PG EG S3 03 (DSC)

# TWO YEAR MASTER'S DEGREE COURSE

## (CBCS in Accordance with NEP 2020)

## SEMESTER - III

# MODERN POETRY
# ENGLISH


Padmanath Gohainbaruah School of Humanities

KRISHNA KANTA HANDIQUI STATE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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# DSC 9: MODERN POETRY

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# COURSE INTRODUCTION

This is the 3rd Discipline Specific Core (DSC 9) Course of MA English programme and it deals with Modern Poetry which refers to poetry written, mainly in Europe and North America, in between 1890 and 1950, in the tradition of modernist literature. But the term also Modern Poetry depend upon a number of factors– including its origins and influences, particular poetic schools in question and so on. The modernist break with the past, its different inventions and innovations were also clearly visible in the field of poetry. Thus, modern poetry is stated to have begun with the French Symbolism or Symbolist Movement and have ended with World War II. However, for our purpose, in this course, we shall also try to look at the state of poetry following World War II.

Besides Modern Poetry presents an almost different experience in addressing issues of the 20th century. It encompasses a number of poets who offer very different responses to the chaos of a world torn apart by the two world wars. Poetic experiments in the beginning of 20th century bears important testimony of a changed outlook involving new modes of expression, the emerging idea of poetry as an exploration of the possibilities of language, the origins and emergence of modernism, the influence of symbolism, the impact of the two World Wars, and the subsequent post war disillusionment. In DSC 1 of Semester 1 of the MA English Programme, you have already read about the history of Modern Poetry with reference to the representative poets. However, in this course, our purpose shall be to look at the history of Modern Poetry more meticulously, and its characteristics of the modernist poetry shall be discussed with reference to some poems of the representative poets.

This Course has 3 Blocks i.e. Block 1, Block 2 and Block 3

# BLOCK 1: INTRODUCTION

The units of this Block need to be studied as the history of Modern Poetry with reference to various modern poets since the early part of the 20th century till 1960s and 70s, their technical and thematic renderings as well as the various social and intellectual contexts. Keeping this in mind, this Block is divided into four units, which are as the following:

**Unit 1: Introducing Modern Poetry** will familiarise you with the idea of the modern poetry as well as with some important trends in the 20th century poetry. However, this unit shall also help you to consider the different important aspects and contexts of modern poetry, which would help you to discuss and interpret the prescribed modern poems.

**Unit 2: Symbolism in Modern Poetry** shall help you to discuss the idea of Symbolism in the context of Modern English Poetry. However, we shall start our discussion on the topic first by referring to the Symbolist Movement which designates specifically a group of French writers beginning with Charles Baudelaire and then with later poets such as Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, StéphaneMallarmé and Paul Valéry. Our main purpose here is to help you to examine how this Symbolist movement influenced the English poets of the 20th century.

**Unit 3: War Poetry** shall discuss some of the important aspects as well as contexts of 20th century war poetry. The truths told by war poets continue to disconcert, not least because they encompass what Wilfred Owen called the 'exultation'of war as well as the futility, the imaginative opportunities as well as the senseless horrors. War poets cannot wholly regret even the most appalling experiences, as they transform violence, death, atrocity, into the pleasing formal aesthetics of art. It is assumed that once you finish reading this unit, you will be able to acknowledge the contributions of the war poets to English poetry of the 20th century.

**Unit 4: Poetry after WW II** shall mostly deal with the contexts of modern poetry following World War II. In this unit, we shall specifically deal with Apocalyptic poetry and Movement poetry in some detail as they bear tremendous significance in the context of 20th century English poetry.

## BLOCK 2: INTRODUCTION

This Block contains total six units on five different modern poets who roughly belonged to the years beginning with the 20th century till the World War II. The details of the units are as the following.

**Unit 5: G. M. Hopkins: "The Windhover", "Pied Beauty"** discusses why Hopkins is an important poet with his poetical and technical brilliance. He is also considered a religious poet and one of the precursors of modern English poetry. He made a radical attempt to alter the nature of poetic expression from that of his contemporaries in late Victorian times. He wanted to integrate the spiritual and the sensuous experiences, and then adopt certain reformist techniques which would give fresh vitality to the language and meter in English poetry.

**Unit 6: W. B. Yeats: "The Second Coming", "Byzantium"** deals with the poem "The Second Coming" composed by W. B. Yeats. Yeats was an Irish poet, dramatist, and prose writer. However, he is more famous as one of the greatest English language poets of the 20th century. The title of the prescribed poem is derived from the Christian belief in the Second Coming of Christ, but the god to be born, is a monster. This idea is significant in the sense that it was written shortly after the Russian Revolution and

World War I, and just before the rise of Fascism under Mussolini in Italy. Thus, in this unit, you will get to read how Yeats, in order to showcase the disintegration of the modern society, uses the Christian background in this poem.

**Unit 7: T. S. Eliot: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"** shall introduce you to T. S. Eliot and one of his greatest poems "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". T. S. Eliot is one of the most eminent poet-critics of the 20th century. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" explores the abjection, the personal dilemma and self-disgust in a way that a whole generation, devastated by a horrific war, could truly identify with. These poems lay bare the complex and even shocking aspects of post-war life with the help of techniques immensely suited for the purpose.

**Unit 8: T. S. Eliot: "Journey of the Magie"** is based on yet another poem by T. S. Eliot –"Journey of the Magie". In this poem, Eliot recreates the Biblical account of the three wise men, also referred to as the 'magi' who take up a long journey towards Bethlehem in search of the Holy Infant, Jesus Christ so as to bless Him and complete the purpose of their divinely ordained journey. You will find that the Eliot's critical formulations and his sharp intellectual acumen made him a highly regarded critic as well as a visible figure in the 20th century literary circles.

**Unit 9: Rupert Brooke: "The Soldier"** shall provide a reading of Rupert Brook's poem "The Soldier". As you know, when the First World War broke out in 1914, additional concerns relating to civilization and dystopia grappled the minds of these poets. Indeed, many of those poets who were actively involved in the war were soldiers. Poets like Brooke exemplified ideas that were dominated by elements of mysticism, idealism and patriotism aiming to glorify self-sacrifice for the cause of the country. In the poem "The Soldier", Brooke tells his short-term experiences as a soldier in the war to illuminate the society of his time on the idea of war and more particularly to instil in the people a vision of idealism as well as patriotism.

**Unit 10: Wilfred Owen: "Arms and The Boy" & "Futility"**, unlike the previous one which discusses War poetry with reference to the themes of idealising the concept of war, shall help you to discuss the shifting trend in war poetry with regard to the themes, the transition from an idealistic or patriotic representation to the anguish and reality, that have become the dominant traits of the War. Along with Siegfried Sassoon, it was Wilfred Owen, who contributed towards bringing into poetry the realities of War that were harsh and poignant to the civilians. As you read the unit, you will learn that, Owen strived to state through his poems his close association with the war experiences at the trench as well as with a soldier who fought at the frontline.

# BLOCK 3: INTRODUCTION

This Block contains total five units on five different modern poets who were active following the World War II. The details of the units are as the following.

**Unit 11: W. H. Auden: "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"** deals with Wystan Hugh Auden's "In Memory of W.B Yeats". This is one of the elegies of W.H. Auden and it was written in 1939 soon after Yeats' death in 1939. For Auden, the moment was historical because it marked the end of the 1930s, the decade of unrest and lost hopes. World War II began nine months later. Auden here not only pays tribute to a great poet but appeals, in a moving dirge as expressed in the third section of the poem, to poets in a time of defeat. He asserts the value of poetry as a means of survival against the forces of humanity.

**Unit 12: Dylan Thomas: "Poem in October"** deals with Dylan Thomas and his poem "Poem in October". Thomas is a unique poet because no other modern poet is so popular with the common masses as him. In the era of impersonal and intellectual poetry of the 1940s, Thomas was a personal poet, and he revived the spirit of lyric poetry and romanticism. In this poem, the poet reflects on his own life, marvelling the nature around him and taking joy in it, till the weather makes an abrupt change. In that change, he seems to relive moments of his childhood, and a great feeling of joy surges through the poet.

