 8.9 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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#### Short-Answer Questions

1. Write a short note on the narrative style of Katherine Mansfield.
2. What is the impact of rigid gender roles on Bertha's life in Katherine Mansfield's *Bliss*?
3. How does ignorance shatter the reality of Bertha in the short story *Bliss*?
4. What does the image of the pear tree symbolise in the short story *Bliss*?

#### Long-Answer Questions

1. Discuss some of the prominent themes dealt with in the short story *Bliss*.
2. Examine the theme of desire, sexuality and gender in Katherine Mansfield's *Bliss*.
3. Explain the significance of the title of the short story *Bliss*.

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### 8.10 FURTHER READINGS

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- Ascari, Maurizio. 2014. *Cinema and the Imagination in Katherine Mansfield's Writing*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tomalin, Claire. 2003. *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life*. New Delhi: Penguin Books Limited.
- Gunsteren, Julia Van. 1990. *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Impressionism*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
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## UNIT 9 ERNEST HEMINGWAY: *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA*

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### NOTES

#### Structure

- 9.0 Introduction
- 9.1 Objectives
- 9.2 Introduction to Ernest Hemingway
  - 9.2.1 Plot Overview
  - 9.2.2 Analysis
- 9.3 Primary Characters of *The Old Man and The Sea*
- 9.4 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 9.5 Summary
- 9.6 Key Words
- 9.7 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 9.8 Further Readings

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### 9.0 INTRODUCTION

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This unit deals with one of the most prominent works of Ernest Hemingway. Ernest Hemingway is a canonical figure in the American literary tradition. He was born in Oak Park, Illinois on 21 July 1899. He was the son of a doctor and a music teacher. At age eighteen, he volunteered to serve as a Red Cross ambulance driver in World War I and was sent to Italy. He began his writing career as a reporter for the Kansas City Star. In 1921, Hemingway moved to Paris, where he served as a correspondent for the Toronto Daily Star. As a journalist, he also covered the Spanish Civil War. In Paris, Hemingway became a part of the writers of the 'lost generation'. It was a group of American and English expatriate writers who tried to reflect through their works the moral, social and psychological loss caused by the World War I. The group included Faulkner, Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos and Sinclair Lewis, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Ford Madox Ford. In the early 1920s, Hemingway too began to achieve fame as a chronicler of the disaffection felt by many American youth after the World War I. This unit will discuss in detail the literary career of Ernest Hemingway and the novel *The Old Man and the Sea*.

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### 9.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the prominent works of Ernest Hemingway
- Examine the plot of the novel *The Old Man and the Sea*
- Critically analyse the theme and major characters of *The Old Man and the Sea*

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## 9.2 INTRODUCTION TO ERNEST HEMINGWAY

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### NOTES

Hemingway was famous for his novels, short stories and essays. Most of his life and works revolved around games like hunting, fishing, boxing and bullfighting. A great fan of baseball, Hemingway liked to talk in the sport's lingo. Hemingway wrote on bullfighting, published short stories and articles. Many of his works are considered classics of American literature. His novels *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) established him as a dominant literary voice of his time.

Hemingway fictionalized his experience in Italy in what some consider his greatest novel, *A Farewell to Arms*. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway's bestselling novel, was published in 1940. His novel *Across the River and Into the Trees*, published in 1950, was not received well by the critics. The much needed success came with the publication of the novel *The Old Man and the Sea*, in the year 1952. It was the last novel published in his lifetime. At the end of his life, Hemingway became prone to debilitating bouts of depression. He committed suicide in 1961 in Ketchum, Idaho.

*The Old Man and the Sea* published in the form of a book in the year 1952, initially appeared in a special issue of *Life Magazine* in November 1951. It was a popular success and the story won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1953. A year later, in 1954, Hemingway was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. *Life* magazine sold more than 5 million copies of its September 1, 1952, issue, and the novel was at the top of the best-seller lists for six months. In the 1930s, Hemingway lived in Key West, Florida, later in Cuba, and his years of experience fishing in the Gulf Stream and the Caribbean provided an essential background for the vivid descriptions of the fisherman's craft in *The Old Man and the Sea*. The novel is considered by many to be the culmination point of his career. It is especially praised for its depiction of a new dimension to the typical Hemingway code hero, who is less macho and more respectful of life. Santiago is a character that faces the human condition to make it better and survives without dismissing it or dying.

### 9.2.1 Plot Overview

*The Old Man and the Sea*, set in Cuba, depicts the epic battle between an elderly fisherman, Santiago, and a huge marlin. The principal characters are an old Cuban fisherman Santiago, a young boy Manolin, and the fish Marlin. The readers are introduced to an impoverished old fisherman Santiago who despite his expertise at fishing has been unable to catch a fish for eighty-four days.

For the first forty four days, a young boy named Manolin was with him. The boy had worked with Santiago as an apprentice for many years. He joined the old man when he was just five years old and the old man had taught him to fish. Manolin's parents had forced him to switch boats, leave the unlucky old man and join a prosperous ship. Many young fishermen made fun of Santiago, while the

older ones felt sad about his condition. Most of the times Santiago relied upon Manolin for living. Manolin continued to care for the old man upon his return from the sea each night. He loved and respected the old man, relished Santiago's stories of past adventures and his knowledge of American baseball and its primary hero, the great DiMaggio. Santiago is fond of DiMaggio's strength and endurance. The player's father was a fisherman which also gives a sense of connection to Santiago. The old man tells Manolin about his early life working on ships that sailed to Africa. Manolin so cherished the company of the old man that he regularly visited him and brought food, tea and drinks. He offered himself to serve Santiago in some way if not fish with him. The boy believes Santiago is a legend among fishermen. We also get a glimpse of the old man shack. It has nothing more than the barest necessities—a bed, a table and chair, and a place to cook. There are two pictures on the wall, one of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and one of the Virgin of Cobre, the patroness of Cuba. The old man has taken down the photograph of his wife as it made him feel lonely.

Next morning, Santiago goes to Manolin's house to wake the boy. The two head back to Santiago's shack and drink coffee from condensed milk cans. Santiago is confident about the day's prospects. He and Manolin part on the beach, wishing each other good luck. It is the eighty-fourth day and as decided, the old man sailed his skiff far beyond the island's shallow coastal waters out into the Caribbean waters around Cuba and ventured into the Gulf Stream. While waiting for a catch, Santiago shows sympathy for the creatures and love for the sea which can often be cruel. He wonders when he developed the habit of talking to himself, but does not remember.

He thinks that if the other fishermen heard him talking, they would think him crazy. The old man realizes that he has sailed so far out that he can no longer see the shore. No land is visible at all. As expected, he caught a large marlin in deep waters of the Gulf Stream. The fish is so huge that it pulls the skiff further into the sea. Nevertheless, he promises himself that he will kill his opponent before the day ends. The old man waited for the fish to surface, but this does not happen. He could do nothing but hold on. Often, he wishes the boy with him. When night fell, his small boat was pulled far out to sea by the fish. The struggle continues through the night.

Next morning, the marlin is still pulling the skiff. The old man realized that landing such enormous fish would mean a prolonged struggle. The marlin almost pulled the old man overboard and his hand starts bleeding because of the taut skiff line that is a connection between the marlin and the old man, has cut his palm deep. The hand feels the cramp because of the strain of taking the fish resistance. Santiago feels angry and frustrated by the weakness of his own body. He eats tuna that he has caught a day before and had planned to use it as a bait. He hopes that tuna will give some strength to his body and ease the cramp in his hand. As he eats, he feels a brotherly desire to feed the marlin too. The fish suddenly leaps magnificently into the air. Santiago is surprised to see the size of the fish which is

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bigger than he has expected and ever seen. Santiago realizes the power of the fish. Calling the marlin great, Santiago says he will never let the fish learn its own strength. The struggle continues. With another day's passage the old man's energies were exhausted. On the third day the fish has slowed down. It is tired and so is old Santiago, deprived of sleep, food and water, feeling delirious. Santiago continues to battle the marlin, pulling in line to shorten the fish's circles. Feeling weak the old man, who often claimed he is not religious, says Hail Marys and Our Fathers. He also promises that if he catches the fish, he will make a pilgrimage to the Virgin of Cobre. As the marlin circles the boat, Santiago manages to pull it close enough to kill it with a harpoon thrust. His hands were deeply cut from holding the rope attached to the marlin.

Santiago tried to put the marlin in the boat, but it was too large to fit in it. He tied the huge marlin to the boat's side. As Santiago heads towards the shore with the fish, the marlin's blood leaves a trail in the water. The smell of the blood attracts sharks and the first to attack is a big mako shark. The old man killed this one with his harpoon, but the smell of blood in the water drew others. Before being killed, the mako shark had taken a huge chunk of flesh from marlin's body. In the struggle, the old man loses the harpoon and lengths of valuable rope, which leaves him vulnerable to other shark attacks. The old man fights off the successive vicious predators as best he can. Although he kills several sharks, more and more appear. Santiago's continued fight against the scavengers becomes useless. By the nightfall of second day, the sharks had ripped the marlin to pieces. They have devoured the marlin's precious meat, leaving only skeleton, head and tail. All the old man could do was to steer his boat toward lights of Havana. Upon reaching the shore, the old man carried his gear forward, falling several times from exhaustion. Santiago chastises himself for going out too far, and for sacrificing his great and worthy opponent, the marlin.

Santiago arrives home before daybreak, stumbles back to his shack. He goes off to sleep and does not wake up until late in the morning. In the meantime, Manolin had come to see the old man and looking at his condition the boy cries. He goes to fetch coffee for Santiago and tells everyone not to disturb the old man's sleep. When the old man wakes up, he is greeted by Manolin. The boy tells him to rest more and prepare for the next day. Manolin tells the old man that he will join back as his apprentice, does not matter what the parents or anyone else says. The boy urges that he has to learn a lot from Santiago. At first, the old man says no to the boy, but soon agrees without much resistance. His fellow fishermen marveled at the skeleton of a fish larger than any that they have ever seen. The village fishermen now showed respect to the same old man Santiago whom they had ridiculed for not being able to catch a fish in eighty four days. That afternoon, some tourists also saw the marlin's skeleton and asked a waiter what it is. Trying to explain what happened to the marlin, the waiter says tiburon which means shark. The tourists misunderstand it and assume that the skeleton is of a shark. Manolin pledges to return to fishing with Santiago.

The novel ends as the old man goes into a deep slumber, with the boy at his side, and again dreams of lions on distant shore near Africa.

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### 9.2.2 Analysis

The novel *The Old Man and the Sea* has been interpreted at various levels of meaning. The character and tragic adventures of the old man, Santiago, states that there is honour even in struggle, defeat and death. It is the conscious decision on the part of the old man to act, to fight, and to never give up that enables Santiago to go on in adverse circumstances. Although, he loses the long battle against the scavenger sharks and returns back without his fish, he earns the respect of the people in the village and community. Through the struggle of Santiago, Hemingway clearly suggests that victory is not a prerequisite for honour. Instead, there is glory in the act of struggle itself, regardless of the outcome of the struggle. The prestige and honour Santiago accrues comes from his determination and strength to continue to fight in destructive circumstances. There is majesty and splendor in his determination to stick to his guns in his struggle against the powerful forces arrayed against him with the knowledge that catastrophe is inevitable. In Hemingway's conception of the world, death and destruction are a part of the natural order of things and are unavoidable. One cannot overcome them, but one can face them with courage.

Throughout his struggle, the old man is sustained by his determination and the pride of his calling. It is with his unconquerable spirit and will power that the broken old fisherman ventures far out into the Gulf Stream and there hooks the biggest marlin ever seen in those waters. Santiago is aware of the dangers associated with his profession, particularly when he decides to cross the forbidden depths of the sea. Yet, he holds his head high and continues with his steadfast struggle with the marlin. He believed in his own philosophy of life that a man can be destroyed, but cannot be defeated. The old man's battle with the fish is marked by immense pain and suffering. However, this is also the world in which extreme pain becomes a source of triumph rather than defeat. Santiago's triumph is in his endurance, physical pain does not matter here. Therefore, despite his struggle at the sea, he decides to rest before going back out to sea, and this time with the boy Manolin.

Another interpretation asserts that *The Old Man and the Sea* concerns life. The old man's humble but dignified courage in the struggle both to survive and to prevail was taken to symbolize the kind of courage demanded in any person's struggles with life. The novel gives an inspiring lesson that a man might be defeated in practical or worldly terms while still triumphing spiritually and as a person. The individual struggles for success in a world that seems to be designed to destroy him. Sometimes, a man is punished by a hostile universe without his fault. In this cruel and oppressive order, the old man summons the courage to confront the challenges of daily life. Santiago could not catch a single fish continuously for eighty four days in spite of being a skilled fisherman. The novel also suggests that if a man goes beyond the forbidden boundaries and the limits of human possibility,

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he will be punished. Santiago acknowledges his responsibility in his ruin. At the same time, one also understands that man's greatest potential can be found only when he returns to the natural world. The old man's physical suffering leads to a more significant spiritual triumph.

Hope and resolution are necessary components of endurance throughout the novel. Santiago's knowledge of the sea and its creatures and his unparalleled craft helps him preserve a sense of hope regardless of circumstance. After the arrival of the mako shark, Santiago is preoccupied with the notion of hope. As Santiago sails on while the sharks continue to attack his catch, Santiago seems full of resolution, but he had little hope to take back the marlin. Later, the old man hits the shark without hope, but with resolution. Without hope Santiago has reason neither to fight the sharks nor to return. With this hope and resolution, Santiago achieves spiritual victory at the end of his struggle. His bleeding hands, broken harpoon, and broken back are a testimony of the heroic battle he had to wage with marlin and the killer sharks.

The natural world that Hemingway portrays in the midst of the deep sea is the one in which life and death accompany each other. Ultimately, everything in this world dies, it is the sense of camaraderie between men and creatures that alleviate the grimness of that fact. Santiago says as the marlin dies that the fish came alive with his death. The old man shares a sense of identity with the marlin that he catches. He loves the sea and its occupants and has compassion for them. Hemingway also unites the old man with marlin through Santiago's frequent expressions of his feeling of kinship. He, thus, suggests that the fate of one is the fate of the other. For three days, he holds fast to the line that links him to the fish, even though it cuts deeply into his palms, causes a crippling cramp in his left hand, and ruins his back. This physical pain allows Santiago to forge a connection with the marlin that goes beyond the literal link of the line.

The novel can also be studied as a tale of man in conflict with nature as well as in harmony with nature. Hemingway suggests that the world is a vast, interconnected network of life. He recounts man's place within nature as the protagonist Santiago is pitted against the creatures of the sea. Santiago feels of deep connection with the warbler who will soon be taken away by the hawk. The brotherhood between Santiago and the surrounding world extends beyond the warbler. The old man feels an intimate connection to the great fish, as well as to the sea and stars. Santiago constantly pledges his love, respect, and sentiment of brotherhood to the marlin.

Both Santiago and the marlin display qualities of pride and honour, valour and dauntless attitude. Both, the old man as well as the marlin, and other creatures are subject to the same eternal law that is they must kill or be killed. As the old man himself remarks on seeing the flying warbler that the world is filled with predators. No living thing can escape the inevitable struggle that will lead to its death. Death is inevitable, but giving up to its challenges without any fight is not the way of life. The best is that man or animal who struggles till he meets his end.