**Unit 13: Ted Hughes: "Pike", "Thrushes"** deals with two poems "Pike" and "Thrushes" written by Ted Hughes. Ted Hughes wrote frequently of the blend of beauty and violence in the natural world. For Hughes, animals serve as a metaphor for his view on human life. Animals live out a struggle for the survival of the fittest in the same way that humans strive for ascendancy and success. But, there is a difference.

**Unit 14: Phillip Larkin: "Next Please", "Ambulance"** takes up two interesting poems titled "Next Please" and "Ambulances" by Philip Larkin who wrote during the second half of the 20th century. Both these poems reflect the poet's compelling thoughts on the fleeting nature of life and the inevitability of death itself. Although, the poems contain a sense of gloom in capturing our common sense of fear and insecurity with regard to death, yet they also confront death as a natural process of life in itself. Larkin is considered one of the most promising poets of England who was widely read and admired for his poetry that created new insights into the realities of modern life, as well as, the otherwise taken-for-granted or mundane aspects of everyday life that found a new expression through his poetry.

**Unit 15: Seamus Heaney: "After A Killing"** deals with Seamus Heaney's poem "After a Killing". The intensity of the Irish experience is portrayed in most of the works of Heaney, because since an early age, Heaney felt the tension between the protestant groups and himself because of their divergent views on

politics and religion, and their different languages and literary traditions. The present poem was occasioned by the killing of the British Ambassador Christopher Ewart-Biggs in July 1976 by the Provisional Irish Republican Army.

While going through a unit, you may also notice some text boxes, which have been included to help you know some of the difficult terms and concepts. You will also read about some relevant ideas and concepts in “LET US KNOW” along with the text. We have kept “CHECK YOUR PROGRESS” questions in each unit. These have been designed to self-check your progress of study. The hints for the answers to these questions are given at the end of the unit. We strongly advise that you answer the questions immediately after you finish reading the section in which these questions occur. We have also included a few books in the “FURTHER READING” which will be helpful for your further consultation. The books referred to in the preparation of the units have been added at the end of the block. As you know the world of literature and criticism is too big, we strongly advise you not to take a unit to be an end in itself. Despite our attempts to make a unit self-contained, we advise that you read the original texts of the authors prescribed as well as other additional materials for a thorough understanding of the contents of a particular unit.

# UNIT 1: INTRODUCING MODERN POETRY

## UNIT STRUCTURE


1.1 Learning Objectives

1.2 Introduction

1.3 The Idea of Modern Poetry

1.4 Some Important Trends in Modern Poetry

- 1.4.1 The Decadents
- 1.4.2 The Georgians
- 1.4.3 The Imagists

1.5 Let us Sum up

1.6 Further Reading

1.7 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

1.8 Possible Questions


## 1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- explain the history of modern poetry with reference to the famous modernist poets
- provide your own definition of modern poetry
- enlist the various shifts and changes taking place in the field of poetry in the 20th century
- identify some of the important poetic trends and discuss their characteristics
- gain some ideas on the techniques used by the modern poets.

## 2.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of Block 1 of Course 3 on Modern Poetry. This unit will familiarise you with the idea of the modern poetry as well as with some important poetic trends in the 20th century poetry. In Course 1 of Semester 1 of the MA English Programme, you have already read briefly about the history of modern poetry with reference to the representative poets and their works. However, in this unit, and also in the units that follow,

we shall try to consider those aspects and contexts of modern poetry, which would help you to discuss and interpret the prescribed modern English poets of the 20th century in this Course. Therefore, we would like you to pay particular attention to the different changes taking place in the writing of poems by the renowned modern poets of the 20th century, and then use your understanding in the discussion of the prescribed modern poets. For the purpose of this unit, we have substantially adapted from the entry on modern poetry in the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*.

## 1.3 THE IDEA OF MODERN POETRY

[Adapted from "English Poetry" in *New Princeton Encyclopedia*, Pages 350-352]

In this section, we shall try to quickly gloss through the different ideas of modern poetry with reference to the various modernist poets as well as their major concerns.

Modernism can be simplistically seen as a reaction against Romanticism. However, seen in the context of poetry, the picture of modernism seems too complicated. Amidst several competing poetic schools in the early 20th century, mention must be made of the rousing masculinity of Rudyard Kipling and Henry Newbolt; the Georgian return to the countryside, and the poetry of the First World War, which began in the patriotic enthusiasm of Rupert Brooke and ended in the angry pacifism of Wilfred Owen. The poetic anthologies of the Georgians that appeared from 1911 to 1922 included poets like Walter de la Mare, Robert Graves and Edward Thomas. Although not in technique, they were moderns in their awareness and purpose. The Georgians were very conscious of being English, and there has always been a strong native tradition in 20th century poetry, taking us back to Hardy and even to the Dorset dialect poet William Barnes. Poets like John Betjeman, Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes of around 1950s and 60s can all be seen as belonging to this tradition.

T. S. Eliot, as you will come to know, is the man who brought French symbolism to England, borrowing substantially from the concentrated, intellectual, gnomic poetry of Mallarme and Valery and the colloquial, ironic, self-conscious poetry of Corbiere and Laforgue. Eliot's modernist viewpoints

start with his claim that the English metaphysical poets used language in a way very similar to the French symbolists, and with his assertions that modern poetry must be difficult, "Our civilisation comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results." Eliot's first poetry collection—*Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) opens with two dramatic monologues that owe to Laforgue and Henry James. J. Alfred Prufrock, in his "love-song", sees himself descending the stair "with a bald spot in the middle of my hair," and the speaker of "Portrait of a Lady" also says, "My smile falls heavily among the bric-a-brac." This analogy with music is central to the symbolist view of poetry, and it appears in the titles of several of Eliot's poems such as "Preludes", "Five-finger Exercises", "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" and *Four Quartets.*

Eliot regarded Ezra Pound, yet another great modern poet, as his immediate master, and dedicated his famous poem *The Waste Land* to him with the phrase "il miglior fabbro" (the best craftsman). Pound's origin in aestheticism is even clearer than Eliot's as is his debt to Browning in his early dramatic monologues. Pound never ceased to be a literary poet, adapting freely from many languages. Both Pound and Eliot reintroduced into English poetry the Renaissance idea of "imitatio," the insertion into a poem of pieces of earlier poems on the same theme, usually adapted somewhat; Pound carried this to its greatest extreme in the *Cantos,* the huge poem to which he devoted his later years.

Along with Eliot and Pound, we cannot but refer to the name of W. B. Yeats. However, Yeats never became a modernist to the same extent as Pound and Eliot. Instead, he moved away from his early romanticism. Although, his finest poems retain a concern with traditional romantic themes: religion, art, history. "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" sums up the dichotomy that runs through all his poetry. "Sailing to Byzantium" is often recognised as a 20th century equivalent to Keats' "Grecian Urn". Both poems set forth the paradox that the timelessness of art can capture the flux of living most perfectly because of its very lifelessness. Yeats was interested in a wide range of fringe religions, esoteric science, the occult and cyclic views of



**Dissociation of Sensibility:** This phrase first appears in T. S. Eliot's essay, "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), where he suggests: "something…happened to the mind of England between the time of Donne or Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the time of Tennyson and Browning…Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility." This idea became instrumental in not only reviving the significance of the Metaphysical poetry in the 20th century but also in establishing Eliot's modernist ideas. Eliot's essay helped inspire interest in 17th century poets in the 20th century.

history. He put these ideas into his prose work *A Vision* (1925), and used them as a basis for many of his greatest poems. Thus, his poetic works are a prime case for exploring the relation between poetry and ideas. The painstaking system of historical periods, related to the phases of the moon in *A Vision* is compressed into terse and resonant statements about the chaos of the modern world in such poems as “The Second Coming” and “Lapis Lazuli,” or such memorable couplets as “Hector is dead and there’s a light in Troy / We that look on but laugh in tragic joy,” where aesthetic delight and social despair ignite each other.

English poetry in the 1930s became more political. The leftwing enthusiasms of the Popular Front and opposition to Fascism ran through the works of the poets like W. H. Auden, Cecil Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, and Louis MacNeice. The Spanish Civil War was the focal conflict of the decade, and Auden offered a Marxist version of it in his “Spain 1937.” Auden, the most complex and interesting of these poets, soon left his political phase behind, and later tried to suppress it when revising his early work. His three long poems, *New Year Letter* (1941), *For the Time Being* (1945), and *The Age of Anxiety* (1948), show his growing religious concerns and shift to a more psychological and anthropological stance. However, one of his most powerful political poems, “The Shield of Achilles,” did appear as late as 1955. Auden’s later development was seen as irresponsible by those who regarded him as the political conscience of the 1930s, but it can equally be seen as showing a constant vitality and intellectual range. A very different view of the 30s is provided by John Betjeman (1906-83), who by the time he became the Poet Laureate in 1972, was regarded with a grudging respect by the critics, responding to his obvious verbal skill and the deep feeling under the quaint humour.

The World War II produced surprisingly little poetry of any lasting importance. Eliot and Dylan Thomas did write movingly about the air raids. The neo-romanticism and revived surrealism of the 1940s did not seem to be of any interest, but with the exception of the works of Dylan Thomas. His poems, using a variety of formal verse forms, including experiments of great discipline and complexity, are at times turgid, at other times, very moving in

their verbal richness. His most popular poems are the celebratory "Poem in October" and "Fern Hill" which anticipate the even more popular *Under Milk Wood* (1953), a radio play that mingles bawdiness and a nursery-rhyme magic.

The 1950s saw the rise of a new school of poets called 'The Movement' and they valued clarity, wit, and traditional competence, while also being suspicious of bardic afflatus and grand gesture. As a movement, it was short-lived, and its main figures, Kingsley Amis, John Wain, Donald Davie, Philip Larkin, and Thom Gunn, soon took their own ways. Larkin was the most admired poet in the 1960s, his wry melancholy and resigned awareness of the drabness of life being presented with wit and a powerful lyric gift: "Church Going" and "The Witsun Weddings," treating religion and ritual from the stance of a wryly-bewildered outsider, may be considered the two most representative poems of the post war generation. However, Ted Hughes, who became Poet Laureate in 1984, offers a strong contrast to Larkin: whereas Larkin derives from Hardy, Hughes derives from Lawrence. Hughes is prolific, sometimes obscure, his poems displaying verbal energy and inventiveness. His best-known volume is *Crow* (1970), which is explicitly violent and blasphemous, and which convey a disturbing sense of cruelty.

It needs to be mentioned here that since the 1960s, a poetic school of astonishing richness and fertility arose in Northern Ireland, with political violence since 1969 providing much of the subject matter. The leading figure is Seamus Heaney, whose verbal richness moves powerfully between Irish arid personal themes, The other poets are—John Montague, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon. The works of Craig Raine and Christopher Reid have become known as "Martian" because of Raine's poem "A Martian sends a postcard home," a manifesto of Defamiliarisation, inviting the readers to see common objects with the eye of a Martian or small child. Many of their best poems are riddles.

This is also the time when for the first time in English literature, women started making their presence felt in the field of poetry. Stevie Smith wrote mischievously naive poetry that verges on doggerel, but achieved a

few unforgettable short poems: “Not waving but drowning” has become one of the most famous lyrics of the age. Elizabeth Jennings, who had been associated with the ‘Movement’ and Sylvia Plath, who committed suicide in 1963 at the age of 32, both handle mental breakdown and inner disturbance with poise and insight. She also wrote some very significant poems about motherhood and domestic life. More recent names include Elizabeth Bartlett, U. A. Fanthorpe, Anne Stevenson, Jenny Joseph, and Fleur Adcock.

It is however difficult to group the poets who rose to prominence after 1970. There can be seen a second “invasion” of American influence, esp. through the work of the “confessional” poets such as Amy Lowell, John Berryman and Sylvia Plath (who herself settled in England and married an English poet Ted Hughes), as well as through the violently modernist techniques applied to urban life—e.g. in the work of Roy Fisher. Adrian Mitchell is a popular—and populist—poet of strong political commitment.

Some other late 20th century English poets who need mentioning include–Norman MacCaig who combines a keen eye for nature with a brilliant verbal gift and philosophic probing; R. S. Thomas whose religious poems are the product of a Christianity after the death of God movement; Charles Tomlinson developing into an urbane, controlled, intelligent and at times witty poet; Peter Redgrove writing in a style that is largely surrealist; and Geoffrey Hill who has written complex, resonant poems in traditional meters and prose-poems.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 1:** Name some of the poetic schools of the early 20th century.

**Q 2:** How is the poet T. S. Eliot connected to French Symbolism? How does he view the idea of modern poetry?

**Q 3:** Mention the specific contributions of W. B. Yeats to modern poetry.

**Q 4:** What is Auden’s contribution to modern poetry?

**Q 5:** Write a note on the major concerns of the Movement poets.

## 1.4 SOME IMPORTANT TRENDS IN MODERN POETRY

In this section, we shall only look at some of the most prominent groups of the modernist poets.

### 1.4.1 The Decadents

[Adapted from *New Princeton Encyclopedia*, Pages 275-6]

The decadents refer to periods or works whose qualities mark a "falling away" from previously recognised conditions or standards of excellence. The term is often applied to the Alexandrian (or Hellenistic) period in Greek literature (300-30 B.C.) and to the period in Latin literature after the death of Augustus (14 A.D.). In modern poetry, 'The Decadents' has been identified most persistently in the works of the French symbolist of the late 19th century, whose influence in the British Isles encouraged native tendencies already nurtured by the poetry of Walter Pater, Rossetti and Swinburne, and by the general ambience of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement.

A basic characteristic of the decadents has been a failure to recognise objective or timeless values that transcend and give form and direction to individual experience and effort. In these terms, a decadent poet is seen living in a state of flux, he tends to be concerned not with "the fruit of experience" but with "experience itself and with private sensations". Besides, his poems reveal a number of "decadent" characteristics, some of which are as the following:

- Ennui or the feeling of being bored by something tedious.
- A search for novelty with attendant artificiality and interest in the unnatural, excessive self-analysis, feverish hedonism with poetic interest in corruption and morbidity.
- Abulia or a loss of will power, neurosis, and exaggerated erotic sensibility.
- Aestheticism, with stress on "Art for Art's Sake" in the evocation of exquisite sensations and emotions.

- Dandyism and scorn of contemporary society and mores.
- Restless curiosity, perversity, or eccentricity in subject matter; overemphasis on form, with resultant loss of balance between form and content—or interest in ornamentation, resulting at times in disintegration of artistic unity.
- Bookishness, erudite or exotic vocabulary.
- Frequent employment of synaesthesia or a sensation that normally occurs in one sense modality when another modality is stimulated
- Complex and difficult syntax.
- Experiments in the use of new rhythms, rich in evocative and sensuous effects alien to those of tradition and often departing from the mathematical principles of control in established prosody.
- Obscurity, arising from remote, private, or complicated imagery.
- A pervasive sense of something lost—a nostalgic semi-mysticism without clear direction or spiritual commitment, but with frequent reference to exotic religions and rituals, e.g. Tarot cards, magic, alchemy, Theosophy and the like

From the above-mentioned characteristics, there emerge certain fundamental distinctions between the symbolists and the decadents. While the Symbolist inhabits a world of seamless and cumulative duration, a world of temporal synthesis, the decadent endures the forces of heredity, that produce a fluctuation between febrility and neurasthenia, culminating in psychological exhaustion.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 6:** Mention the common tendency of decadent poetry?

**Q 7:** State some of the common characteristics of decadent poetry.

### 1.4.2 The Georgians

[Adapted from *New Princeton Encyclopedia*, Page 461]

Edward Marsh, in his preface to the Anthology *Georgian Poetry 1911-1912* (1912), the first of five anthologies he edited, suggested, "that we are the beginning of another 'Georgian period' which may take rank…with several great poetic ages of the past." Since then, the term is in vogue and the poets associated with the movement called "The Georgians" include names like Lascelles Abercrombie, Rupert Brooke, W. H. Davies, John Drinkwater, James Elroy Flecker, W. W. Gibson, Ralph Hodgson, Harold Munro, J. C. Squire, and W. J. Turner; and the others who occasionally published in *Georgian Poetry* were Robert Graves, D. H. Lawrence and James Stephens.