The story of the old man has also be interpreted as a parable of religious significance, an almost Christian parable of victory through defeat. The Christian references in *The Old Man and the Sea* are inescapable. Hemmingway associates Santiago's ordeal, in his struggle with the big fish and fighting position in which Santiago collapses on his bed, his face down with his arms out straight and the palms of his hands up, conjures up the image of Christ on the cross. Hemingway employs these religious symbolism to prove that how Santiago, like Christ, has transcended by turning his loss into gain and defeat into triumph.

Hemingway's fiction presents a world peopled almost exclusively by men who display their skills. Throughout the novel, the writer describes the old man's proficiency in fishing. Santiago's memory of hooking the female marlin of a male female pair exemplifies Hemingway's world in which women have no substantial place. Santiago does not keep the picture of his wife on the wall of his shack. He does not dream about her or any other woman. Men are the central focus of most of Hemingway's writing and of *The Old Man and the Sea* too. In Hemingway's world, mere survival is not enough. To elevate oneself above the masses, one must master the rules and rituals by which men are judged.

Many critics also read the novel as an allegory of Hemingway's own literary career, with Santiago representing Hemingway, the struggle for the marlin representing his efforts to reel in a great work, and the attack of the sharks representing the vicious attacks of the critics. The novel has been seen as an affirmation of such fundamental human values as love, humility, courage, and the bond between the old and the young.

#### Check Your Progress

1. In which year was *For Whom the Bell Tolls* published?
2. When was *The Old Man and the Sea* published?
3. Which American baseball player is Santiago fond of in the novel *The Old Man and the Sea*?

### 9.3 PRIMARY CHARACTERS OF *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA*

Some of the important characters of the novel are discussed as follows:

#### Santiago

Santiago is an old Cuban fisherman with an unparalleled precision when fishing. Everything about Santiago was old except his eyes, blue in colour, cheerful, confident and undefeated. He is an epitome of courage and the novel tells the story of his unconquerable spirit in the face of adversity. He believes that man can be destroyed, but cannot be defeated. Santiago, though destroyed at the end, is never defeated.

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He emerges as a hero. In all the adverse circumstances, Santiago never lost his confidence and exhibits terrific strength and moral certainty.

The concept of code hero applies to Santiago, like other characters of Hemingway's novels. Hemingway conceives his protagonist as a man alienated from his surroundings, who lives with the ideals of honour, courage and endurance in a world that is dangerous and hostile. He faces life with grace even under physical and moral pressures. He neither dies nor does he win the physical battle. He remains undefeated in his spirits even in adverse circumstances. He is humble and dignified.

Santiago preserves his pride, his values and his honour as he faces physical defeat in the epic struggle with the marlin and the sharks in the Gulf Stream. The battle is a test of the old man's physical and mental strength and he is successful at the end. He suffers, feels the pain of failure, and yet remains undefeated. A code hero is skilled in his profession, so is Santiago. A lonely and wise old fisherman conquers a magnificent fish, endures the heart-breaking loss of it, and rises gallantly above his defeat. He is a hero in deed and spirit, defeated yet courageous enough to rise again.

Santiago finds the marlin a worthy opponent. The marlin did not die before fighting the old man. Santiago feels love and respect for the marlin. Although wounded and weary, the old man feels a deep empathy and admiration for the big fish, his brother in suffering, strength, and resolve. The destruction of both the marlin and the old man become a point of honour and achievement that confirm their heroic qualities. Santiago's struggle does not change his place in the world, but it enables him to meet his most dignified self.

In spite of his struggles, Santiago holds onto his pride. It is his pride that becomes a source of determination that does not let him lose hope. His pride motivates him to greatness by taking the challenge to go into the dangerous deep water and leads to his heroic transcendence of defeat. Pride is also a source of Santiago's greatest strength. At the same time, hubris also becomes a reason for his destruction and the old man is aware of it. After sharks have destroyed the marlin, the old man says again and again that he has ruined himself as well as the marlin, by sailing beyond the accepted boundaries.

### **Manolin**

The young boy Manolin considers Santiago his mentor and respects the old man for his skills as a fisherman. While, others make fun of the old man and his bad luck, the young boy's steadfast devotion to and trust in Santiago establishes his mentor as a figure of significant moral stature. Though professionally he has left Santiago's boat because his parents forced him to do so, yet he took care of the old man every day. By the end of the novel, Manolin mentions that he will join back Santiago as an apprentice no matter what his parents ask him to do. Hemingway establishes the character of the boy as a symbol of uncompromised

love and commitment. All he feels for the old man is love, respect and admiration. Manolin's love for Santiago is spontaneous and natural.

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Santiago and Manolin share an undefined bond with each other. Manolin is an important character in the novel, not only because of his role as a caretaker for Santiago, but because the love and friendship he shows the old man is necessary sustenance for a man. The boy is the only companion to the old man. The mutual affection between the old man and the young boy is typical of Hemingway's general emphasis on friendship between males. The old fisherman and the boy value human relationships above materialism. Manolin is an outward manifestation of the boy in Santiago. His wish for the boy to be with him during his struggle in the sea is also the old man's yearning for his youthful strength. The old man passes on his legacy of crafts and experience to the young boy. His dedication to learning from the old man ensures that Santiago will live on. In Manolin, Santiago has found a way to live after death.

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### **DiMaggio**

Baseball is the national sport of Cuba and DiMaggio was a baseball player. Although, he was a center fielder for the New York Yankees from 1936 to 1951, he is often considered the best all-around player ever at that position.

Santiago worships him as a model of strength and commitment. The old man's thoughts turn toward DiMaggio whenever he needs to reassure himself of his own strength. Despite a painful bone spur that might have crippled another player, DiMaggio went on to secure a triumphant career. The baseball player is a symbol of success against all odds. The ideal of DiMaggio's courage gives Santiago spiritual strength. DiMaggio never appears in the novel, yet he plays a significant role throughout.

Perico, the newspaper distributor and Martin, the cafe owner also do not appear in the story. Nonetheless, both play an important role in the life of the old man. One provides him with the newspaper to remain connected with baseball and the other provides him with supper.

### **Major Theme of *The Old Man and the Sea*: Symbolism**

Santiago dreams of the lions at play on the beaches of Africa three times. The first time he dreams of the lions is on the night before he departs on his fishing expedition in the deep waters of the Gulf Stream. The second dream occurs when he sleeps on the boat for a few hours in the middle of his struggle with the marlin. The third time he dreams of the lions at the end of the novel. The lions can be associated with the youth of Santiago, when he was full of vigour. The promise of triumph and regeneration is supported by the closing image of the book. The vigour of the youthful experience is permanently enshrined in his dreams of the lions on the beach.

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This also explains the camaraderie between the old man and Manolin. The glorious and splendid marlin symbolizes the ideal opponent to the old man in the natural world where everything kills everything eventually. The magnificent fish brings out the best in the old man, his strength and courage, his love and respect. The fishing line that reaches the marlin through Santiago's palms serves as a symbol of the camaraderie that Santiago feels with the fish. With the destruction of marlin by the sharks Santiago too feels ruined.

The shovel-nosed sharks are also opponents for the old man. They stand in contrast to the marlin, which is worthy of Santiago's effort and strength. These sharks symbolize and embody the destructive laws of the universe. There is no glory in battling with them as they are predators.

Hemingway employs a number of religious symbols and images associated with Christ. Like Christ, the old man too has turned his defeat into triumph by winning the respect of the villagers and the young boy Manolin. The narrator's description of Santiago's return to town shows the old man struggles up the hill with his mast across his shoulders, brings to mind images of crucifixion. The position in which he collapses on his bed resembles the image of Christ suffering on the cross.

### Check Your Progress

4. What does Santiago's dream about lions symbolize?
5. Mention the use of religious symbols by Hemingway in *The Old Man and the Sea*.

## 9.4 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

1. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway's bestselling novel, was published in 1940.
2. *The Old Man and the Sea* was published in 1952.
3. Santiago is fond of American baseball player DiMaggio.
4. The lions in Santiago's dream can be associated with the youth of Santiago, when he was full of vigour.
5. Hemingway employs a number of religious symbols and images associated with Christ. Like Christ, the old man too has turned his defeat into triumph by winning the respect of the villagers and the young boy Manolin. The narrator's description of Santiago's return to town shows the old man struggles up the hill with his mast across his shoulders, brings to mind images of crucifixion. The position in which he collapses on his bed resembles the image of Christ suffering on the cross.

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## 9.5 SUMMARY

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- Hemingway was famous for his novels, short stories and essays. Most of his life and works revolved around games like hunting, fishing, boxing and bullfighting. Many of his works are considered classics of American literature. His novels *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) established him as a dominant literary voice of his time.
- *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway's bestselling novel, was published in 1940. His novel *Across the River and Into the Trees*, published in 1950, was not received well by the critics. The much needed success came with the publication of the novel *The Old Man and the Sea*, in the year 1952. It was the last novel published in his lifetime.
- At the end of his life, Hemingway became prone to debilitating bouts of depression. He committed suicide in 1961 in Ketchum, Idaho.
- *The Old Man and the Sea* was a popular success and the story won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1953. A year later, in 1954, Hemingway was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.
- *The Old Man and the Sea*, set in Cuba, depicts the epic battle between an elderly fisherman, Santiago, and a huge marlin. The principal characters are an old Cuban fisherman Santiago, a young boy Manolin, and the fish Marlin. The readers are introduced to an impoverished old fisherman Santiago who despite his expertise at fishing has been unable to catch a fish for eighty-four days.
- For the first forty four days, a young boy named Manolin was with him. The boy had worked with Santiago as an apprentice for many years. He joined the old man when he was just five years old and the old man had taught him to fish.
- Santiago and Manolin part before the former ventures into the Caribbean waters. The old man realizes that he has sailed so far out that he can no longer see the shore. As expected, he caught a large marlin in deep waters of the Gulf Stream. The fish is so huge that it pulls the skiff further into the sea.
- When night fell, his small boat was pulled far out to sea by the fish. The marlin almost pulled the old man overboard and his hand starts bleeding because of the taut skiff line that is a connection between the marlin and the old man, has cut his palm deep. Santiago feels angry and frustrated by the weakness of his own body.
- On the third day the fish has slowed down. It is tired and so is old Santiago, deprived of sleep, food and water, feeling delirious. Santiago continues to battle the marlin, pulling in line to shorten the fish's circles.

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- Santiago tried to put the marlin in the boat, but it was too large to fit in it. He tied the huge marlin to the boat's side. As Santiago heads towards the shore with the fish, the marlin's blood leaves a trail in the water. The smell of the blood attracts sharks and the first to attack is a big mako shark.
- The old man fights off the successive vicious predators as best he can. Although he kills several sharks, more and more appear. By the nightfall of second day, the sharks had ripped the marlin to pieces. They have devoured the marlin's precious meat, leaving only skeleton, head and tail.
- Santiago arrives home before daybreak, stumbles back to his shack. He goes off to sleep and does not wake up until late in the morning. When the old man wakes up, he is greeted by Manolin. Manolin tells the old man that he will join back as his apprentice, does not matter what the parents or anyone else says. The novel ends as the old man goes into a deep slumber, with the boy at his side, and again dreams of lions on distant shore near Africa.
- The character and tragic adventures of the old man, Santiago, states that there is honour even in struggle, defeat and death. It is the conscious decision on the part of the old man to act, to fight, and to never give up that enables Santiago to go on in adverse circumstances.
- Through the struggle of Santiago, Hemingway clearly suggests that victory is not a prerequisite for honour. Instead, there is glory in the act of struggle itself, regardless of the outcome of the struggle.
- The old man's battle with the fish is marked by immense pain and suffering. However, this is also the world in which extreme pain becomes a source of triumph rather than defeat.
- Another interpretation asserts that *The Old Man and the Sea* concerns life. The old man's humble but dignified courage in the struggle both to survive and to prevail was taken to symbolize the kind of courage demanded in any person's struggles with life.
- The novel can also be studied as a tale of man in conflict with nature as well as in harmony with nature. Both Santiago and the marlin display qualities of pride and honour, valour and dauntless attitude. Both, the old man as well as the marlin, and other creatures are subject to the same eternal law that is they must kill or be killed.
- The Christian references in *The Old Man and the Sea* are inescapable. Hemmingway associates Santiago's ordeal, in his struggle with the big fish and fighting against the sharks, with Christ's agony and triumph, fighting against the evil. This is supported by the use of Christian symbols and metaphors.

- Many critics also read the novel as an allegory of Hemingway's own literary career, with Santiago representing Hemingway, the struggle for the marlin representing his efforts to reel in a great work, and the attack of the sharks representing the vicious attacks of the critics.
- Santiago dreams of the lions at play on the beaches of Africa three times. The first time he dreams of the lions is on the night before he departs on his fishing expedition in the deep waters of the Gulf Stream. The second dream occurs when he sleeps on the boat for a few hours in the middle of his struggle with the marlin. The third time he dreams of the lions at the end of the novel. The lions can be associated with the youth of Santiago, when he was full of vigour.

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### 9.6 KEY WORDS

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- **Parable:** It is a short story that teaches a lesson.
- **Allegory:** As a literary device, an allegory is a narrative in which a character, place, or event is used to deliver a broader message about real-world issues and occurrences.
- **Symbolism:** It is the use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities by giving them symbolic meanings that are different from their literal sense.

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### 9.7 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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#### Short-Answer Questions

1. Write a short note on the role of Manolin in the novel.
2. How has Hemingway depicted sea and nature in the novel *The Old Man and the Sea*?
3. Why does the old man consider the marlin as a worthy opponent and extend his feeling of brotherhood, love, and respect to the creature he eventually kills?

#### Long-Answer Questions

1. Discuss *The Old Man and the Sea* as a novel about strength and endurance.
2. Examine the religious symbolism in the novel *The Old Man and the Sea*.
3. Analyse the relationship between Santiago and Manolin in the novel *The Old Man and the Sea*.

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## 9.8 FURTHER READINGS

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### NOTES

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## UNIT 10 PATRICK WHITE: *VOSS*

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### Structure

- 10.0 Introduction
- 10.1 Objectives
- 10.2 About the Author: Patrick White
  - 10.2.1 A Short Background of the British Presence in Australia
- 10.3 *Voss*: Summary
- 10.4 *Voss*: Major Themes
- 10.5 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 10.6 Summary
- 10.7 Key Words
- 10.8 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 10.9 Further Readings

### NOTES

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## 10.0 INTRODUCTION

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Patrick White's novel *Voss* deals with a German explorer Voss' expedition of the Australian topography. The novel is often read as a historical novel as the exploration of Australia was based on the real life exploration that was done in 1845; but more than being a historical novel it is a metaphysical novel, as it deals with the psyche of Voss as well as his relationship with the Australian landscape. This unit will discuss the prominent works of Patrick White and the themes of his novel *Voss*.

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## 10.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the prominent works of Patrick White
- Examine the history of the British presence in Australia
- Analyse the major themes of the novel *Voss*

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## 10.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: PATRICK WHITE

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Patrick White was born in Knightsbridge, London in the year 1912 to Victor Martindale White and Ruth (née Withycombe), who were both Australians. He was just six months old when he was brought to Australia. He was educated in Australia till he was thirteen. The next phase of his education started in England. After the British phase of his education, he came back to Australia. He started working as a jackaroo on sheep stations. Patrick White's intention to be acquainted with continental literature became evident on his return to England to study French and German at King's College. His life is one of journey and travel.