The Georgians were regarded as timid pastoralists, they were in fact rebelling against the poetic modes influential in Britain since the 1890s—the withdrawal from life of the Aesthetes (Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson) and the Tory Imperialism of the public poets (Rudyard Kipling, Sir Henry Newbolt). The Georgians proposed to record actual personal experience in language close to common speech anticipating a similar rejection of public rhetoric after the World War II by 'The Movement' poets in Robert Conquest's Anthology *New Lines,* 1956.

As an avant-garde movement, however, the Georgians were quickly outdistanced by the modernists Pound, Eliot and their followers, who published their first work during the same decade, 1910-20, and came to prominence in the 1920s. The other factor that made Georgian poetry look old-fashioned was the brutal experience of trench warfare in World War I, which brought into the poetry of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and, in the 1920s, Robert Graves a harsh realism absent from the Georgians' bucolic reminiscences. Their verse, traditional in technique, remained untouched by the modernists' experimentalism or flouting of

conventional decorum. Rival publications to the Georgian poets, came from the modernist camp such as Pound's *Des Imagistes* (1914) and *Wheels* (1916-21).

Although the Georgians existed for a relatively brief period, their influence continued for quite some time. For example, Robert Graves, D. H. Lawrence and other British poets developed their personal styles based on the Georgian emphasis on honesty in place of public rhetoric; on the common life as poetic subject rather than a retreat into aestheticism; and on the language of actual speech, not false poeticism. When Marsh, in his introduction to the last of his Anthologies (1922), wrote, "Much admired modern work seems to me, in its lack of inspiration and its disregard of form, like gravy imitating lava," the opponents of Grave could dismiss the movement as passé. Its virtues were being more aggressively promoted by Pound and other modernists in the context of bolder treatments of subject, structure, and diction. Therefore, through the Georgians faded away, still they helped to reform and redeem English poetry from being either too private or too public to express the truth of feeling.

**LET US KNOW**



**Free Verse (Verse Libre):**

This type of verse is distinguished from meter by the lack of a structuring grid based on counting of linguistic units and/or position of linguistic features. Some features of Free Verse include—nonmetrical structuring, heavy reliance on grammatical breaks, absence of regular end rhyme. The early 20th century saw the rise of Free Verse, which were the products of different literary-historical conditions. We could also argue that free verse reaches back to the oral roots of poetry, to the period preceding the development of regular metricity. In the first type of free verse, the form partly freed from the constraints of traditional meter, has its origins in Fr. *Vers Libere* of the 17th century, when La Fontaine and his

followers began to loosen the strictly syllabic lines of French poetry by inventing "liberated" metrical forms. Such was the precursor of those prosodic strainings against meter, which in the 19th century became a major trend.

In English, this partial liberation of and from meter existed here and there before Whitman. This type and, if included, the premetrical form described briefly above, appear as free verse only in retrospect. The second type, avant-garde free verse, has no direct roots in the metrical tradition at least in the way the verse-line is built up. Meter is what this self-conscious, self-proclaimed free verse is free of. This type was born when Walt Whitman's proudly non-metrical *Leaves of Grass* (1855) flouted accent-and-syllable counting regularity. Whitman brought back into poetry strong stress at unpredictable places, grammatical emphasis and parallelism, anaphora, and long lines. His oral-derived form is expansive, asymmetrical, mixing dialects and modes, and above all, personal.

Writers of another subtype, notably William Carlos Williams and those in his tradition, like Cid Gorman, George Oppen, and Robert Creeley, strive for more delicate dynamics, wrenching tighter Whitman's long and sometimes prolonged lines. An international list of avant-garde practitioners would include, among many others, Arthur Rimbaud, Andre Breton, Paul Eluard, Michel Deguy, Aime Cesaire, Anne-Marie Albiach, Kuo Mo Jo, Yip Wai-lim, Aleksandr Blok, Velemir Xlebnikov, Nikolai Zabolotskij, Olga Berggolts, Evgeny Evtusenko, Pablo Neruda; Lajos Kassak, Milan Fust; and Gael Turnbull and Charles Tomlinson.



## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q 8:** Name the poets commonly known as the Georgians.

**Q 9:** Why did the Georgian poetry take a declining trend?

**Q 10:** What is Free Verse? Why did Free Verse emerge?

### 1.4.3 The Imagists

[Adapted from *New Princeton Encyclopedia*, Page 574]

As a school of poetry, Imagism flourished in England and America between 1912 and 1914, and being marked by the virtues of clarity, compression, and precision. In 1912, Ezra Pound wrote of the "forgotten school of images" that formed around the Bergsonian philosopher T. E. Hulme. Hulme was the founder of a 'Poets' Club' which began meeting regularly in London in 1909, and which was influenced by Hulme's speculations on literary language. Hulme wrote in his essay "Romanticism and Classicism" that the language of poetry is a "visual concrete one…Images in verse are not mere decoration, but the very essence of an intuitive lang."

It was however Ezra Pound who founded the 'Imagist Movement'. Hilda Doolittle recalls in her memoir of Pound that Pound named imagism when he suggested revisions to her poem "Hermes of the Ways" and "scrawled 'H. D. Imagiste' at the bottom of the page" before sending it to the magazine called *Poetry* in October 1912. In November, Pound used the term "Imagiste" for the first time in print when he published the "Complete Poetical Works" of Hulme (five short poems) as an appendix to his *Ripostes.* Poems by "H. D., 'Imagiste'" were published in *Poetry* in January 1913, and in the March 1913 issue, F. S. Flint, quoting an unnamed "Imagiste" (Pound), listed these characteristics of the movement:

- Direct treatment of the "thing", whether subjective or objective.
- Use of absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation.
- As regarding rhythm, to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome.

However, the April issue of the magazine *Poetry* included the best known and perhaps the finest of the imagist poems, Pound's "In a Station of the Metro." The climax of the movement came in the Spring of 1914, when Pound published an anthology *Des Imagistes* in England and America*,* which included poems by H. D., Richard

Aldington, F. S. Flint, Amy Lowell, James Joyce, and William Carlos Williams. By this time, Lowell was assuming leadership of the movement and began publishing anthologies entitled *Some Imagist Poets* for the years 1915-17. However, Pound repudiated "Amygism," declaring that it was a dilution of the original movement, which violated the second imagist principle, and aligned himself rather with vorticism.

By 1917, Lowell herself felt that the movement had run its course; but her anthologies had kept it alive, and her first two volumes contained prefaces, which, along with the *Poetry* essays, constitute the most deliberate statements of imagist theory. Though the poems themselves often have a merely casual relation to Pound's definition of the image, they place their values in clarity, exactness, and concreteness of detail; in economy of language and brevity of treatment; and in an organic basis for selecting rhythmic patterns. H.D.'s "Storm" illustrates these values:

> You crash over the trees,
> you crack the live branch—
> the branch is white,
> the green crushed,
> each leaf is rent like split wood.

The imagists' concern with poetic form and technique and their desire for the immediacy of effect that arises from the closest possible association of word and object were in part a program for improving the craft of writing which influenced the formalist poetics of critics like Eliot, Richards, and Ransom. Recent critics have seen imagism as an attempt to create a poem as a single entity, which, unlike a symbolic or allegorical poem, intensifies its objective reality rather than expressing the subjective feelings of the poet. Stephen Spender made the essential point about the influence and importance of imagism like this: "the aims of the imagist movement in poetry provide the archetype of a modern creative procedure."



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 11:** Who are the imagist poets? Mention the characteristics of Imagist poetry.

**Q 12:** What are some of the main concerns of the Imagists?



## 1.5 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, you have learnt that modernism was an international movement, appearing in Germany as Expressionism and in England as introduced from France. The seminal figures of English literary modernism of the time are Pound and Eliot, both Americans, though Eliot became very thoroughly anglicised. Their poetry contains a great deal of social commentary and awareness of the ugliness of modern life, yet in many ways, they derive more from aestheticism than from any tradition of social realism. You have learnt that modernist poetic trends such as The Decadents, The Georgians and The Imagists help us to understand the nature of modernist poetry as well as its main concerns. With their individual poetic techniques, the poets belonging to these groups in a way shaped the history of modern poetry in the 20th century. It is hoped that the information and ideas you have gained in this unit shall help you to analyse the prescribed poets and their poems with confidence.



## 1.6 FURTHER READING

1) Albert, Edward. (1975). *History of English Literature*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

2) Daiches, David. (1984). *A Critical History of English Literature.* Vol. IV. Allied Publishers Private Ltd, Delhi.

3) Preminger, Alex. & T. V. F. Brogan. (Eds.). (1993). *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton University Press.

4) Roberts, Neil. (Ed.). (2003). *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry.* Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

5) Sanders, Andrew. (2000). *The Short Oxford History of English Literature.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.



## 1.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

**Ans to Q 1:** The rousing masculinity of Rudyard Kipling and Henry Newbolt… ….the imagists… …the decadents… …the Georgian return to the countryside… …and the poetry of the First World War.

**Ans to Q 2:** T. S. Eliot brought French symbolism to England, borrowing substantially from the concentrated, intellectual, gnomic poetry of Mallarme and Valery and the colloquial, ironic, self-conscious poetry of Corbiere and Laforgue… …he started with his claim that the English metaphysical poets used language in a way very similar to the French symbolists… …his idea of poetry was that modern poetry must be difficult, because, "Our civilisation comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results."

**Ans to Q 3:** W. B. Yeats moved away from his early romantic themes: religion, art, history… …his "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" sums up the dichotomy that runs through all his poetry… …he was interested in a wide range of fringe religions, esoteric science, the occult and cyclic views of history, which he put as ideas in his prose work *A Vision*… ...the painstaking system of historical periods, related to the phases of the moon in *A Vision* is compressed into terse and resonant statements about the chaos of the modern world in such poems as "The Second Coming" and "Lapis Lazuli".

**Ans to Q 4:** Auden left his political phase behind and later tried to suppress it when revising his early work… …his three long poems, *New Year Letter* (1941), *For the Time Being* (1945), and *The Age of Anxiety*

(1948), show his growing religious concerns and shift to psychological and anthropological stance… …"The Shield of Achilles" is one of his most powerful political poems… …Auden's later development as a poet, though marked by political conscience of the 1930s, can equally be seen as showing a constant vitality and intellectual range.

**Ans to Q 5: '**The Movement' poets valued clarity, wit, and traditional competence… …Philip Larkin, was the most admired poets for his wry melancholy and resigned awareness of the drabness of life… …his poems "Church Going" and "The Witsun Weddings," that treat religion and ritual from the stance of a wryly bewildered outsider are considered the two most representative poems of the post war generation… …Ted Hughes, whose poetry displayed verbal energy and inventiveness, was another important poet of the group.

**Ans to Q 6:** A basic tendency of the decadents has been a failure to recognise objective or timeless values that transcend and give form and direction to individual experience and effort. .. …the decadent poet is seen living in a state of flux, as he tends to be concerned not with "the fruit of experience" but with "experience itself and with private sensations".

**Ans to Q 7:** Ennui or the feeling of being bored… …loss of will power, neurosis, and exaggerated erotic sensibility… …Aestheticism, with stress on "Art for Art's Sake"… …dandyism and scorn of contemporary society and mores… …erudite or exotic vocabulary… …frequent employment of synaesthesia… …complex and difficult syntax… …experiments in the use of new rhythms… …obscurity, arising from remote, private, or complicated imagery… …a pervasive sense of something lost etc.

**Ans to Q 8:** Lascelles Abercrombie, Rupert Brooke, W. H. Davies, John Drinkwater, James Elroy Flecker, W. W. Gibson, Ralph Hodgson, Harold Munro, J. C. Squire, and W. J. Turner, Robert Graves, D. H. Lawrence and James Stephens.

**Ans to Q 9:** The Georgians were quickly outdistanced by the modernists poets like Pound, Eliot and their followers… …Georgian poetry started

looking old-fashioned due to the brutal experience of trench warfare in World War I, which brought into the poetry of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, a harsh realism absent from the Georgians' bucolic reminiscences…. …their verse, traditional in technique, remained untouched by the modernists' experimentalism or flouting of conventional decorum.

**Ans to Q 10:** It is a type of verse distinguished from meter by the lack of a structuring grid based on counting of linguistic units… …some features of Free Verse include—nonmetrical structuring, heavy reliance on grammatical breaks, absence of regular end rhyme… …it emerged in the early 20th century as a product of different literary-historical conditions… …borrowing much from French poetry, the English poets "liberated" metrical forms.

**Ans to Q 11:** Ezra Pound, T. E. Hulme, Hilda Doolittle… …direct treatment of the "thing", whether subjective or objective… …use of absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation… ...composing poetry in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome.

**Ans to Q 12:** The imagists were concern with poetic form and technique… …closest possible association of word and object… …It was as an attempt to create a poem as a single entity… …intensified the objective reality rather than expressing the subjective feelings of the poet… …Stephen Spender stated, "the aims of the imagist movement in poetry provide the archetype of a modern creative procedure."



## 1.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

**Q 1:** Provide an overview of modernist poetry on the basis of the various thematic renderings by the poets.

**Q 2:** Discuss modern poetry with reference to the different important groups and movements until 1930s.

**Q 3:** Who are known as the Georgians? Discuss the characteristics of

Georgian poetry, and then critically examine their contribution to modern English poetry.

**Q 4:** **"**T. S. Eliot is the man who brought French symbolism to England." Give a reasoned answer.

**Q 5:** What are the common features of the poetry of The Decadents? Explain with reference to some of the decadent poets that you have read.

**Q 6:** Who are known as 'The Imagists' and what type of poetry did they write? Discuss in detail.

**Q 7:** Attempt a brief outline of the intellectual contexts and its cultural manifestations in poetry before World War II.

**Q 8:** Show how 'modern' poetry reflected the dominant concerns of the modern age.

**Q 9:** Write short notes on the following:

**a.** The Imagists

**b.** Verse Libre

**c.** The Georgians

**d.** The Decadents

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# UNIT 2: SYMBOLISM AND MODERN POETRY

## UNIT STRUCTURE


2.1 Learning Objectives

2.2 Introduction

2.3 What is Symbolism or Symbolist Movement?

2.4 The French Symbolist Manifesto

2.5 Important French Symbolist Poets

2.6 Impact of Symbolism and Aestheticism on English Poetry

2.7 Let us Sum up

2.8 Further Reading

2.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

2.10 Possible Questions


## 2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- define symbolism in the context of 20th century poetry
- discuss the history French Symbolism that rendered marked influence on English poetry in the 20th century
- enlist the characteristics of Symbolist poetry in general
- identify the greatest French symbolist poets and note their remarkable works
- discuss the impact of Symbolism in English poetry.

## 2.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit shall help you to discuss the idea of Symbolism in the context of Modern English Poetry. However, we shall start our discussion on the topic first by referring to the **Symbolist Movement** which designates specifically a group of French writers beginning with Charles Baudelaire and then with later poets such as Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Valéry. You will note that Baudelaire based the symbolic mode of his poems in part on the example of the American Edgar Allan

Poe, but especially on the ancient belief in **correspondences**—a doctrine that there exist inherent and systematic analogies between the human mind and the outer world, and also between the natural and the spiritual worlds, as Baudelaire put this doctrine: "Everything, form, movement, number, color, perfume, in the *spiritual* as in the *natural* world, is significative, reciprocal, converse, *conespondent."* As you finish reading this unit, you will not only learn about the history of the Symbolist movement in brief, but will also be able to examine how this movement influenced the English poets of the 20th century.