## NOTES

During the early phase of his life, he frequently travelled between Australia and England. Patrick White epitomizes a sustained effort at fictionalizing the Australian experience. His first novel *The Happy Valley* is projected against the background of the snow country of New South Wales. In this novel, he concentrates on the intensity of human suffering in relation to the archetypal problems of love and jealousy. Some of his other prominent novels are *The Living and the Dead* (1941), *The Aunt's Story* (1948), *The Tree of Man* (1955) *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) *The Solid Mandala* (1966), *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976).

### 10.2.1 A Short Background of the British Presence in Australia

Australia was discovered by Captain James Cook in 1770 and thereafter colonized by the British eight years later when the First Fleet landed at Botany Bay in 1788, under the commandship of Captain Arthur Phillip. This historic landing occurred on 18 January 1788, but Captain Phillip and his crew did not settle there. The fleet sailed north and landed at Port Jackson (Sydney) eight days later. To celebrate the landing of the First Fleet, January 26 is celebrated as Australian Day. The primary objective behind the colonization of Australia by England was the need to relieve its overcrowded prisons. The secondary objective was to provide a base for the Royal Navy in the Eastern Sea. In fact, the first fleet comprised 1373 people of which 732 were convicts. The transportation of convicts continued till 1868. In total, more than 1,60,000 convicts were transported to Australia within a span of 80 years. By the mid-nineteenth century, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania and Victoria had emerged as independent states paying nominal allegiance to Great Britain. The Commonwealth of Australia was formed as a result of the alliance of the colonies on 1 January 1901.

#### Check Your Progress

1. When was Patrick White born?
2. Name the first novel written by Patrick White.
3. When and by whom was Australia discovered?
4. What was the primary objective behind the colonization of Australia by England?

### 10.3 VOSS: SUMMARY

Some scholars are of the opinion that the novel *Voss* by Patrick White is based on an actual expedition which attempted to cross the Australian continent in 1845. This makes it a historical novel in the strict sense of the term; but there are other metaphysical preoccupations of the novel which makes many other scholars read

the novel from a different perspective. It can, therefore, be derived that *Voss* is by no means a conventional historical novel in the strict sense of the term. The exploration is as much of the psychological and spiritual nature of the characters as it is of the actual terrain, though Patrick White renders the latter most vividly in his concentrated and poetic style. As the novel opens, Johann Ulrich Voss, a German immigrant, calls on Edmund Bonner, the major financial backer of the expedition, and meets Bonner's niece Laura Trevelyan. The development of their ensuing relationship parallels the fate of the expedition.

In Sydney, Voss recruits four members of the expedition, one of whom, the boy Harry Robarts, attaches himself to Voss, making himself useful and idolizing Voss as a benefactor and hero. Palfreyman is a rather sickly young man, an ornithologist commissioned by a titled Englishman to make a collection of flora and fauna. For Frank Le Mesurier who has held a number of jobs but none for very long, the expedition may provide fulfillment and self-knowledge, though he is prophetically uneasy about the undertaking. Turner, a drunkard, forces himself upon Voss, assuring him that he will do his part. Meanwhile, Edmund Bonner and his wife are preoccupied with their own affairs, to which Voss and the expedition are peripheral. Their daughter Belle is a beautiful but rather empty-headed young woman; her cousin Laura is the quiet, bookish one. The Bonners' secure, middle class household is disrupted by the discovery that Rose Portion, their servant, who was transported for the manslaughter of one illegitimate child, is now pregnant again. Rose, an awkward, ungainly young woman with a harelip, thought that she had done what was best for the child. Like Harry Robarts, she is somewhat simple.

Although they have spoken only a few times, at the farewell dinner the Bonners give for the expedition, Voss talks for some time with Laura in the garden and requests permission to write to her. Laura agrees. The expedition sails the next day for Newcastle. Thus, it can be perceived that the novel centres on two characters – Voss, a German, and Laura, a young woman, orphaned and new to the colony of New South Wales. It opens as they meet for the first time in the house of Laura's uncle and the patron of Voss's expedition, Mr Bonner.

Johann Ulrich Voss sets out to cross the Australian continent in 1845. After collecting a party of settlers and two Aborigines, his party heads inland from the coast only to meet endless adversity. The explorers cross drought-plagued desert then waterlogged lands until they retreat to a cave where they lie for weeks waiting for the rain to stop. Voss and Laura retain a connection despite Voss's absence and the story intersperses developments in each of their lives. Laura adopts an orphaned child and attends a ball during Voss's absence. The travelling party splits in two and nearly all members eventually perish. The story ends some twenty years later at a garden party hosted by Laura's cousin Belle Radclyffe (née Bonner) on the day of the unveiling of a statue of Voss. The party is also attended by Laura Trevelyan and the one remaining member of Voss's expeditionary party, Mr Judd.

## NOTES

NOTES

**Check Your Progress**

5. Name the four members who are recruited by Voss for the expedition.
6. Where do Laura and Voss meet for the first time in the novel?

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**10.4 VOSS: MAJOR THEMES**

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Patrick White's greatest achievement as an artist probably lies in the fact that he for the first time creates a distinctive Australian consciousness in Australian writing. Patrick White's early novels bear the influence of renowned writers such as D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T S Eliot and others. In the novel, *Voss* he has wonderfully recaptured the colonial reality of New South Wales in the context of the house of Mr Bomer. However, at the same time, this is true that Patrick White does not only deal with the real world but also with the metaphysical world. Therefore, in his novels, we see a spiritual level of experience which makes his novels a greater reading experience. In other words, he creates a tension between spiritual and non-spiritual, body and spirit, good and evil, life and death, dream and actuality, time and eternity.

**Voss and Australia**

It can be said that the central protagonist of Patrick White's *Voss* is Australia as Patrick White seems to be dealing with Australia to a greater extent in his novels, especially *Voss*. Yet, the title of the novel is Voss and not Australia which goes on to suggest that it is not only a novel about Australia but moreover about the experiential phase of Voss's journey as he carries on with his expedition of Australia. In the novel, we discover a linear progressive pattern of Voss's expedition — the preparation of the journey, the journey on the ship Osprey, their progress through Rhine Towers and Jildra, the beginning of their expedition through an arid landscape, varying degrees of predicament, the encounter with the Aborigines and the death of Voss.

Voss is in Australia only for 'two years and four months, but he has already formed a greater understanding of the land than the settlers of New South Wales. When Laura complains of the land being extremely monotonous, he finds himself quite at home: 'I am at home ... it is like the poor parts of Germany' (Chapter 1).

Though Laura fails to be intimate with her new home in New South Wales, Voss discovers the intense complexity of the country: 'Your country is of great subtlety' (Chapter 1). In Voss's scrutiny, the expedition should not be merely measured at the concrete level of human experience; it is also not just an adventure that has drawn him to this precarious pursuit, but is a metaphysical exploration of a country and also one's own self as Voss is able to locate an element of affinity of his soul with the land that he is exploring. Moreover, Voss gradually begins to

locate an element of infinity. In some sense, it can be said that Patrick White has always reiterated the theme of sublime infinity in most of his novels. The theme of topographical exploration is gradually sublimated to the level of a spiritual experience which makes his novels more of metaphysical in nature than merely physical explorations. This is possible because White is essentially preoccupied with certain notions of religious mysticism. Voss's knowledge about Australia as he explores the country generates an awareness of infinity itself as he himself says to Le Mesurier: 'But in this disturbing country, so far as I have become acquainted with it already, it is possible more easily to discard the inessential and to attempt the infinite'.

### **Voss and Laura**

The theme of exploration seems to be the central theme of *Voss*; but apart from it the relationship between Voss and Laura also seem to occupy the central stage of the novel. The novel runs with twin focus at the same time – at one level it is an adventure tale dealing with the mysterious places of Australia (an adventure starting from New South Wales and ending in the wilderness of Australia); and on the other, it deals with the relationship between Voss and Laura. In the beginning, it seems that Voss and Laura belong to two different worlds and there is no compatibility between the two of them. Apart from the initial differences, there exists between them an internal connection which is emphasized by the novelist. After the initial meeting they both go back to their memories where Laura starts thinking about how she came to New South Wales to live in the house of Mr Bonner; and Voss remembers his days in Germany and his final decision to come to Australia as an explorer.

As things progress in the novel, we see that Voss is being misinterpreted and misunderstood by others, but Laura seems to be patient to Voss as she has an understanding of his inner self. The country of Australia seems to be 'foreign and incomprehensible' to them and the settlers find it difficult to assimilate to such a pattern of Australian topography. Things get further complex when Tom Radcliff rudely points out that Voss does not possess the right to claim it as his own country.

To this, Laura says: 'It is his by right of vision'. This is substantiated when Mr. Bonner makes an elaborate statement: 'Here we are talking about our colony as if it did not exist until now. *Or* as if it has now begun to exist as something quite different'. Laura's inner perceptions gradually bring her closer to Voss.

At the picnic scene, they are more mystically aware of each other as they begin to span the silent gulf operating between them. Patrick White writes: 'It was not exactly clear what they should do, only that they were suddenly faced with a great gap to fill, of space, and time... Words, silences, and air had worked upon them subtly, until they had undergone a change' (Chapter 3). In the garden scene (Chapter 4), Voss and Laura begin to discover each other. Laura finds the personality of Voss especially enigmatic. For Laura, Voss is as strange as the Australian desert. She therefore exclaims: 'You are my desert'.

## **NOTES**

## NOTES

The real intensity of Laura's emotion is noticed after the departure of Voss's ship. She visualizes the ship Osprey proceeding through the blue waters and the little white waves. It is only through his separation from Laura that Voss discovers the intensity of his feelings for her. In his letter written to Laura from Rhine Towers, he for the first time acknowledges the need for a relationship with her. He writes:

'I would ask you to join me in thought, and exercise of will, daily, hourly, until I may return to you' (chapter 6). Although she cannot see Voss, she feels the existence of Voss in her very inner being: 'I do truthfully believe that you are always lurking somewhere on the fringes of my dreams, though I seldom see you face, and cannot even distinguish your form' (Chapter 9).

It may seem that this relationship is essentially tragic, because Voss and Laura never meet again. But Patrick White never intended to make it a tragedy. It is true that Voss dies at the end. But Laura continues to cherish the idea of Voss as a symbolic being. For Laura, Voss becomes part of history. She believes: 'He is there still, it is said, in the country, and always will be. His legacy will be written down, eventually by those who have been troubled by it' (Chapter 16).

### Check Your Progress

7. Name the renowned writers who had a significant impact on the writings of Patrick White.
8. State the central theme of *Voss*.

## 10.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

1. Patrick White was born in Knightsbridge, London in the year 1912 to Victor Martindale White and Ruth (née Withycombe), who were both Australians.
2. The first novel written by Patrick White is *The Happy Valley*.
3. Australia was discovered by Captain James Cook in 1770.
4. The primary objective behind the colonization of Australia by England was the need to relieve its overcrowded prisons.
5. In Sydney, Voss recruits four members of the expedition namely, boy Harry Robarts, Palfreyman, Frank Le Mesurier and Turner.
6. Laura and Voss meet for the first time in the novel in the house of Laura's uncle and the patron of Voss's expedition, Mr Bonner.
7. The renowned writers who had a significance influence on the writings of Patrick White are D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T S Eliot and others.
8. The theme of exploration is the central theme of *Voss*.

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## 10.6 SUMMARY

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- Patrick White was born in Knightsbridge, London in the year 1912 to Victor Martindale White and Ruth (née Withycombe), who were both Australians. He was just six months old when he was brought to Australia.
- Patrick White's first novel *The Happy Valley* is projected against the background of the snow country of New South Wales. Some of his other prominent novels are *The Living and the Dead* (1941), *The Aunt's Story* (1948), *The Tree of Man* (1955) *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) *The Solid Mandala* (1966), *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976).
- Australia was discovered by Captain James Cook in 1770 and thereafter colonized by the British eight years later when the First Fleet landed at Botany Bay in 1788, under the commandship of Captain Arthur Phillip. The primary objective behind the colonization of Australia by England was the need to relieve its overcrowded prisons.
- Some scholars are of the opinion that the novel *Voss* by Patrick White is based on an actual expedition which attempted to cross the Australian continent in 1845. As the novel opens, Johann Ulrich Voss, a German immigrant, calls on Edmund Bonner, the major financial backer of the expedition, and meets Bonner's niece Laura Trevelyan. The development of their ensuing relationship parallels the fate of the expedition.
- Johann Ulrich Voss sets out to cross the Australian continent in 1845. After collecting a party of settlers and two Aborigines, his party heads inland from the coast only to meet endless adversity. The explorers cross drought-plagued desert then waterlogged lands until they retreat to a cave where they lie for weeks waiting for the rain to stop.
- Laura adopts an orphaned child and attends a ball during Voss's absence. The travelling party splits in two and nearly all members eventually perish. The story ends some twenty years later at a garden party hosted by Laura's cousin Belle Radclyffe (née Bonner) on the day of the unveiling of a statue of Voss.
- The theme of exploration seems to be the central theme of *Voss*; but apart from it the relationship between Voss and Laura also seem to occupy the central stage of the novel. The novel runs with twin focus at the same time – at one level it is an adventure tale dealing with the mysterious places of Australia (an adventure starting from New South Wales and ending in the wilderness of Australia); and on the other, it deals with the relationship between Voss and Laura.

## NOTES

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## 10.7 KEY WORDS

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- **Topography:** It refers to the physical appearance of the natural features of an area of land.
- **Jackaroo:** This term is used for a man who is learning to work on a sheep or cattle farm.
- **Ornithologist:** This term refers to a person who studies birds.
- **Experiential:** It means pertaining to or derived from experience.

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## 10.8 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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### Short-Answer Questions

1. Write a short note on the British presence in Australia.
2. List the major works written by Patrick White.
3. Write a summary of the novel *Voss* in your own words.

### Long-Answer Questions

1. Patrick White's novel *Voss* is more about metaphysical exploration than topographical exploration. Discuss.
2. Critically analyse the statement '*Voss* deals with Australian consciousness.'
3. Discuss Voss and Laura's relationship as one of the central themes of the novel.

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## 10.9 FURTHER READINGS

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Farner, Geir 2014. *Literary Fiction: The Ways We Read Narrative Literature*. USA: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Milhorn, H. Thomas. 2006. *Writing Genre Fiction: A Guide to the Craft*. Boca Raton, USA: Universal Publishers.

Marr, David .1991. *Patrick White: A Life*. Victoria: Random Century.

Walsh, William. 1977. *Patrick White's Fiction*. Sydney: George Men & Unwin.

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# UNIT 11 MARGARET ATWOOD: *THE BLIND ASSASSIN*

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Margaret Atwood:  
*The Blind Assassin*

## NOTES

### Structure

- 11.0 Introduction
- 11.1 Objectives
- 11.2 About the Author: Margaret Atwood
- 11.3 Summary of *The Blind Assassin*
- 11.4 Character List
- 11.5 Themes
- 11.6 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 11.7 Summary
- 11.8 Key Words
- 11.9 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 11.10 Further Readings

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## 11.0 INTRODUCTION

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The objective of this unit is to make the students aware about the literary works and life of Canadian writer Margaret Atwood. Atwood achieved fame with the publication of books like *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin*. Published in 2000, *The Blind Assassin* revolves around the life of Iris Chase who is writing a biography for her granddaughter. This unit will delve into the plot and major themes of the novel.