## 2.3 WHAT IS SYMBOLISM OR SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT?

[Adapted from: https://www.britannica.com/art/ Symbolism-literary-and-artistic-movement]

**As you have read in the Introduction to this unit, Symbolism** is a loosely organised literary and artistic movement that originated with a group of French poets in the late 19th century, spreading to painting and the theatre, and also influencing the European and American literatures of the 20th century to varying degrees. The symbolist artists sought to express individual emotional experience through the subtle and suggestive use of highly symbolised language. This movement saw the flourishing of French poets like Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, Jules Laforgue, Henri de Régnier, René Ghil, and Gustave Kahn. Other French poets namely Paul Valéry and Paul Claudel are also often considered to be direct 20th century heirs of the Symbolists.

As you go through this unit, you will learn that Symbolism originated as part of the revolt of certain French poets against the rigid conventions governing both technique and theme in traditional French poetry as evidenced in the precise description of **Parnassian** poetry. They wished to liberate poetry from its expository functions and its formalised oratory in order to describe instead the fleeting, immediate sensations of man's inner life and experience. They attempted to evoke the ineffable intuitions and sense impressions of man's inner life and to communicate the underlying mystery of existence through a free and highly personal use



**Parnassian:** Refers to a group of French poets of the late 19th century who emphasised strictness of form, named from the anthology *Le Parnasse contemporain* (1866).

**Wagner:** Wilhelm Richard *Wagner* was a German composer, theatre director, polemicist, and conductor.

of metaphors and images that, though lacking in precise meaning, would nevertheless convey the state of the poet's mind and hint at the "dark and confused unity" of an inexpressible reality.

Symbolist poets such as Verlaine and Rimbaud were greatly influenced by the poetry and thought of Charles Baudelaire, particularly by the poems in his *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857). They adopted Baudelaire's concept of the '*correspondances'* between the senses and combined this with the **Wagnerian ideal** of a synthesis of the arts to produce an original conception of the musical qualities of poetry. Thus, to the Symbolists, the theme within a poem could be developed and "orchestrated" by the sensitive manipulation of the harmonies, tones, and colours inherent in carefully chosen words. Their emphasis on the essential and innate qualities of the poetic medium was based on the conviction that art was supreme over all other means of expression or knowledge. This, in turn, was partly based on their idealistic conviction that underlying the materiality and individuality of the physical world was another reality whose essence could best be glimpsed through the subjective emotional responses contributing to and generated by the work of art. Works such as Verlaine's *Romances sans paroles* (1874; *Songs Without Words*) and Mallarmé's *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (1876) sparked a growing interest in the nascent innovations of progressive French poets.

Jean Moréas in *Le Figaro,* published the Symbolist Manifesto on September 18, 1886. Here, he attacked the descriptive tendencies of Realist theatre, Naturalistic novels, and Parnassian poetry. He also proposed replacing the term *décadent*, which was used to describe Baudelaire and others, with the terms *symboliste* and *symbolisme.* Many little Symbolist reviews and magazines sprang up in the late 1880s, their authors freely participating in the controversies generated by the attacks of hostile critics on the movement. Mallarmé became the leader of the Symbolists, and his *Divagations* (1897) remains the most valuable statement of the movement's aesthetics. In their efforts to escape the rigid metrical patterns and to achieve freer poetic rhythms, many Symbolist poets resorted to the composition of prose poems and the use of *vers libre* (free verse), which become a fundamental form of contemporary poetry.

The Symbolist movement in poetry reached its peak around 1890s and began to enter a precipitous decline in popularity about 1900. The atmospheric, unfocused imagery of the symbolist poetry eventually came to be seen as over-refined and affected, and the term *décadent*, which the Symbolists had once proudly proclaimed, became with others a term of laughter denoting mere fin-de-siècle preciosity. The symbolist works had a strong and lasting influence on much British and American literature in the 20th century. Their experimental techniques greatly enriched the technical repertoire of modern poetry, and Symbolist theories bore fruit both in the poetry of W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot and in the modern novel as represented by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, in which word harmonies and patterns of images often take preeminence over the narrative.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 1:** How did Symbolism evolve?

**Q 2:** Who published the Symbolist Manifesto? State the significance of the Manifesto.

**Q 3:** How did the French Symbolist poets influence the 20th century literature?

## 2.4 THE FRENCH SYMBOLIST MANIFESTO

[Adapted from Wikipedia]

In this section, we shall quickly go through the "The Symbolist Manifesto" published on 18 September 1886 in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* by Jean Moréas. The Manifesto describes a new literary movement, an evolution from and rebellion against both romanticism and naturalism, and it asserts the name of Symbolism as not only the appropriate for that movement, but also uniquely reflective of how creative minds approach the creation of art. The manifesto was also intended to serve more practical, immediate needs. Moréas, together with Gustave Kahn and others, felt a need to distinguish themselves from a group of writers associated with Anatole Baju and *Le Décadent*. For Moréas and Kahn, the self-identified decadent writers represented both an earlier stage of development on the

path towards symbolism, and also a frivolous exploitation of the language and techniques of the movement. Definition of Symbolism became especially important with the publication of *Les Deliquescence d'Adore Floupette*, a work of intentional parody. The skill with which it was executed, made the reading public think that *Les Deliquescence* was representative of this new literature. Clarification was essential. The Manifesto unfolded as an introduction establishing the purpose of the document and then three stages: an opening argument, a dramatic interlude, and a closing argument.

The first stage of making the case for Symbolism is an aggressive and frank definition of movement, its beliefs and priorities. As a reaction against the authority of rational naturalism, the manifesto describes symbolists as enemies "of education, declamation, wrong feelings, [and] objective description." As a reaction against the newly self-styled decadents, the manifesto goes on to stipulate the primacy of "the Idea." The purpose of creativity is to find an appropriate way to subjectively express the Idea through extravagant analogy, using natural and concrete things to obliquely reference "primordial Ideas." Against charges of obscurity resulting from this approach, the manifesto simply points to many allegorical or obscurely symbolic characters from widely accepted literature. The conclusion of the opening argument is an explanation of the style itself. Moréas lays forth the sort of paradox that is typical for symbolist art when he talks about the rhythm of their writing: ancient but lively, chaotic but ordered, fluid but boldly assertive. He then gives an appropriately colorful and obscure description of their literary technique:

*...an archetypal and complex style; of unpolluted terms, periods which brace themselves alternating with periods of undulating lapses, significant pleonasms, mysterious ellipses, outstanding anacoluthia, any audacious and multiform surplus; finally the good language – instituted and updated, good and luxuriant and energetic French language...*

The second portion of the Manifesto is a brief drama in two scenes, featuring poet Théodore de Banville whose 1871 work *Petit Traité de Poésie Française* ("A Small Treatise on French Poetry") helped to liberate the French poets from traditions and rules that prevented the free exercise of their creativity. Different qualities of the French language lent themselves to

different kinds of poetic rhythm and structures. He also increased the emphasis on poetry as an exercise for the poet in developing clever rhyming games.

The Manifesto concludes by first explaining the power of art and literature to bring together streams of thought and transform them into new and grand things, implying both its grandeur and its wonder. Moréas credits writers of other traditions with their accomplishments in this regard, but then argues that symbolists are uniquely positioned to deal with the essence of life: the human being within a reality that has been distorted by his own hallucinations. Symbolists are free to work with things both mechanical and mythical, things seen ahead and recalled from behind.

The final words of the Symbolist Manifesto are that "art would not know how to search into the objective, what an extremely succinct and simple starting point." For, thus art must do its searching within the subjective. The Manifesto, besides tracing early Symbolism in the dramatic works of William Shakespeare as well as in the fictional works of Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, Émile Zola, also identifies a few poets as most immediately responsible for developing this current Symbolism: Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, and Theodore de Banville. Symbolism was seen, however as a work in-progress, constantly being refined, including by the efforts of those writers. Moréas left the door open for newcomers to shape the movement even further.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 4:** What was the purpose of the French Symbolist Manifesto?

**Q 5:** How was the first case of Symbolism made?

**Q 6:** What do you find in the closing part of the Symbolist Manifesto?

## 2.5 IMPORTANT FRENCH SYMBOLIST POETS

[Adapted from online *Encyclopedia Britannica*]

In the previous section, we have mentioned how the Symbolist Manifesto made a reference to some of the French Symbolist poets. These

poets were undeniably influential, and their poetic structures and conceits were built upon grand, illogical, intuitive associations. The "symbols" for which they are named are emblems of the actual world—as opposed to the purely emotional world that dominates their work—that accumulate supernatural significance in the absence of a clear narrative or location. In the following, we shall try to discuss those poets.

**Charles Baudelaire:**

Charles Baudelaire or Charles-Pierre Baudelaire (1821-1867) was born in Paris. Together being a poet, translator, literary and art critic, his reputation rests primarily on *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857; *The Flowers of Evil*), which was perhaps the most important and influential poetry collection published in Europe in the 19th century. Similarly, his *Petits poèmes en prose* (1868; "Little Prose Poems") was also the most successful and innovative early experiment in prose poetry of the time. Since his education at the Collège Royal in 1832, Baudelaire showed promise as a student and began to write his earliest poems, but to his masters, he seemed an example of depravity, adopting what they called "affectations unsuited to his age." He also developed a tendency to moods of intense melancholy, and he became aware that he was solitary by nature. Regular acts of indiscipline led to his being expelled from the school after a trivial incident in April 1839. After passing his BA at the Collège Saint-Louis, Baudelaire became a nominal student of law at the École de Droit while in reality leading a "free life" in the Latin Quarter. There he made his first contacts in the literary world. However, his continuing extravagance made him exhaust half of his fortune leaving him debt-ridden. The agonising moods of isolation and despair that Baudelaire had known in adolescence, and which he called his moods of "spleen," returned and became more frequent.

In around 1842, Baudelaire decided to become a poet. Until 1846, he probably composed the bulk of the poems that make up the first edition (1857) of *Les Fleurs du mal*. He refrained from publishing them as separate texts, which suggests that from the beginning, he had in mind a coherent collection governed by a tight thematic architecture rather than a simple sequence of self-contained poems. In October 1845, he announced

the imminent appearance of a collection entitled “Les Lesbiennes” (“The Lesbians”), followed, at intervals after 1848, by “Les Limbes” (“Limbo”). He stated the goal which was to “represent the agitations and melancholies of modern youth.” However, none of the collections ever appeared in book form. Nevertheless, Baudelaire first established himself in the Parisian cultural milieu not as a poet but as an art critic with his reviews of the Salons of 1845 and 1846. Inspired by the example of the Romantic painter Eugène Delacroix, he elaborated in his *Salons* a wide-ranging theory of modern painting, with painters being urged to celebrate and express the “heroism of modern life.”

In 1847, Baudelaire discovered the works of Edgar Allan Poe. Overwhelmed by what he saw as the almost preternatural similarities between the American writer’s thought and temperament and his own, he embarked upon the task of translation that was to provide him with his most regular occupation and income for the rest of his life. His translation of Poe’s *Mesmeric Revelation* appeared in 1848, and thereafter translations appeared regularly in reviews before being collected in book form in *Histoires extraordinaires* (1856; “Extraordinary Tales”) and *Nouvelles Histoires extraordinaires* (1857; “New Extraordinary Tales”), each preceded by an important critical introduction by Baudelaire. These were followed by *Les Aventures d’Arthur Gordon Pym* (1857), *Eurêka* (1864), and *Histoires grotesques et sérieuses* (1865; “Grotesque and Serious Tales”). As translations, these works are classics of French prose, and Poe’s example gave Baudelaire greater confidence in his own aesthetic theories and ideals of poetry.

Baudelaire’s growing reputation as Poe’s translator and as an art critic at last enabled him to publish some of his poems. In June 1855, the *Revue des deux mondes* published a sequence of 18 of his poems under the general title of *Les Fleurs du mal*. The poems, which Baudelaire had chosen for their original style and startling themes, brought him notoriety. When the first edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* was published in June 1857, 13 of its 100 poems were immediately arraigned for offences to religion or public morality. Gradually, other poems were also removed on the grounds

of obscenity. Owing largely to these circumstances, *Les Fleurs du mal* became a byword for depravity, morbidity, and obscenity, and the legend of Baudelaire as the doomed dissident and pornographic poet was born.

At the time of Baudelaire's death, many of his writings were unpublished and those that had been published were out of print. The future leaders of the Symbolist movement who attended his funeral were already started describing themselves as his followers, and by the 20th century, he was widely recognised as one of the greatest French poets of the 19th century.



**LET US KNOW**

Baudelaire's poetic masterpiece *Les Fleurs du mal* consists of 126 poems arranged in six sections of varying length. Baudelaire always insisted that the collection was not a "simple album" but had "a beginning and an end," each poem revealing its full meaning only when read in relation to the others within the "singular framework" in which it is placed. A prefatory poem makes it clear that Baudelaire's concern is with the general human predicament of which his own is representative. The collection may be read in the light of the concluding poem, "Le Voyage," as a journey through self and society in search of some impossible satisfaction that forever eludes the traveller.

As both poet and critic, Baudelaire stands in relation to French and European poetry as a crucial link between Romanticism and Modernism and as a supreme example, in both his life and his work, of what it means to be a modern artist. His catalytic influence was recognised in the 19th century by Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Stephane Mallarme and in the 20th century by Paul Valéry, Rainer Maria Rilke, and T.S. Eliot. In his pursuit of an "evocative magic" of images and sounds, his blending of intellect and feeling, irony and lyricism, and his deliberate eschewal of rhetorical utterance, Baudelaire moved decisively away from the Romantic poetry of statement and emotion to the modern poetry of symbol and suggestion.

His disciple Jules Laforgue stated that he had been the first poet to write of Paris as one condemned to live day to day in the city, and his greatest originality being, as Verlaine wrote in 1865, to "represent powerfully and essentially modern man" in all his physical, psychological, and moral complexity. He is a pivotal figure in European literature and thought, and his influence on modern poetry is a matter of serious discussion.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 7:** What is Charles Baudelaire so famous for?

**Q 8:** Which aspects of Poe's work greatly influence Charles Baudelaire?

**Q 9:** What is Baudelaire's significance as a poet critic?

**Stéphane Mallarmé:**

Stéphane Mallarmé (1842—1898) was an originator and a leader of the Symbolist movement in poetry. In his childhood, Mallarmé enjoyed the sheltered security of family life for only five brief years, until the early death of his mother in August 1847. This traumatic experience was once again echoed 10 years later by the death of his younger sister Maria, in August 1857, and his father in 1863. These tragic events often explain much of the longing Mallarmé expressed, from the very beginning of his poetic career, to turn away from the harsh world of reality in search of another world. You will note that this remained the enduring theme of his poetry which may be explained by the comparative harshness with which his adult life continued to treat him.

Despite these trials and tribulations, Mallarmé made steady progress with his career as a poet. His early poems, published in different magazines in 1862, were influenced by Charles Baudelaire, whose *Les Fleurs du mal* ("The Flowers of Evil") was largely concerned with the theme of escape from reality. This was also a theme with which Mallarmé was already becoming obsessed. But, Baudelaire's escapism had been of an essentially emotional and sensual kind—a vague dream of tropical islands and peaceful landscapes where all would be "*luxe, calme et volupté*" ("luxury, calm, and

voluptuousness"). Mallarmé was of a much more intellectual bent, and his determination to analyse the nature of the ideal world and its relationship with reality is reflected in the two dramatic poems he began to write in 1864 and 1865, respectively, *Hérodiade* ("Herodias") and *L'Après-midi d'un faune* ("The Afternoon of a Faun").

By 1868, Mallarmé had come to the conclusion that, although nothing lies beyond reality, within this nothingness, lie the essences of perfect forms. The poet's task is to perceive and crystallise these essences. In so doing, the poet becomes more than a mere descriptive versifier, transposing into poetic form an already existent reality. He becomes a veritable God, creating something from nothing, conjuring up for the reader, as Mallarmé himself put it, "*l'absente de tous bouquets*"—the ideal flower that is absent from all real bouquets. But to crystallise essences in this way, to create the notion of floweriness, rather than to describe an actual flower, demands an extremely subtle and complex use of all the resources of language, and Mallarmé devoted himself during the rest of his life to putting his theories into practice in what he called his *Grand Oeuvre* ("Great Work"), or *Le Livre* ("The Book"). He never came near to completing this work, however, and the few preparatory notes that survived give little or no idea of what the end result of him might have been.