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## 11.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the prominent works of Margaret Atwood
- Examine the plot of the novel *The Blind Assassin*
- Explain the major themes of the novel *The Blind Assassin*

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## 11.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: MARGARET ATWOOD

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Margaret Atwood is a Canadian writer known for her novels as well as her short stories. Her prominent literary works include *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *The Blind Assassin* (2000) and *The Tent* (2006). She is globally quite well-known as her works have been translated into several languages. Some of them like *The Handmaid's Tale* have even been adapted to screens.

## NOTES

Atwood was born on 18 November 1939 in Ottawa, Canada to parents who helped foster her love for reading and writing. She went on to get her degree from the University of Toronto in the year 1961. After that she got her Masters from Radcliffe College. She likes to teach and is still set in her career as a college professor in various Universities of Canada and even America.

Atwood first got famous as a poet when she produced a poetry collection *Double Persephone* (1961), published by the Hawkshead Press. She continued writing poems for a while and produced well known collections of poems, including *The Animals in That Country* (1968). By 1969, she published her first work in prose in the form of her first novel, *The Edible Woman*- a work that provided a satirical look at to-be brides. She continued writing prose and poetry after that but the work that garnered her much of the global attention was *The Handmaid's Tale*. She continued to publish novels such as *Lady Oracle* (1976) and *Life Before Man* (1980).

Atwood is the author of novels like *Cat's Eye* (1989) and Booker Prize-winning *The Blind Assassin*. She has also published a dystopian trilogy consisting of novels- *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013). In addition to her famous book *The Penelopiad* (2005), she also released the book of essays that was titled *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, looking at the nuances and possibilities of sci-fi/fantasy genre of novel writing.

### Check Your Progress

1. In which year was *The Blind Assassin* published?
2. Name the novels that are part of the dystopian trilogy published by Atwood.
3. Which work of Atwood is a collection of essays about science fiction?

## 11.3 SUMMARY OF *THE BLIND ASSASSIN*

*The Blind Assassin* is the story of a person named Iris Chase. Iris is writing a novel on her deathbed which she intends to give to her granddaughter, who is the only surviving family member. Iris, along with her sister Laura were raised in Canada. Despite being raised by a single father, the two had a relatively happy childhood. As an adult, she married a violent old man named Richard Griffen. They have a daughter and have been married for several years.

After recording her youth, Iris includes a novel within her novel. The novel within the novel is supposed to be written by Alex Thomas, who is a science fiction writer. Indeed, Iris is still the writer, but in the novel she attributes the science fiction to her sister Laura. Alex has a love affair with the woman who wrote the story for Iris. The science fiction titled *The Blind Assassin* is a thrilling account of a love affair. Iris leads the readers to believe that the novel within a novel is about

her sister's affair with a man named Alex. After the end of the novel-within-a-novel, Iris returns to her real life account.

Margaret Atwood:  
*The Blind Assassin*

Laura comes to know that Alex has died in the war. Following this revelation, Laura kills herself. Shortly after, Iris discovers her sister's journal and she finds out that her sister had been blackmailed and raped for many years by her husband Richard. Iris then admits that the novel 'written by Alex' is actually about her affair with Alex. From Laura's diary Iris comes to learn that Richard had impregnated Laura and then forced her to get an abortion. Horrified at her husband's action, she takes her daughter, Aimee, with her and leaves her husband.

## NOTES

After abandoning Richard, Iris struggles as a single mother. She often contacts Richard which upsets her daughter. When asked, Iris convinces Richard that Laura had a love affair with Alex. This news is too much for Richard and he commits suicide. She shares her unpublished biography with her granddaughter Sabrina in hopes of keeping it a secret.

### Check Your Progress

4. Who is the narrator of the *The Blind Assassin*?
5. How does Iris learn the truth about her husband?

## 11.4 CHARACTER LIST

Given below are the important plays in the novel:

**Iris Chase Griffen:** Iris is the protagonist of the story and also the narrator. Born in 1916, Iris is the eldest child in the Chase family. She was born when her father was away fighting in the First World War. Iris says that she appears to be her father's child as she has inherited his features, 'his scowl, dogged scepticism' as well as his nature. She is blonde like her sister Laura. Iris is constantly looking out for her younger sister Laura.

**Laura Chase:** Laura is Iris' younger sister who was born in the autumn of 1919. Laura takes after her mother as she has inherited her mother's 'high, pure forehead' and is extremely sensitive. She was a restless child, but could endure physical pain; so she cried only because of emotional stress rather than physical. She was especially saddened by the increase in the number of disabled veterans after World War I.

As a teenager, she fell in love with a guy named Alex Thomas and Iris' cruel husband Richard used this to manipulate and torture her. She is repeatedly sexually assaulted by Richard. Laura gets pregnant and is forced to get an abortion. When Laura learned that Alex had died in World War II and that Alex and Iris had been in love, she commits suicide by driving her car off a bridge. She is known worldwide as a novelist, although Iris is the author of her famous novel.

## NOTES

**Norval Chase:** He is the father of Iris and Laura. He was compelled to return from the war after he was injured. Physically and emotionally scarred by the events of the war, Norval Chase became an atheist which put more strain on his marriage. He slowly descended into depression and alcoholism. He inherited the Chase Industries after the death of his brothers Percy and Eddie in World War I. Although the family business thrived during the World War I, it began to decline after the war. Eventually he tried to save the business by forcing Iris to marry the wealthy Richard Griffin. Years of alcoholism affected his health and he died at an early age shortly after Iris' wedding.

**Liliana Chase:** She is the mother of Iris and Laura, and wife of Norval Chase. Her father was a senior lawyer for the Chase Industries while her mother had passed away when she was only nine years old. She took Methodist religion seriously and believed that 'you should help those less fortunate than yourself'. Before her marriage, she worked as a schoolteacher. She was married to Norval in 1914 when she was only 18 years old. She shared a great life with him at first but after the war, everything changed and their marriage suffered. She suffered a miscarriage when Iris and Laura were young and died shortly after that. Before her death, she asked Iris to look after her younger sister Laura.

**Benjamin Chase:** He is Laura and Iris's grandfather and Norval's father. He started the family business Chase Industries and built several factories, including their successful button factory. The factory did well during the war years, but he lost two of his children, Percy and Eddie, in the war. After hearing this news, he suffered a stroke and the business was unofficially ceded to Lilliana. She transferred the business to Norval on his return from the war. He was a proud and successful businessman who created a family fortune and even published a book about family business.

**Adelia Montfort Chase:** She is the wife of Benjamin Chase and also the grandmother of Iris and Laura. She is described as someone who is very sweet while talking to people but sharp enough to easily take advantage of them. She belonged to a once- rich and prominent family of Montreal and married her husband solely for his wealth. She brings 'old money' refinery to his 'new money'. She dies before Liliana and Norval's wedding and also before the birth of Laura and Iris. Although both the sisters never meet their grandmother, she is always seen by both of them as an epitome of refinement and culture.

**Richard Griffen:** He is a wealthy businessman and owner of Royal Classic Knitwear. His marriage to Iris is a match that is arranged by Norwell. He is described as a very cold, greedy and selfish kind of a person. He even manipulates and later rapes Laura, and then forces her to get an abortion. Because of him, Iris commits suicide as she feels traumatized.

**Alex Thomas:** He is a newspaper reporter who meets both the sisters at a picnic when they were teenagers. His origin is not known, as he is an orphan raised and taught by a Presbyterian minister. Money is not important to him. He eventually

became Iris's boyfriend after she married Richard, even though Laura was also in love with him. He fathered a child with Iris before his death. This child Aimee is believed to be Richard's child.

*Margaret Atwood:  
The Blind Assassin*

**Reenie Hincks:** Reenie is Chase family's housekeeper, but also takes on the upbringing of Iris and Laura after the death of their mother. She started as a nursemaid for Iris. She was never eager to talk about her life to the girls but shares stories about their family. She is a strong and kind influence on the lives of girls. Despite her complaints from Norval, she is protective towards the family. Her husband Ron died in World War II. Her daughter Myra Hincks later becomes Iris' nurse when she is older.

**Aimee Griffen:** She is the daughter of Richard and Iris. After her father's death, she is raised by her aunt. She thankfully never witnessed the atrocities that her father unleashed on her mother. She once gets hold of a diary that belonged to her aunt Laura, leading her to believe that she is Laura and Alex's daughter. The idea fascinates her so much that she clings to the fantasy. She does not share a very happy relationship with her mother. It is later revealed that she is the daughter of Iris and Alex. Aimee has a daughter, Sabrina. Even when Aimee dies after becoming an addict, Iris does not get the custody of Sabrina, having been ousted by Winfred.

## NOTES

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### 11.5 THEMES

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Some of the prominent themes of the novel have been discussed below:

#### **The Desire to Be Known**

Iris, the protagonist and the narrator of the story, arrives at a very simple conclusion by the end of the story. Despite all the ups and downs as well as the possibilities, the most important thing for her was to be truly known by somebody. She wanted to be understood. In retrospect, she realized that she could have saved herself from a lot of suffering if she knew that this was what she wanted. In fact, she wrote the book for the same reason. This is her confession. She is correcting misperceptions and uncovering secrets so everyone can know the truth about her.

#### **Despair**

Although she was always determined and vivacious, Iris is surrounded by people who struggle with hope. They lived recklessly and eventually landed themselves in terrible places. Her lover Alex was killed in the war. Despite being Iris' lover, he was also adored by Laura. When Laura hears this news, she loses hope and kills herself. Richard, Iris' husband, blackmails and rapes Laura. Similarly, Iris tells Richard that Laura was the one who had an affair with Alex, not her. Since Laura was the sister he really wanted all along, Richard too gives up and kills himself. Everyone around Iris is suffering but Iris remains strong till the end.

## NOTES

### Legacy

Iris is worried about her legacy as she's dying. Her daughter Aimee is dead now and Aimee's daughter is the only surviving relative. Like most people, Iris does not want to die without having left an enduring mark of her existence. Writing on her deathbed, Iris attempts to create something that will outlast her frail body. Instead of leaving behind money or fame, she leaves behind all that she has - the life she's lived.

#### Check Your Progress

6. Who does Iris share her autobiography with?
7. How has the war changed Norval Chase's personality?

### 11.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

1. *The Blind Assassin* was published in the year 2000.
2. Margaret Atwood has published a dystopian trilogy consisting of novels- *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013).
3. Margaret Atwood has released a book of essays titled *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, in which she looks at the nuances and possibilities of sci-fi/fantasy genre of novel writing.
4. Iris is the narrator and the protagonist of the novel.
5. Iris discovers her sister's journal and she finds out that her sister had been blackmailed and raped for many years by her husband Richard.
6. Iris shares her autobiography with her granddaughter Sabrina.
7. Physically and emotionally scarred by the events of the war, Norval Chase became an atheist which put more strain on his marriage. He slowly descended into depression and alcoholism. Years of alcoholism affected his health and he died at an early age shortly after Iris' wedding.

### 11.7 SUMMARY

- Margaret Atwood is a Canadian writer known for her novels as well as her short stories. Her prominent literary works include *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *The Blind Assassin* (2000) and *The Tent* (2006).
- Atwood was born on 18 November 1939 in Ottawa, Canada. Atwood first got famous as a poet when she produced a poetry collection *Double Persephone* (1961), published by the Hawkshead Press. She continued

writing poems for a while and produced well known collections of poems, including *The Animals in That Country* (1968).

Margaret Atwood:  
*The Blind Assassin*

- Atwood is the author of novels like *Cat's Eye* (1989) and Booker Prize-winning *The Blind Assassin*. She has also published a dystopian trilogy consisting of novels- *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013). In addition to her famous book *The Penelopiad* (2005), she also released the book of essays that was titled *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, looking at the nuances and possibilities of sci-fi/fantasy genre of novel writing.
- *The Blind Assassin* is the story of a person named Iris Chase. Iris is writing a novel on her deathbed which she intends to give to her granddaughter, who is the only surviving family member.
- Iris includes a novel within her novel. The novel within the novel is supposed to be written by Alex Thomas, who is a science fiction writer. Indeed, Iris is still the writer, but in the novel she attributes the science fiction to her sister Laura. The science fiction titled *The Blind Assassin* is a thrilling account of a love affair. Iris leads the readers to believe that the novel within a novel is about her sister's affair with a man named Alex. After the end of the novel-within-a-novel, Iris returns to her real life account.
- Laura comes to know that Alex has died in the war. Following this revelation, Laura kills herself. Shortly after, Iris discovers her sister's journal and she finds out that her sister had been blackmailed and raped for many years by her husband Richard. From Laura's diary Iris comes to learn that Richard had impregnated Laura and then forced her to get an abortion.
- Horrified at her husband's action, Iris takes her daughter, Aimee, with her and leaves her husband. However, she remains in touch with Richard. Iris convinces Richard that Laura had a love affair with Alex. This news is too much for Richard and he commits suicide. Iris shares her unpublished biography with her granddaughter in hopes of keeping it a secret.
- Iris, the protagonist and the narrator of the story, arrives at a very simple conclusion by the end of the story. Despite all the ups and downs as well as the possibilities, the most important thing for her was to be truly known by somebody. In fact, she wrote the book for the same reason. This is her confession. She is correcting misperceptions and uncovering secrets so everyone can know the truth about her.
- Despair is another theme of the novel. Everyone around Iris is suffering but Iris remains strong till the end.
- Iris is worried about her legacy as she's dying. Her daughter Aimee is dead now and Aimee's daughter is the only surviving relative. Like most people, Iris does not want to die without having left an enduring mark of her existence. Writing on her deathbed, Iris attempts to create something that will outlast her frail body.

## NOTES

## NOTES

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### 11.8 KEY WORDS

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- **Trilogy:** It is a set of three works of art that are connected and can be seen either as a single work or as three individual works.
- **Science fiction:** It is a genre of speculative fiction that typically deals with imaginative and futuristic concepts such as advanced science and technology, space exploration, time travel, parallel universes, and extraterrestrial life.
- **Biography:** It is a detailed description of a person's life.

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### 11.9 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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#### Short-Answer Questions

1. Write a short note on the use of novel-within-a-novel technique in *The Blind Assassin*.
2. Give a brief character sketch of Laura Chase.
3. How does Iris preserve her legacy in the novel *The Blind Assassin*?

#### Long-Answer Questions

1. Discuss in detail the ordeal suffered by the prominent characters in the novel *The Blind Assassin*.
2. Analyse the major themes of the novel *The Blind Assassin*.

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### 11.10 FURTHER READINGS

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**BLOCK - IV**  
**ENRICHING VOCABULARY**

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*O'Neill: The Emperor Jones*

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**UNIT 12 O'NEILL: *THE EMPEROR JONES***

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NOTES

**Structure**

- 12.0 Introduction
- 12.1 Objectives
- 12.2 About the Author: Eugene O'Neill
- 12.3 *The Emperor Jones*
  - 12.3.1 Detailed Summary and Analysis
  - 12.3.2 Major Characters
- 12.4 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 12.5 Summary
- 12.6 Key Words
- 12.7 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 12.8 Further Readings

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**12.0 INTRODUCTION**

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Eugene O'Neill was a prominent playwright who left an indelible impact on the American literature in the 20th century. Despite struggling with alcoholism and depression, O'Neill created one masterpiece after another, while also experimenting with expressionism. He rose to fame with the publication of the *The Emperor Jones*, in which he narrated the story of a cunning man named Brutus Jones. The play also achieved popularity as it was the first time that a Black actor played a leading role for a white theatre company. The play continues to assume importance for its study of power, systemic oppression and colonial exploitation.

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**12.1 OBJECTIVES**

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the literary works of Eugene O'Neill
- Critically analyse the play *The Emperor Jones*

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**12.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: EUGENE O'NEILL**

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Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was born in a hotel in the city of New York. He was the son of James O'Neill and Mary Ellen Quinlan. Because of his father's profession, Eugene O'Neill switched schools frequently during his childhood. At a very early

*Self-Instructional  
Material*

## NOTES

age, O'Neill was sent to various boarding schools. He also attended Princeton University and was reportedly suspended for conduct violations. After that, he shifted to New York and specifically the Greenwich Village where he mostly stayed and attended plays.

O'Neill's life was an unhappy and tormented one. He mostly lived away from his family although he was quite close with his elder brother, Jamie. His whole family also led an unhappy life and he learned about their disorders when he was away from home. A striking resemblance to his life is seen in his plays, especially *A long Day's Journey into The Night*. In this play, the mother is a morphine addict who once wanted to become a nun while the father is a failed actor who feels trapped in a single role. The protagonist's brother, much like O'Neill's brother, was a drunk. O'Neill, like the other members of his family, was a heavy drinker, as a result of which he tried to commit suicide in 1911. O'Neill was also friends with a young man who committed suicide. His parents and brother died in 1923, leaving O'Neill completely alone in the world.

In 1909, O'Neill married his girlfriend, Kathleen Jenkins after she became pregnant. His son Eugene O'Neill, Jr. also died of suicide in 1950 at the age of 40. O'Neill moved to a flophouse called Jimmy the Priest in Lower Manhattan, which became a setting for many of his plays. O'Neill was diagnosed with mild tuberculosis in 1912, and it was during this time that he read a lot and decided to become a playwright.

Having watched his father perform in plays all his life from the backstage, O'Neill understood the workings and the machinations of drama and became adept at playwriting. He started writing around the year 1913 with experimental pieces based on O'Neill's own life like *Thirst and Other Plays*. He was also keen of creating dramas that were better than the sentimental ones that his father acted in. Because of this, although his plays had melodramatic moments, the characters and plots that he created were quite complex and realistic.

Later, O'Neill met a female writer named Agnes Boulton, whom he married in the year 1918 and with whom he had two children- a son named Shane and a daughter named Oona who later married Charlie Chaplin. After divorcing Agnes, O'Neill fell in love with and married Carlotta Monterey, an actress. It was a hard marriage as she was overprotective of O'Neill. In this way, although O'Neill had a very successful career, he also suffered heavily in his personal life.

In 1920, O'Neill became the ruler of Broadway with his Pulitzer winning play *Beyond the Horizon*, a naturalistic work relating the tragic fate of two brothers. *The Emperor Jones* made O'Neill famous. The story revolves around Brutus Jones who used fear, superstition, and unscrupulous means to flee the United States and become the ruler of a Caribbean island. It was a depiction of racial relations at the time. O'Neill has dominated American drama since the 1920s. Many of his plays were broadcasted in the 20s ranging from the expressionist play titled *The Hairy Ape* to his most terrific performance of alienated modernity, the historically costumed drama *Fontana* (1925).

After getting the Nobel Prize in 1936, O'Neill was applauded for being the only American to have won it, although by this point, he started to perish both physically and spiritually. He became increasingly unhappy since the beginning of World War II and could not even hold a pen properly as his health deteriorated.

Eugene O'Neill died in 1953, as he had been born- in a hotel. During his last days, he felt strangely distant from the theatre. Before that, O'Neill had been extensively working on what he considered his best work till 1940s- a cycle of plays called, *A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed*. He destroyed most of his other works from his later years.

*Long Day's Journey into Night*, which is considered by many to be O'Neill's greatest work, was written between 1939 and 1941. O'Neill did not want it to be published for at least twenty five years after his death as he feared that the play was too autobiographical and would cause humiliation if it was published in his lifetime. But his widow Carlotta Monterey insisted on getting the play published because she saw it as great opportunity and so, the play was produced and performed in many parts of America. The play was also published three years after Eugene's demise. It won him his fourth Pulitzer and elevated his status as a great playwright, although posthumously. It also led to an eventual revival of *Iceman* which was earlier disregarded by the audience.

#### Check Your Progress

1. When was Eugene O'Neill awarded the Nobel Prize?
2. Why was Eugene O'Neill reluctant to publish *Long Day's Journey into Night*?
3. On whose request was the *Long Day's Journey into Night* published?

### 12.3 THE EMPEROR JONES

The play is the first international triumph of expressionism by an American playwright; with it, Eugene O'Neill single-handedly introduced experimental American theatre to Europe and established his reputation as one of the greatest American playwrights. The play was first performed in November 1920 at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York. It was a ground-breaking success and was one of the few dramas that gave representation to African Americans in American theatre. This was also the first time that a black man played a leading role for a white theatre company. The black actor was Charles S. Gilpin. *The New York Times* celebrated this news by reporting how Gilpin a black man was the star of the play. He was widely appreciated for his role. Although the play was written by a white man and dealt with racial issues and incorporated a repeated use of the now considered derogatory word 'nigger', the play was mostly embraced with open arms by the black

#### NOTES

*O'Neill: The Emperor Jones* community of artists as well as the white audience. James Johnson, a promoter of African-American culture in particular, observed that with 'O'Neill's *play*... another important page in the history of the Negro was written'.

## NOTES

### 12.3.1 Detailed Summary and Analysis

*The Emperor Jones* written by one of the best playwrights of 20<sup>th</sup> century America, explores the psychology of a greedy and deceptive man who uses lies to fool the people and become their emperor. The play also explores the colonial rule that overshadowed the global landscape during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The play is rife with moralistic view point as the Emperor Jones gets what he deserves in return of his greed and lust for money.

#### Scene 1

At the palace of the Emperor of an unidentified island in the West Indies, a native black woman tries to avoid the trap of Smithers, a cockney trader. She explains to him that all the residents have fled to the mountains. A few minutes later, Emperor Brutus Jones enters the throne room with an irritated, sleepy expression. He is dressed in a highly decorated uniform.

Jones yelled and threatened to injure the person who woke him up. Smithers catches Jones' attention and accepts that he woke Jones up. He then tells Jones that he has news for him. Jones sits in his chair and asks Smithers to tell him the news. Smithers jokingly asked Jones where the court and the servants were, but Jones simply yawns and tells him that they are drinking in town. Jones sniggers when Smithers tells him that drinking is part of his job. Smithers then warns Jones that he had initially helped Jones on the island. Jones put his hand on the pistol and reminded Smithers to respect him. When Smithers apologizes, Jones insists that he is a completely different person now. Smithers retorts that nobody else would hire Jones once it got out that he'd been in jail in the United States, but Jones simply looks at Smithers and says that he knows Smithers has been in jail too.

Jones explains that he would not act as the emperor for glory: he was organizing a program to entertain the natives, but he only wanted their money. When Smithers says that the locals have no money, Jones laughs and tells him that it is not true as he is still the emperor. Smithers asks Jones about his law-breaking habits. Jones argues that the emperor has no duty to obey the law, especially because 'big stealin' made him an emperor. Smithers claims that Jones deceived the natives and remarks on Jones' luck. Jones is angry, but Smithers says Jones's story about the silver bullets was fortunate: when Jones first came to the island, he argued with one of the natives and when he misfired, Jones shot him and said that he could only be killed by silver bullets. The locals bought this story. Jones laughs at this and says that the locals are fools. Smithers asked Jones if the rumours are true, and that he had a silver bullet made. Jones said they were there, explaining that he had told the natives that he will kill himself with it.

Jones stated that at the first sight of problem, he would take his money and leave. Smithers deliberately asks Jones if he would return to the United States, and Jones says he could because he had never been there in prison there. Smithers doesn't believe it, and ask Jones about the stories relating to him killing white men in the United States. Jones insists he is not afraid of lynching. In addition, Jones says that he would kill Smithers if he doesn't improve his ways.

Smithers looks terrified and reminds Jones that he has always been a friend. Smithers warns Jones about Lem and his behaviour, because Lem hates Jones. Smithers also warns Jones about the forest, but Jones doesn't pay heed to the warnings. He reiterates that the natives are stupid, he can easily escape to escape, and if he is caught he will kill himself with the silver bullet. The sound of a tom-tom reaches the palace. Smithers explains that locals have begun preparing for witchcraft. Jones affirmed that he was not afraid and reminded Smithers that he was an advocate for the Baptist Church. Smith laughed and said bids him goodbye.

## NOTES

### Scene 2

In the evening, Jones arrives at the edge of the forest. Due to the scorching heat, Jones wipes the sweat from his forehead. Jones listens attentively and wonders if the locals have started crossing the plains. Jones lights a match to see clearly. The rhythm of the tom-toms picks up pace and Jones flings the match realizing it was a bad move. Jones turned to scan the plains as 'little formless fears', grub-like creatures with glittering eyes, crawl out of the forest. Jones turns towards the forest and asks if the forest is mocking him. The formless fear laugh and this frightens Jones even more. He shoots at them as they scuttle into the forest. Jones listened to Tom Tom. He tells himself that fears were just pigs and goes deep into the woods.

### Scene 3

A few hours later, the moonlight illuminates a clearing. Jeff, the Black man Jones murdered in the United States, suddenly hunkers down and throws dice on the ground. Jones goes to the edge of the clearing when he hears the clicking sound of the dice. Suddenly he recognizes Jeff. Jones talks to Jeff, wondering with fear how Jeff managed to come to the island. Jones asks Jeff if he is a ghost. Jeff doesn't respond and Jones shoots at him. When the smoke clears, Jeff is not there anymore. After that, the tom-tom starts ringing faster and Jones runs back towards the forest.

### Scene 4

Just before midnight, Jones stumbles upon a road. His clothes were more torn and he is struggling due to the heat. Jones pulls off his coat and throws it away. As Jones rests, he begins to wonder where the road came from. He had never seen it before and wonders if there are ghosts around. Afraid, Jones starts praying to God so that he doesn't see more ghosts. As Jones studies the moon, a group of

## NOTES

black convicts walk onto the road, accompanied by a white prison guard. As soon as Jones notices the chain gang, they begin working on the road. The guard looks at Jones angrily and motions him to join the group. Jones obeys the order as if he is in a trance. Since he does not have a shovel, he simply matches the shoveling motion of the other convicts. However, the guard still whips him. Angry, Jones lifts up his arms as if he has a shovel and tries to hit the guard. He, then, realizes that he doesn't have a shovel. He pleads with the convict to lend him their shovel. Eventually Jones pulls out his revolver and shoots the guard in the back. As he does this, the forest and the chain gang disappear. Jones further crashes away into the woods.

### Scene 5

A few hours later, Jones reaches a clearing with a stump in the middle of it. He pleads on his knees and prays to Jesus to forgive him for killing Jeff and the prison guard, and for stealing from the natives. Jones looks at his torn shoes and realizes that it is making his feet hurt more. He takes them off and holds it in his lap when a silent crowd of white Southerners dressed in clothing from the 1850s enter the clearing. They gather around the stump and an attendant leads a group of slaves. Jones doesn't notice anything until the auctioneer taps Jones on the shoulder and motions him to join the crowd. Jones tries to get away as the auctioneer describes Jones' strengths. When the auctioneer starts the bidding, Jones realizes that he is being sold into slavery. Angrily, Jones takes out his gun and shoots both the auctioneer and the purchaser. The clearing disappears and the beat of the tom-tom gains place. Jones runs away.

### Scene 6

After wandering for another two hours, Jones goes to a clearing that is long and narrow. Vines on the clearing have created an arched ceiling. By now, Jones' pants are so torn that it looks like he is only wearing a loincloth. Jones cries out to God, wondering what he will do since he only has one silver bullet left. He decides to take rest and throws himself on the ground. The moonlight shines as two rows of black men wearing loincloth come into view. They sit alongside each other as if they are in a ship and begin wailing. He tries to ignore them but Jones joins them in their wailing. As the voices fade, Jones dashes into the forest.

### Scene 7

In the morning, Jones enters another clearing which is situated next to the river. He is walking as if he is in a trance. Jones asks God to protect him when a Congo witch doctor jumps out from behind a tree. The witch doctor begins dancing to the rhythm of the tom-tom and Jones watches in fascination. The doctor dances to the story of being pursued by devils and as the tension increases, Jones begins chanting and dancing to the rhythm of the tom-tom. Suddenly, the witch doctor motions to Jones, and Jones understands that he is going to be offered as a sacrifice.

The wizard summoned the crocodile god from the river. The crocodile looks at Jones as the witch doctor motions for Jones to approach it. The tom-tom reaches a high pitch as Jones cries out and grabs his gun. He shoots the crocodile with his silver bullet.

The crocodile returns to the river and the witch disappears but Jones lies down on his face and cries.

### Scene 8

At dawn, Lem, his soldiers and Smithers reach the edge of the forest. One of the soldiers discovers the spot from where Jones entered the forest. Smithers is disappointed, but Lem quietly tells Smithers that they will find Jones. When Lem hears snapping twigs in the forest, he sends in soldiers.

Lem smiles and tells Smithers that Jones is dead. Lem explained that he and his men spend the night casting charms and melting their money to make silver bullets. The soldiers come out of the woods carrying Jones' body. Smithers mocks Jones' body and teases the locals as they take away Jones' body.

### 12.3.2 Major Characters

**Brutus Jones:** He was a porter before he killed a man named Jeff and a white prison guard. He then escaped to the Caribbean island where he secured, through lies, the emperorship of a small Caribbean island. However, Jones is not an ordinary criminal. He is quick-witted and is a man of talent, confidence and ability. Brutus is clearly smarter than Smithers. He successfully ascended the throne of the islanders. Jones also successfully managed to convince the natives that only a silver bullet could kill him.

When Brutus learns that the natives are rebelling against him, he quickly springs into action and moves up his escape plan. During his flight, he encounters a series of strange phenomena that take him back to the history of African oppression. However, Jones underestimates the intelligence of other people, which eventually brings his downfall. He was pursued by islanders who killed him with a silver bullet.

**Lem:** He is the antagonist of Brutus' life who tries to kill him on the island. Lem hired a killer to kill Brutus, but the killer's shot was wrong and Jones used this opportunity to convince everyone that he could only be killed by a silver bullet. Lem believed it but continued to incite rebellion and armed his rebel groups with a gun. Eventually, Lem's men find and try to kill the protagonist.

#### Check Your Progress

4. When was the play *The Emperor Jones* first performed?
5. Name the black actor who played the role of Jones when the play *The Emperor Jones* was first performed.

### NOTES

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## 12.4 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

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### NOTES

1. Eugene O'Neill was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1936.
2. Eugene O'Neill was reluctant to publish *Long Day's Journey into Night* as he feared that the play was too autobiographical and would cause humiliation if it was published in his lifetime.
3. Eugene O'Neill's widow Carlotta Monterey insisted on getting the play *Long Day's Journey into Night* published and so the play was produced and performed in many parts of America.
4. *The Emperor Jones* was first performed in November 1920 at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York.
5. The black actor who played the role of Jones was Charles S. Gilpin.

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## 12.5 SUMMARY

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- Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was born in a hotel in the city of New York. He was the son of James O'Neill and Mary Ellen Quinlan. Because of his father's profession, Eugene O'Neill switched schools frequently during his childhood.
- O'Neill's life was an unhappy and tormented one. He mostly lived away from his family although he was quite close with his elder brother, Jamie. O'Neill, like the other members of his family, was a heavy drinker, as a result of which he tried to commit suicide in 1911.
- Having watched his father perform in plays all his life from the backstage, O'Neill understood the workings and the machinations of drama and became adept at playwriting. He started writing around the year 1913 with experimental pieces based on O'Neill's own life like *Thirst and Other Plays*.
- In 1920, O'Neill became the ruler of Broadway with his Pulitzer winning play *Beyond the Horizon*, a naturalistic work relating the tragic fate of two brothers. *The Emperor Jones* made O'Neill famous. The story revolves around Brutus Jones who used fear, superstition, and unscrupulous means to flee the United States and become the ruler of a Caribbean island.
- After getting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1936, O'Neill was applauded for being the only American to have won it, although by this point, he started to perish both physically and spiritually.

- *Long Day's Journey into Night*, which is considered by many to be O'Neill's greatest work, was written between 1939 and 1941. O'Neill did not want it to be published for at least twenty five years after his death as he feared that the play was too autobiographical and would cause humiliation if it was published in his lifetime.
- *The Emperor Jones* was first performed in November 1920 at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York. It was a ground-breaking success and was one of the few dramas that gave representation to African Americans in American theatre. This was also the first time that a black man played a leading role for a white theatre company. The black actor was Charles S. Gilpin.
- *The Emperor Jones* written by one of the best playwrights of 20th century America, explores the psychology of a greedy and deceptive man who uses lies to fool the people and become their emperor. The play also explores the colonial rule that overshadowed the global landscape during the 20th century. The play is rife with moralistic view point as the Emperor Jones gets what he deserves in return of his greed and lust for money.
- Brutus Jones was a porter before he killed a man named Jeff and a white prison guard. He then escaped to the Caribbean island where he assumed the role of a white man and secured, through lies, the emperorship of a small Caribbean island.
- When Brutus learns that the natives are rebelling against him, he quickly springs into action and moves up his escape plan. During his flight, he encounters a series of strange phenomena that take him back to the history of African oppression. However, Jones underestimates the intelligence of other people, which eventually brings his downfall. He was pursued by islanders who killed him with a silver bullet.

## NOTES

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### 12.6 KEY WORDS

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- **Expressionism:** It is a modernist movement that originated in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century. Its typical trait is to present the world solely from a subjective perspective, distorting it radically for emotional effect in order to evoke moods or ideas.
- **Slavery:** It was a practice in the United States wherein Africans and African Americans were enslaved and owned by other people. The slaves were deprived of basic human rights and treated like property.
- **Antagonist:** The term is used for the principal opponent or foil of the main character.

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## 12.7 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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### NOTES

#### Short-Answer Questions

1. Write a short note on the autobiographical elements in *Long Day's Journey into Night*.
2. How does Jones fool the natives into believing that he can only be killed by a silver bullet?
3. Compare the disintegration of Jones' uniform with his downfall as the Emperor of the Caribbean island.
4. Give a brief character sketch of Brutus Jones.

#### Long-Answer Questions

1. Examine the theme of colonial oppression in the play *The Emperor Jones*.
2. Discuss the collective memory of African oppression that Jones revisits when he is in the forest.
3. Analyse *The Emperor Jones* as a play about power and systemic oppression.

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## 12.8 FURTHER READINGS

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## UNIT 13 WOLE SOYINKA: *THE LION AND THE JEWEL*

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### NOTES

#### Structure

- 13.0 Introduction
- 13.1 Objectives
- 13.2 About the Author: Wole Soyinka
- 13.3 Summary of *The Lion and The Jewel*
- 13.4 Character List
- 13.5 Themes
- 13.6 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 13.7 Summary
- 13.8 Key Words
- 13.9 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 13.10 Further Readings

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### 13.0 INTRODUCTION

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Wole Soyinka is a Nigerian writer who won the Nobel Prize in 1986. A staunch critic of the Nigerian government, Soyinka is known for his depiction of the postcolonial world. In the play *The Lion and the Jewel*, he showcases with ease the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, gender norms, the power of words and images, and the legacy of colonialism. This unit will discuss the contribution of Wole Soyinka to the world of literature by analysing his play *The Lion and the Jewel*.

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### 13.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the literary career of Wole Soyinka
- Examine the themes and characters of the play *The Lion and the Jewel*

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### 13.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: WOLE SOYINKA

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Akinwande Soyinka, known worldwide as Wole Soyinka, is a Nigerian playwright and poet writer. He was the first sub-Saharan African to win the Nobel Prize in 1986. He was born in Ab'okuta, Nigeria. His father was named Samuel Ayodele Soyinka. He was an Anglican minister while his mother Grace Eniola Soyinka was a local shopkeeper and a political activist.

## NOTES

He started producing plays in England and Nigeria and also began to take an interest in the Nigerian struggle for freedom. In the year 1965, Soyinka demanded the cancellation of Western Nigeria Regional Elections after talking over a broadcasting studio in Western Studio. In 1967, he was arrested and put in solitary confinement for two years.

Soyinka has been a staunch critic of Nigerian government and many different African governments, especially the ones that are characterised by dictatorship and are authoritarian in nature. According to Soyinka, his writing has been majorly influenced by the ‘the oppressive boot and the irrelevance of the colour of the foot that wears it’. During the rule of General Sani Abacha (1993-98), Soyinka escaped out of the country by motorcycle on the ‘NADECO Route’. Abacha later declared a death sentence against him ‘in absentia’. Only when democracy returned to Nigeria in 1999, did Soyinka return to his country.

In Nigeria, Soyinka taught a course at Obafemi Awolowo University on Comparative Literature from 1963 to 1975. In 1999, he was made Professor Emeritus. Soyinka worked as a Professor of Creative Literature at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas. He has also worked as a resident-scholar at the NYUs Institute of African American Affairs and at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California, US. Soyinka was also a Distinguished Scholar in Residence at Duke University in 2008. He has also taught at the Oxford, Harvard and Yale University.

In December 2017, Soyinka was awarded the Europe Theatre Prize in the ‘Special Prize’ category for his contribution ‘to the realization of cultural events that promote understanding and the exchange of knowledge between peoples’.

### Check Your Progress

1. In which year did Wole Soyinka win the Nobel Prize?
2. When did Wole Soyinka receive the Europe Theatre Prize?

## 13.3 SUMMARY OF *THE LION AND THE JEWEL*

The play *The Lion and the Jewel* is set in the village of Ilunjinle in the country of Nigeria. In that village resides a beautiful young woman, Sidi. She is the Jewel of the village. She is adored by the villagers especially the village school teacher Lakunle. Lakunle is a village outsider who believes in modern ideas. He adores Sidi as a woman but he does not want to pay something called the bride tax as he considers it an archaic tradition. As per the tradition, the groom has to pay an amount to the bride’s parent in order to marry her. Although Lakunle is in love with Sidi, she does not reciprocate the feeling. Sidi, who has grown up in the village, finds Lakunle’s modern ideas loathsome. However, she tells Lakunle that she will marry him as long as he pays the bride-price as per the traditions of the village.

When Lakunle is talking to Sidi, several women gather around and tell Sidi about the photographer who had visited the village sometime back. Apparently, the photographer took pictures of the whole village during that time and one of the pictures had Sidi at the centre. Everyone comments on how beautiful Sidi looks in the picture. The praise annoys Lakunle but raises Sidi's spirits, so much so that she suggests that all the villagers enact the story of the photographer. She asks Lakunle to play the photographer and after a bit of hesitation, he agrees. The drummers and singers and actors play out the arrival of the stranger who had photographed the village people. Even Lakunle gets excited and starts getting in the spirit of performance. As the play continues, the Bale or the head of the village, Baroka (whose name means 'the Lion') arrives on the stage and plays the role of the village head in the play. Later, while looking at the pictures taken by the photographer, Baroka is enchanted by Sidi's beauty and decides to take her as his latest wife. He already has a harem of wives with him of which Sadiku is the head.

After getting to know about Baroka's intentions, Sadiku goes and tells Sidi that Baroka wants to take her as his new wife. While Sadiku feels that being Baroka's wife is quite an honour, Sidi does not share the same feeling. Sidi even laughs at the prospect as she feels that the village head is old. Full of herself and proud of her beauty, Sidi comments that the only reason Baroka wants her is due to her beauty and fame. Lakunle listens to the conversation between Sadiku and Sidi with jealousy and annoyance.

When Sadiku tells Baroka about the whole incident, he becomes distressed after hearing that Sidi called him old. He gets sad at the fact that he is no longer as young and virile. He tries to find comfort in Sadiku.

Later, while Sidi is standing near the school house and admiring her photographs, Sadiku comes and greets her. She reveals that Baroka is actually impotent. As they are near the school, Lakunle tries to hear what they are talking about but the two tell him to leave them alone and continue to talk to each other. Sidi tells the eldest wife of Baroka that she plans to go to a dinner with the Bale and make him feel inferior. Sadiku gleefully agrees to Sidi's plan, and Sidi bounds off.

We then see Baroka wrestling with his hired trainer. Sidi enters the room confidently, but Bale's attitude of dismissal confuses her. She pretends that she needs counsel about a man who wants to marry her, describing Baroka in the process. As Bale continues to fight, he criticizes Sidi for listening to the words of his wife, Sadiku. He asks her if Sadiku had invented any story, and she says no. He pretends to be complain about Sadiku's frequent match-fixing.

The drum begins, and the female dancers follow the male. Sadiku and Lakunle wait for Sidi to return. Lakunle is very scared, and claims to be going to rescue Sidi. The mummies play away, and Sadiku happily assumes Bale has been brought down. Suddenly, Sidi runs in, crying. She throws herself on the ground. Lakunle is scared and asks if she was beaten. Sidi cries that Sadiku was deceived. The

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Baroka tricked Sidi and raped her. Lakunle then announced that he will marry Sidi. However, almost as soon as the wedding preparations begin, Lakunle seems worried. He claims that he needs more time. Sidi laughs and says he is preparing to marry Baroka, because that is the only thing she can do. Sadiku blesses her and asks the gods for fertility.

The festivities begin, and Lakunle also seems to be getting into the spirit of celebration as he chases after a girl who pushes him in the behind.

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### 13.4 CHARACTER LIST

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The following are the characters in the play:

**Sidi (The Jewel):** She is a superficial but a beautiful woman in the village of Ilujinle. At first she agrees to marry Lukulne, even though she is not interested in him. She is vexed by his modern ideas and his refusal to pay the bride tax. She is very proud of the photos in the magazine and becomes even more engrossed in the picture as the play progresses. Sidi hopes to trick Baroka, who she dislikes and does not want to marry. Eventually, she is raped by Baroka and forced to marry him.

**Lakunle:** He is an arrogant young man who teaches in the school at Ilujinle and despises the villagers for their belief in backward ideas. He is deeply in love with Sidi and her beauty but does not want to pay the bride tax- an African tradition. He wants to modernize the village and is jealous of Baroka because of Sidi and is annoyed by him. He usually tried to stay away from village activities but is drawn to them regardless.

**Baroka (The Lion):** With the knowledge and authority of the Bale or the village leader, The Lion continues to look for other women. He showcases dismay at not being young and virile and seeks comfort from his eldest wife. But this is proven to be false when he shows that he is still quite strong and active. He only pretended to be impotent to fail Sadiku's plan and trap Sidi.

**Sadiku:** The chief wife of the Bale, Sadiku is elderly but an excellent source of comfort for Baroka. However, in the long run, she decides to conspire against him and tries to involve Sidi in the plan to destroy Baroka. However, her plan is found out and she fails in her endeavour.

**The photographer:** The photographer came to Ilunjinle and took many photos of the village and its inhabitants. He was fascinated by the beauty of Sidi and published a stunning picture of her at the centre.

**The Wrestler:** He wrestles with Baroka to strengthen him. He is hired specifically because of his superior skills and once Baroka can best him, it is understood that he will be replaced by a better fighter.

**The Favourite:** The Bale's current favourite wife, is tasked with pleasing him. The favourite wife of Baroka keeps changing.

**The Surveyor:** He is a white man heading towards the building of a railway through the village. He is bribed by Baroka to abandon the project.

*Wole Soyinka: The Lion  
and The Jewel*

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### 13.5 THEMES

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Some of the important themes dealt with in the play are discussed below:

#### **Tradition vs. Modernity**

This is maybe the most obvious theme in the play. Soyinka at first, seems to have created the dichotomy between the two ideas through the characters of old Baroka and the youth Lakunle. However, as the play progresses, Soyinka challenges the crowd's presumptions. Lakunle espouses regressive views and abandons his modern ideas when it is convenient to do so. On the other hand, Baroka says he doesn't detest progress but finds its stagnation exhausting. He wants to use the machine of stamps in order to make more money. Soyinka along these lines recommends that progress is not bad, but it should be done on African terms.

#### **Gender**

It seems that Soyinka unconsciously made a statement about gender in the play. Soyinka creates two female characters that are lively, obstinate, manipulative and independent. However, the two characters are ultimately pawns in the hands of the male characters. Sidi does not want to marry either Lakunle or Baroka, yet Baroka deceives her, rapes her, and then marries her. She is simply an object. It seems that women have power over men but as the plot of the play progresses, we come to know that not only is Sidi trapped but Sadiku is also tricked by the Baroka. Their attempts to defeat the Lion fail.

#### **Trickery and Manipulation**

The play is full of tricks and deception as many characters within the play use deception and lies to trick each other. This is seen to be more viable than being direct, as the things the characters want come at the expense of others' emotions and wishes. Sidi and Sadiku attempt to trick the Bale so they can celebrate his downfall. The Bale not only tricks Sadiku but Sidi as well in order to get Sidi as the new wife. Although the play usually remains light and humorous, deception and lies form a huge part of the plot.

#### **Performance**

There are many instances of performance in the play. They include singing, dancing and acting. All the characters, including Bale, partake in it. The story of the stranger was already well known, but the performance cemented it as an important moment

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in the history of the village. The performance of the mummies the participation of Sadiku in it was a way of showing dissatisfaction with the leader. Performance gives the incompetent Sadiku a sense of power, even though in the end it is a dream and nothing else.

### Words

Words play an important role in the play. They are more or less related to foolishness, pride and ego. Although Lakunle is supposed to be good with words, he rarely gets the desired result from his words. He is neither able to stop the Baroka nor convince Sidi of his love for him. His words only make him look like a fool. The Bale is significantly more sparing with words, although he does utilize them for his benefit when he deceives Sidi.

### Images

Images have great power in this play. First of all, photographic images are emblems of modernity. They are amazing to see, easy to disseminate, and promote status and identity. We see how the female protagonist of the play is obsessed with her own image in the magazine. Secondly, images have a social impact. Sidi's reputation as a beautiful woman grows with the image of her in the magazine. On the other hand, Baroka feels small and unaccomplished as he sees his own small picture next to an image of the toilets. In this way, unconsciously, he becomes related to an unpleasant image. Through this, the playwright shows the mind-blowing power of images and the effect they have on people. He is no longer strong, and his image is no longer strong.

### Legacies of Colonialism

Although Soyinka does not deal with this as directly as he does in his other works, the issue of colonialism and imperialism in Nigeria is dealt with in the play. Lakunle represents the West: his clothing, his words, his learning, and his foolishness are all indicative of Britain's influence on Nigeria. On the other hand, the Bale is a traditional African figure. The mid-20th-century Nigerian village he rules has been affected by British rule, and even though the country is on the road to independence, it will never be able to go back in time. It is part of a modern world and must start to change, whether it wants to or not.

### Check Your Progress

3. What is the setting of the play *The Lion and the Jewel*?
4. What is the bride tax?
5. Why is Lakunle opposed to paying the bride tax?
6. Why does Sidi reject the prospect of marrying Baroka initially?

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## 13.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

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1. Wole Soyinka won the Nobel Prize in 1986.
2. In December 2017, Soyinka was awarded the Europe Theatre Prize in the ‘Special Prize’ category for his contribution ‘to the realization of cultural events that promote understanding and the exchange of knowledge between peoples’.
3. The play *The Lion and the Jewel* is set in the village of Ilunjinle in the country of Nigeria.
4. The bride tax is an African tradition in which the groom has to pay an amount to the bride’s parent in order to marry her.
5. Lakunle is opposed to paying bride tax as he considers it an archaic tradition.
6. Sidi laughs at the prospect of marrying Baroka initially as he is very old.

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## 13.7 SUMMARY

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- Akinwande Soyinka, known worldwide as Wole Soyinka, is a Nigerian playwright and poet writer. He was the first sub-Saharan African to win the Nobel Prize in 1986.
- Soyinka has been a staunch critic of Nigerian government and many different African governments, especially the ones that are characterised by dictatorship and are authoritarian in nature.
- In December 2017, Soyinka was awarded the Europe Theatre Prize in the ‘Special Prize’ category for his contribution ‘to the realization of cultural events that promote understanding and the exchange of knowledge between peoples’.
- The play *The Lion and the Jewel* is set in the village of Ilunjinle in the country of Nigeria. In that village resides a beautiful young woman, Sidi. She is the Jewel of the village. She is adored by the villagers especially the village school teacher Lakunle.
- Lakunle is a village outsider who believes in modern ideas. He adores Sidi as a woman but he does not want to pay something called the bride tax as he considers it an archaic tradition. As per the tradition, the groom has to pay an amount to the bride’s parent in order to marry her.
- When Lakunle is talking to Sidi, several women gather around and tell Sidi about the photographer who had visited the village sometime back. Apparently, the photographer took pictures of the whole village during that

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- time and one of the pictures had Sidi at the centre. Everyone comments on how beautiful Sidi looks in the picture. The praise annoys Lakunle but raises Sidi's spirits.
- Later, while looking at the pictures taken by the photographer, Baroka is enchanted by Sidi's beauty and decides to take her as his latest wife. He already has a harem of wives with him of which Sadiku is the head.
  - Sadiku goes and tells Sidi that Baroka wants to take her as his new wife. While Sadiku feels that being Baroka's wife is quite an honour, Sidi does not share the same feeling. Sidi even laughs at the prospect as she feels that the village head is old.
  - When Sadiku tells Baroka about the whole incident, he becomes distressed after hearing that Sidi called him old. He gets sad at the fact that he is no longer as young and virile.
  - Later, while Sidi is standing near the school house and admiring her photographs, Sadiku comes and greets her. She reveals that Baroka is actually impotent. Sidi tells the eldest wife of Baroka that she plans to go to a dinner with the Bale and make him feel inferior. Sadiku gleefully agrees to Sidi's plan, and Sidi bounds off.
  - The scene shifts to Baroka's room. Sidi enters the room confidently, but Bale's attitude of dismissal confuses her. He asks her if Sadiku had invented any story, and she says no.
  - Sadiku and Lakunle wait for Sidi to return. Suddenly, Sidi runs in, crying. She throws herself on the ground. The Baroka tricked Sidi and raped her. Lakunle then announced that he will marry Sidi. However, almost as soon as the wedding preparations begin, Lakunle seems worried. He claims that he needs more time. Sidi laughs and says he is preparing to marry Baroka, because that is the only thing she can do.
  - The theme of tradition and modernity is the most obvious theme in the play. Soyinka at first, seems to have created the dichotomy between the two ideas through the characters of old Baroka and the youth Lakunle. However, as the play progresses, Soyinka challenges the crowd's presumptions. Lakunle espouses regressive views and abandons his modern ideas when it is convenient to do so. On the other hand, Baroka says he doesn't detest progress but finds its stagnation exhausting.
  - It seems that Soyinka unconsciously made a statement about gender in the play. Soyinka creates two female characters that are lively, obstinate, manipulative and independent. However, the two characters are ultimately pawns in the hands of the male characters.
  - The play is full of tricks and deception as many characters within the play use deception and lies to trick each other. This is seen to be more viable

than being direct, as the things the characters want come at the expense of others' emotions and wishes.

- There are many instances of performance in the play. They include singing, dancing and acting. All the characters, including Bale, partake in it.
- Words play an important role in the play. They are more or less related to foolishness, pride and ego. Although Lakunle is supposed to be good with words, he rarely gets the desired result from his words.
- Images have great power in this play. We see how the female protagonist of the play is obsessed with her own image in the magazine. Secondly, images have a social impact. Sidi's reputation as a beautiful woman grows with the image of her in the magazine.
- Although Soyinka does not deal with this as directly as he does in his other works, the issue of colonialism and imperialism in Nigeria is dealt with in the play. Lakunle represents the West. On the other hand, the Bale is a traditional African figure.

*Wole Soyinka: The Lion  
and The Jewel*

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### 13.8 KEY WORDS

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- **Activist:** The term is used for someone who takes action to cause political or social change, usually as a member of a group.
- **Dictatorship:** It is a form of government characterized by a single leader or group of leaders and little or no toleration for political pluralism or independent programs or media.
- **Colonialism:** It is a practice or policy of control by one people or power over other people or areas, often by establishing colonies and generally with the aim of economic dominance.

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### 13.9 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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#### Short-Answer Questions

1. How does the Bale deceive Sidi?
2. Give a brief character sketch of Sidi.
3. How does Soyinka depict the dichotomy between tradition and modernity in the play *The Lion and the Jewel*?
4. Write a short note on Soyinka's depiction of the female characters in the play *The Lion and the Jewel*.

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**Long-Answer Questions**

1. Critically analyse the major themes of the play *The Lion and the Jewel*.
2. Discuss the importance of words, performance and images in the play *The Lion and the Jewel*.

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**13.10 FURTHER READINGS**

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Wright, Derek. 1996. *Wole Soyinka: Life, Work and Criticism*. York: York Press.

Msiska, Mpalive-Hangson. 2007. *Postcolonial identity in Wole Soyinka*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Soyinka, Wole. 2001. *Conversations with Wole Soyinka*. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi.

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# UNIT 14 SHARON POLLOCK: *BLOOD RELATIONS*

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Wole Soyinka: *The Lion  
and The Jewell*

## NOTES

### Structure

- 14.0 Introduction
- 14.1 Objectives
- 14.2 About the Author: Sharon Pollock
- 14.3 Summary of *Blood Relations*
- 14.4 Characters
- 14.5 Themes
- 14.6 Symbols and Metaphors
- 14.7 Answers to Check Your Progress Questions
- 14.8 Summary
- 14.9 Key Words
- 14.10 Self Assessment Questions and Exercises
- 14.11 Further Readings

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## 14.0 INTRODUCTION

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Sharon Pollock is a Canadian playwright and actor who gained popularity for her work *Blood Relations*. Some of her prominent works are *One Tiger to a Hill* (1980), *Whiskey Six Cadenza* (1983), *Fair Liberty's Call* (1993), *End Dream* (2000) and *Generations* (1980). The play *Blood Relations* is based on an actual murder case. This unit will discuss in detail the plot structure, themes and characters of the play *Blood Relations*.

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## 14.1 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the literary career of Sharon Pollock
- Analyse the play *Blood Relations*
- Examine the major themes and characters of the play *Blood Relations*

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## 14.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR: SHARON POLLOCK

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Sharon Pollock (1936- present) is a Canadian playwright, director and actor. She is highly influential in the field of Canadian theatre and many of her works have been performed all around the world. She is also the Artistic Director of Calgary Theatre and New Brunswick Theatre. As a playwright, she is best known for her plays titled *Blood Relations* (1980) and *Doc* (1984).

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Pollock was born as Mary Sharon Chalmers to Eloise Chalmers and George Chalmers. As a child, she travelled a lot with her family which is how she was introduced to the American musical theatre. This piqued her interest in Drama and she later became involved in the Toronto theatre. She enrolled in the University of New Brunswick where she was an active member of drama society and also met her future husband, Ross Pollock. She had five children from the marriage although the marriage was an abusive one. Pollock even admitted later to have tried to poison her husband. Frustrated from her abusive partner, Pollock returned to her hometown, Fredericton, with her children and started writing her own plays.

Pollock started her career as a full length playwright with *A Compulsory Option* (1972). Her other major works include *One Tiger to a Hill* (1980), *Whiskey Six Cadenza* (1983), *Fair Liberty's Call* (1993), *End Dream* (2000) and *Generations* (1980). Her strong notions about encouraging the Canadian theatre inspired her to found her own theatre - The Garry theatre in 1995.

Of her plays, *Blood Relations* is one of the most renowned work. It was first staged in Theatre Three in March of 1980. Originally titled *My Name is Lisbeth*, the play tells the story of Lizzie Borden and is based on an actual murder case. The murder mystery explores the life of Lizzie Borden and the murders of her father and her step-mother of which she was accused. According to Pollock, it is easier for the society to deny that Lizzie Borden was the murderer rather than look into what is wrong with the way society is working. Axe as a murder weapon is also shocking. Pollock believes that if the victims had been poisoned instead of being killed by an axe, the murder would not have caused as much stir within the public as it did. The play also touches on some feminist issues as well.

Throughout her career as a playwright, Pollock used her acting as well as her own life experience to tell the stories that were realistic. She talked about things that she cared about. She has always preferred writing over acting as writing for plays gave her a chance to have her own voice in the world- a liberty that acting could not provide. She worked to uplift the Canadian theatre and has been staunch opponent of institutionalization of theatre. Pollock has delved into the world of musical theatre and is currently writing for the Atlantic Ballet Company.

### Check Your Progress

1. In which year did Sharon Pollock establish the Gary Theatre?
2. Where was *Blood Relations* first staged?
3. What was the original title of *Blood Relations*?

## 14.3 SUMMARY OF *BLOOD RELATIONS*

The play opens up on a late Sunday evening in the parlour of Borden House in 1902 (after the murders had already taken place) in Massachusetts. Lizzie Borden

enters with tea for her friend, The Actress- who is also indicated to be her lover. The Actress comments that she heard the children singing a song about how she murdered her parents with an Axe. She asks Lizzie if the rumours of the murder are all true. In response, Lizzie decides to act out the events of the murders. The Actress could play the character of Lizzie while Lizzie herself would play the Irish maid Bridget.

The play then goes into flashback. The audience gets a glimpse of the Borden House where Harry Wingate, Lizzie's step-uncle, behaves with her in a sexually inappropriate manner. We also see how Lizzie's step-mother, Mrs. Abigail Borden, is busy scheming with her brother to acquire more money from Mr. Borden (the family patriarch), which would leave Lizzie and her older sister, Emma, completely dependent on them.

As the Actress and Lizzie act out the events leading up to the murder from Lizzie's perspective, we see how Lizzie used to be a kind girl who loved her father but felt that her father was not kind to her and would often fall prey to her step-mother's schemes. Her step-mother is shown as a greedy lady with ulterior motives who wanted to acquire the Borden estate and property for herself. For that purpose, she also convinces Mr. Borden to push Lizzie for marriage. Lizzie though, does not have any interest in marriage and feels that she always falls short of her family's expectations and cannot follow the society's rules. All she wants is independence to follow her own heart and to take care of the pigeons that she keeps in her shed.

The audience also comes to know that Lizzie is friends with a doctor, Mr. Patrick— an Irish doctor who is married. Even though Lizzie insists that they are just friends, everyone including her father suspects something more to their relationship. Tired of what he considers to be Lizzie's rebellious attitude, Mr. Borden starts hitting her and even goes to the extent of killing all her pigeons in front of her eyes. Mrs. Borden and her brother use this opportunity to make Mr. Borden sign away the farm and mill-house to Wingate, thus, talking away Lizzie's inheritance.

Desperate for her independence and driven almost mad by the injustice done to her, Lizzie hatches the plan to murder her step-mother, who she believes to be the cause of all her suffering. One day, while she is alone at home with Mrs. Borden, Lizzie kills her with a hatchet. As she tries to cover the murder, Mr. Borden arrives home unexpectedly and Lizzie ends up killing him too.

As we dive back into the present we see that The Actress does believe that Lizzie killed her parents. Meanwhile, Lizzie's sister- Emma, comes down the stairs to complain about the noise from the re-enactment. She is against Lizzie's relationship with The Actress and prohibits Lizzie from seeing her again. She also asks again if Lizzie was actually responsible for their parent's murders since Lizzie has never really opened up about it to her.

Lizzie responds that if she was in fact is responsible for the double murders, then Emma is also partially responsible since she was the one who practically raised Lizzie. The Actress intervenes at that point that Lizzie should take

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responsibility for her actions as she is the one who actually killed her parents but Lizzie turns it around on The Actress, saying that The Actress is the killer as she was the one playing Lizzie during the re-enactment.

In this way, the concept of role play lends ambiguity to the events of the murder. It also provides a way for both The Actress and Lizzie to escape the social restrictions and freely explore the events leading up to the murder without really answering the question of whether Lizzie actually committed the murders or not.

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### 14.4 CHARACTERS

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The prominent characters of the play *Blood Relations* have been discussed below:

#### **Lizzie Borden**

Lizzie Borden is the main character of the play. When the play opens, ten years have passed since the events of the murder and Lizzie is living with her elder sister Emma and meeting with The Actress, who comes over so often to visit her. Throughout the play, Lizzie remains quite ambiguous about the real events of the murder and her role in the whole situation even though everyone believes her to be the culprit. While re-enacting the murder, she plays the role of Bridget, the Irish maid who used to work for the Bordens while The Actress takes on the role of Lizzie.

In the re-enactment, Lizzie is portrayed by The Actress as oppressed and insecure. She seems to be driven mad by the mistreatment she receives at the hands of her parents and longs for independence. She rightfully fears that her inheritance will be taken by her scheming step-mother and her lascivious brother. She does not want to get married either and fails to fulfil the expectations of being lady-like, leading her to become even more cooped up and negative. She sees her step-mother as the main cause of all her suffering and thus, plans to murder her.

#### **Dr. Patrick**

Dr. Patrick is an Irish doctor who is friends with Lizzie. Even though Dr. Patrick is married, he is smitten with Lizzie's wit and attitude and is even ready to elope with Lizzie if she agrees. Lizzie, on the other hand, only sees him as a friend even though the whole town suspects them to be in an affair.

#### **Emma Borden**

Emma is Lizzie's older sister. She is rather meek and shies away from any conflict. Although she shares Lizzie's disdain towards their father and step-mother, she does not rebel like Lizzie. After the death of their parents, she lives with Lizzie but like others, she also suspects Lizzie of the double murder. She is also highly critical of Lizzie's relationship with the Actress.

### **Bridget**

Bridget is the Irish maid working for the Borden's and in the re-enactment, she is played by Lizzie. She is portrayed as someone who sympathizes with Lizzie's distressful situation even more so than Lizzie's own family. In Lizzie's portrayal of Bridget, she is shown as someone who is kind and well-intentioned. She wants to protect Lizzie but also worries about the consequences of the murder.

### **Mrs. Borden**

Mrs. Borden is Lizzie and Emma's stepmother. She is shown as a greedy, scheming woman who Lizzie absolutely hates. She plans to take away Lizzie and Emma's inheritance by convincing Mr. Borden to give it to her brother, Harry Wingate. She also judges Lizzie for being unconventional and not following the social norms of the society. Lizzie on the other hand sees her as the cause of all her problems and is highly mistrustful of her.

### **Mr. Borden**

Mr. Borden is Lizzie's father. He often finds himself in the midst of the fights between Mrs. Borden and Lizzie. Even though he is rich and in possession of a large estate, he is shown to be quite miserly all throughout the play. He is very patriarchal and although he loves Lizzie, he wishes she was not so unconventional and fitted better in the society. Growing more and more tired of Lizzie's rebellious attitude, he turns more and more abusive, even going to the extent of hitting Lizzie and killing her pigeons in front of her to assert his dominance. He often falls into the schemes of his wife and her brother. He is eventually killed by Lizzie when he happens to arrive at the murder scene of Mrs. Borden.

### **The Actress**

The Actress is an actress from Boston who is supposedly having an affair with Lizzie and comes to visit her often. She comes from a different more liberal background although she seems to be a little afraid of Lizzie and suspects that Lizzie actually was the murderer. In the re-enactment, she plays the character of Lizzie. Although, she starts off with Lizzie's notes about the character, she starts playing Lizzie as she sees her- depressed, insecure and vengeful. When she points to Lizzie as the murderer, Lizzie in turn calls her the murderer as she was the one playing Lizzie.

### **Harry Wingate**

Harry Wingate is Mrs. Borden's brother. He is a lewd and indecent man who constantly behaves inappropriately with Lizzie. He also hatches a scheme with his sister, Mrs. Borden, to get Mr. Borden to sign the estate in their name, leaving Lizzie and Emma penniless and totally dependent on them.

## **NOTES**

## NOTES

### Check Your Progress

4. What is the setting of the play *Blood Relations*?
5. Who plays the role of Lizzie in the enactment of the murder?

## 14.5 THEMES

The major themes of the play are as follows:

**Morality:** Throughout the play, the writer makes us question whether the murders were justified or not. While undoubtedly, murder is a punishable crime no matter what, but by making the audience empathize with the oppressed state of Lizzie Borden, the writer makes the audience question their own morality. Even though the Borden murder case is historically considered one of the most heinous crimes committed at that time, the writer by showing how Lizzy was abused and driven to insanity by her parents, makes us feel sorry for her. As an audience, we feel sympathy towards Lizzie for being denied her freedom and for being tortured by her own family. This brings into question our own morality, showing how subjective the concept of morality can be.

**Family:** The play is titled *Blood Relations*. The story follows the events leading to the murder of Mr. and Mrs. Borden by their daughter, Lizzie Borden. Throughout the play we are made to question family ties. The general connotation of family is related to love, care and support provided by the family. Yet, Lizzie only receives mistreatment, abuse and disdain from her family members. Lizzie does not receive any nurturing from her family members. Her father is patriarchal, inconsistent and sometimes even abusive towards Lizzie. Her step-mother is shown as conniving, cruel and disdainful of Lizzie's unconventional personality. She even schemes to take away both Lizzie and Emma's inheritance. Lizzie's uncle is constantly inappropriate with her and Emma, though loyal to Lizzie, never actively supports her or tries to understand her emotional state. She is also highly critical of Lizzie's relationship with The Actress.

Throughout the story, the few people who actually sympathize or appreciate Lizzie are people outside of her immediate family. This makes the audience question the concept of family as a nurturing loving unit of society that it is supposed to be. The relationship that Lizzie shares with most of her family members is quite unhealthy. Moreover, it is also the source of her insecurity as she is not able to fit within the society. It also makes it easier for us to sympathize with Lizzie and understand how the horrifying treatment meted to her by her family made her murder her parents.

**Truth:** *Blood Relations* is based on the actual murder case of the Borden by their daughter Ms. Lizzie Borden who was accused of killing them with an axe but was acquitted of her crimes due to the evidence being circumstantial. The play

starts off ten years after the events of the murder when The Actress questions Lizzie whether she actually committed the murders. Even as Lizzie makes The Actress go through the whole process of re-enactment, she never directly tells The Actress (or the audience) if she actually committed the murders. Through the device of play within a play, the writer effectively distorts the truth, making us question reality.

It becomes difficult for the audience to tell whether Lizzie is telling the truth or just playing games as she remains quite ambiguous about her role in the whole situation. Additionally, the insecure and oppressed mind-set that Lizzie is portrayed in before the murders, indicates that she had somewhat alienated herself from reality. Within the framework of the re-enactment, we see truth become even more distorted as The Actress, playing the role of Lizzie, commits the violent murders.

**Performance:** The play incorporates the technique of play within a play. The Actress plays the character of Lizzie while Lizzie herself plays the role of Bridget. This element of performance alienates the audience from seeking the objective truth about the night of the murder. By enacting the events leading up to the murder, the playwright makes us empathize with Lizzie's situation, making the whole situation more morally ambiguous in the process. In this way, the writer makes the whole situation hazy through dramatization.

**Societal Expectations:** The biggest factor that causes a rift between Lizzie and her family and especially between her and her father, is her inability to fulfil society's expectations. Her family wanted her to get married but she had always been free-spirited and bold. This attitude is not considered appropriate according to the standards of the society that she was a part of. Lizzie's forthright attitude and her unwillingness to get married as her parents wished, created a huge rift between Mr. Borden and her. Even though Mr. Borden loved his daughter, he could not stand how Lizzie resisted this patriarchal norm. As a result, not only Lizzie grows increasingly sad and insecure, Mr. Borden also grows more and more violent, even killing Lizzie's birds and abusing her. As Mr. Borden himself thinks, Lizzie had qualities that he would have liked in a son but deplored in a daughter.

Lizzie struggles to fit into the strict gendered norms because of her queer identity. This failure to live up to other's expectations of femininity causes Lizzie a lot of anguish. This anguish not only causes her problems but also plagues her adulthood as she chooses to remain unmarried in some hopes of maintaining control over her own life. Not only her father but even her step-mother and her sister are irked and frustrated by her behaviour. This frustration of Lizzie becomes one of the many causes for her dark act of murder.

**Abuse:** Through the re-enactment, the audience comes to know about the abusive situation that Lizzie lives in. Her father hits her several times and even goes as far as to kill her beloved pet pigeons in front of her. Not only does she receive physical abuse, she also shares a very toxic relationship with her family. Her mother derides

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her for not getting married and seeks to take away all her wealth. All her family members look down on her which not only makes her more sad and insecure but also creates this rage within her for the injustice she goes through. By highlighting the abusive environment that Lizzie was living in, Pollock shows the audience that while Lizzie's actions were morally incorrect they stemmed out of the abuse she received at the hands of her parents.

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### 14.6 SYMBOLS AND METAPHORS

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Given belows are the symbols and metaphors used in the play:

#### **Birds**

Lizzie's pet birds represent freedom that she desperately craves. She longs for freedom to be herself which can only happen if she is not financially dependent on her father but her step mother seeks to take that away as well. The birds are kept in a cage, symbolizing how trapped Lizzie is in her current family situation. When her father kills the birds, it represents the death of her freedom. The way Lizzie cares for her pet pigeons and the way she feels affection for them shows how caring and loving she is. She cares for them the way she would have liked to be taken care of by her family.

#### **The Actress (Symbol)**

Lizzie's acquaintance and likely lover, the Actress, plays Lizzie in a re-enactment of Lizzie's crime. The figure of 'The Actress' as someone who represents another person's experience, symbolizes Lizzie's feelings of having multiple identities, of being fragmented by her pain. At the end, the Actress confronts Lizzie about the fact that she killed her parents and Lizzie tells her that it was she who committed the murders, as indeed she is the one who committed them within the re-enactment. The Actress symbolizes the ways that Lizzie, and by extension anyone, is capable of horrible acts of violence because of her circumstances. It represents the ways that responsibility for individual acts can be traced to the environment in which that person lives.

#### **Puppies (Symbol)**

At one point, Lizzie talks about the family farm, and tells a story about a litter of puppies. One of the puppies was sick, or at least 'different' from the rest, presumably because it was the runt of the litter. Lizzie tells us that they had to kill that puppy because of its difference. This story symbolizes Lizzie's own feelings of alienation within her family, the way that she feels 'different' from the rest of the litter, and her fear that being different will bring about her downfall. Part of what sends Lizzie over the edge is her feeling of disempowerment as a result of her uncle Harry Wingate and stepmother acquiring financial control over her father's estate. Wingate manages to convince Mr. Borden to give him possession of both

the family farm and the mill house. For Lizzie, the farm represents a joyous place from her youth, and a place that she hopes to someday possess for herself. The signing away of the farm to her uncle and stepmother symbolizes a complete acquisition of ownership that shuts her out and leaves her dependent and disempowered.

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### Check Your Progress

6. What does Lizzie's pet birds symbolize?
7. What does the story about the litter of puppies symbolize?

## 14.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

1. Sharon Pollock founded the Gary Theatre in 1995.
2. *Blood Relations* was first staged in Theatre Three in March of 1980.
3. The original title of *Blood Relations* was *My Name is Lisbeth*.
4. The play opens up on a late Sunday evening in the parlour of Borden House in 1902 (after the murders had already taken place) in Massachusetts.
5. The Actress plays the role of Lizzie in the enactment.
6. Lizzie's pet birds represent freedom that she desperately craves.
7. The story about the litter of puppies symbolises Lizzie's own feelings of alienation within her family, the way that she feels 'different' from the rest of the litter, and her fear that being different will bring about her downfall.

## 14.8 SUMMARY

- Sharon Pollock (1936- present) is a Canadian playwright, director and actor. She is highly influential in the field of Canadian theatre and many of her works have been performed all around the world. As a playwright, she is best known for her plays titled *Blood Relations* (1980) and *Doc* (1984).
- Pollock started her career as a full length playwright with *A Compulsory Option* (1972). Her other major works include *One Tiger to a Hill* (1980), *Whiskey Six Cadenza* (1983), *Fair Liberty's Call* (1993), *End Dream* (2000) and *Generations* (1980). Her strong notions about encouraging the Canadian theatre inspired her to found her own theatre - The Garry theatre in 1995.
- *Blood Relations* was first staged in Theatre Three in March of 1980. Originally titled *My Name is Lisbeth*, the play tells the story of Lizzie Borden and is based on an actual murder case.

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- Throughout her career as a playwright, Pollock used her acting as well as her own life experience to tell the stories that were realistic. She talked about things that she cared about. She has always preferred writing over acting as writing for plays gave her a chance to have her own voice in the world- a liberty that acting could not provide.
- The play opens up on a late Sunday evening in the parlour of Borden House in 1902 (after the murders had already taken place) in Massachusetts. Lizzie Borden enters with tea for her friend, The Actress- who is also indicated to be her lover. The Actress asks Lizzie if the rumours of the murder are all true. In response, Lizzie decides to act out the events of the murders.
- The play then goes into flashback. The audience gets a glimpse of the Borden House where Harry Wingate, Lizzie's step- uncle, behaves with her in a sexually inappropriate manner. We also see how Lizzie's step-mother, Mrs. Abigail Borden, is busy scheming with her brother to acquire more money from Mr. Borden (the family patriarch), which would leave Lizzie and her older sister, Emma, completely dependent on them.
- As the Actress and Lizzie act out the events leading up to the murder from Lizzie's perspective, we see how Lizzie used to be a kind girl who loved her father but felt that her father was not kind to her and would often fall prey to her step-mother's schemes. Her step-mother is shown as a greedy lady with ulterior motives who wanted to acquire the Borden estate and property for herself.
- Tired of what he considers to be Lizzie's rebellious attitude, Mr. Borden starts hitting her and even goes to the extent of killing all her pigeons in front of her eyes. Mrs. Borden and her brother use this opportunity to make Mr. Borden sign away the farm and mill-house to Wingate, thus, talking away Lizzie's inheritance.
- Desperate for her independence and driven almost mad by the injustice done to her, Lizzie hatches the plan to murder her step-mother, who she believes to be the cause of all her suffering. One day, while she is alone at home with Mrs. Borden, Lizzie kills her with a hatchet. As she tries to cover the murder, Mr. Borden arrives home unexpectedly and Lizzie ends up killing him too.
- As we dive back into the present we see that The Actress does believe that Lizzie killed her parents. The Actress tells her that she should take responsibility for her actions as she is the one who actually killed her parents but Lizzie turns it around on The Actress, saying that The Actress is the killer as she was the one playing Lizzie during the re-enactment.
- Lizzie's pet birds represent freedom that she desperately craves. She longs for freedom to be herself which can only happen if she is not financially

dependent on her father but her step mother seeks to take that away as well. The birds are kept in a cage, symbolizing how trapped Lizzie is in her current family situation. When her father kills the birds, it represents the death of her freedom.

- Lizzie’s acquaintance and likely lover, the Actress, plays Lizzie in a re-enactment of Lizzie’s crime. The figure of ‘The Actress’ as someone who represents another person’s experience, symbolizes Lizzie’s feelings of having multiple identities, of being fragmented by her pain.
- At one point, Lizzie talks about the family farm, and tells a story about a litter of puppies. One of the puppies was sick, or at least ‘different’ from the rest, presumably because it was the runt of the litter. Lizzie tells us that they had to kill that puppy because of its difference. This story symbolizes Lizzie’s own feelings of alienation within her family, the way that she feels ‘different’ from the rest of the litter, and her fear that being different will bring about her downfall.

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### 14.9 KEY WORDS

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- **Acquittal:** It refers to the judgment that a person is not guilty of the crime with which the person has been charged.
- **Patriarch:** The term refers to the male head of a family or tribe.
- **Parlour:** It is a sitting-room in a private house for entertaining visitors.

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### 14.10 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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#### Short-Answer Questions

1. How does Sharon Pollock use the play-within-a-play technique to uncover the truth about the Borden murders?
2. Give a brief character sketch of Lizzie Borden.
3. Write a short note on the role of the Actress in the play *Blood Relations*.

#### Long-Answer Questions

1. Examine the theme of morality and familial ties in the play *Blood Relations*.
2. Discuss the ambiguity regarding the murder in the play *Blood Relations*.
3. Examine the anguish brought about by societal expectations and Lizzie’s queer identity in the play *Blood Relations*.

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## 14.11 FURTHER READINGS

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### NOTES

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