However, Mallarmé did complete a number of poems related to his projected *Grand Oeuvre,* both in their themes and in their extremely evocative use of language. Among these are several elegies—the principal ones being dedicated to Charles Baudelaire, Edgar Allan Poe, Richard Wagner, Théophile Gautier, and Paul Verlaine, and Mallarmé was commissioned to write these elegies at various times in his career. He no doubt agreed to do them because the traditional theme of the elegy—the man is dead but he lives on in his work—is clearly linked to the poet's own belief that, although beyond reality there is nothing, poetry has the power to transcend this annihilation. In a second group of poems, Mallarmé wrote about poetry itself, reflecting evocatively on his aims and achievements. In addition to these two categories of poems, he also wrote some poems that run counter to his obsession with the ideal world, though they, too, display that magical use of language.



**LET US KNOW**

Stéphane Mallarmé, the high priest of the French movement, theorised that symbols were of two types. One was created by the projection of inner feelings onto the world outside. The other existed as nascent words that slowly permeated the consciousness and expressed a state of mind initially unknown to their originator. Though Mallarmé's work was initially met with hostility for its difficulty and obscurity, his experimental work and his intricate theories eventually made him a favourite for 20th century writers and readers. Thanks to his disavowal of tradition, his unconventional syntax, his indirect expression, and his resistance to criticism, adventurous writers continue to extend his methods into contemporary poetics.

**Paul Verlaine:**

Paul Verlaine (1844—1896) was French lyric poet first associated with the Parnassians and later known as a leader of the Symbolists. With Mallarmé and Baudelaire, he formed the so-called Decadents. Since his teenage, he started writing verse and used to meet the leading poets of the Parnassian group and other talented contemporaries such as Mallarmé, Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, and Anatole France. His poems began to appear in their literary reviews; the first, "Monsieur Prudhomme," in 1863. Three years later the first series of *Le Parnasse contemporain,* a collection of pieces by contemporary poets (hence the term Parnassian), contained eight contributions by Verlaine. Verlaine received the most recognition for his work during his lifetime and, despite his erratic and sometimes criminal behaviour, he was elected the "Prince of Poets" by the review *La Plume* shortly before his death. Though he strove to make his poetry known for its intensity and extremity, his form was almost classical in its control and musicality.

In 1863, his first volume of poetry *Poèmes saturniens* appeared. In 1882, his famous "Art poétique" was enthusiastically adopted by the young

Symbolists. He later disavowed the Symbolists, chiefly because they went further than he in abandoning traditional forms: rhyme, for example, seemed to him an unavoidable necessity in French verse. Prose works such as *Les Poètes maudits,* short biographical studies of six poets, including that of Mallarmé and Rimbaud *is* one of his important works.

One of the best lyrical of French poets, Verlaine was an initiator of modern word-music and marked a transition between the Romantic poets and the Symbolists. His best poetry broke with the sonorous rhetoric of most of his predecessors and showed that the French language could communicate new shades of human feeling by suggestion and tremulous vagueness that capture the reader by disarming his intellect; words could be used merely for their sound to make a subtler music, an incantatory spell more potent than their everyday meaning. Explicit intellectual or philosophical content is absent from his best works. His discovery of the intimate musicality of the French language was doubtless instinctive, but, during his most creative years, he was a conscious artist constantly seeking to develop his unique gift and "reform" his nation's poetic expression.

**Arthur Rimbaud:**

Arthur Rimbaud or Jean Nicolas Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), yet another French poet and adventurer was a renowned Symbolist poet and he markedly influenced modern poetry. Rimbaud wanted to serve as a prophet, a visionary, or, as he put it, a *voyant* ("seer"). He had come to believe in a universal life force that informs or underlies all matter. This spiritual force, which Rimbaud referred to simply as "l'inconnu" ("the unknown"), can be sensed only by a chosen few. Rimbaud set himself the task of striving to "see" this spiritual unknown and allowing his individual consciousness to be taken over and used by it as a mere instrument. He should then transmit this music of the universe to his fellow men, awakening them spiritually and leading them forward to social progress. Rimbaud had not given up his social ideals, but intended to realise them through poetry. First, though, he had to qualify himself for the task, and he coined a famous phrase to describe his method: "le dérèglement de tous

les sens" ("the derangement of all the senses").

Rimbaud intended to systematically undermine the normal functioning of his senses so that he could attain visions of the "unknown." In a voluntary martyrdom, he would subject himself to fasting and pain, imbibe alcohol and drugs, and even cultivate hallucination and madness in order to expand his consciousness. In his attempts to communicate his visions to the reader, Rimbaud became one of the first modern poets to shatter the constraints of traditional metric forms and those rules of versification that he had already mastered so brilliantly. He decided to let his visions determine the form of his poems, and if the visions were formless, then the poems would be too. He began allowing images and their associations to determine the structure of his new poems, such as the mysterious sonnet "Voyelles" ("Vowels").

At the end of August 1871, on the advice of a literary friend in Charleville, Rimbaud sent some samples of his poetry to the poet Paul Verlaine who was impressed by their brilliance, and summoned Rimbaud to Paris. In a burst of self-confidence, Rimbaud composed "Le Bateau ivre" ("The Drunken Boat"). This is perhaps his finest poem, and one that clearly demonstrates what his method could achieve. Soon, he emerged as a marvellous poet. But, embarking upon a life of drink and debauchery, he became involved in a homosexual relationship with Verlaine that gave rise to scandal. The two men were soon being seen in public as lovers, and Rimbaud was blamed for breaking up Verlaine's marriage.

Rimbaud would later suggest that he was near death at this time, and the group of delicate, tenuous poems he then wrote—now known as *Derniers Vers* ("Last Verses")—express his yearning for purification through all this suffering. Still trying to match form to vision, he expresses his longing for spiritual regeneration in verse forms that are almost abstract patterns of musical and symbolic allusiveness. These poems clearly show the influence of Verlaine. About this time Rimbaud also composed the work that Verlaine called his masterpiece, "La Chasse spirituelle" ("The Spiritual Hunt"), the manuscript of which disappeared when the two poets went to England. Rimbaud now virtually abandoned verse composition; and

henceforth most of his literary production would consist of prose poems.

During 1872, Rimbaud composed a series of 40 prose poems to which he gave the title *Illuminations.* These are his most ambitious attempt to develop new poetic forms from the content of his visions. The *Illuminations* consist of a series of theatrical tableaux in which Rimbaud creates a primitive fantasy world, an imaginary universe complete with its own mythology, its own quasi-divine beings, its own cities, all depicted in kaleidoscopic images that have the vividness of hallucinations. Within this framework the drama of the different stages of Rimbaud's own life is played out. He sees himself formulating his dreams; his discovery of hashish as a method of inducing visions is hailed; his ensuing nightmare anguish is relived in swirling images and convoluted syntax; and his love affair with Verlaine is recalled in cryptic images and symbols.

The rest of Rimbaud's life, from the literary point of view, was silence. He spent mush of his time roaming around different parts of the world. During this period of expatriation, Rimbaud had become famous as a poet in France. Verlaine had written about him in *Les Poètes maudits* (1884) and had published a selection of his poems. These had been enthusiastically received, and in 1886, unable to discover where Rimbaud was or to get an answer from him, Verlaine published the prose poems, under the title *Illuminations,* and further verse poems, in the Symbolist periodical *La Vogue,* as the work of "the late Arthur Rimbaud."



**LET US KNOW**

Rimbaud is a rare poetic figure in that he stopped writing at the age of 21. His work, however, remains a passionate, visionary body that is continually and widely read. Though they received little public recognition until after his death, *Une saison en enfer* (*A Season in Hell*) and *Illuminations* became models for poets striving to make visible the tormented soul.

**Paul Valéry**:

Paul Valéry (1871-1945) the French poet, essayist and critic is also considered one of the most important symbolist thinkers, though he might

be more accurately described as a pivotal figure of many poetic schools. His work built upon the work of the writers mentioned above and eventually became a foundation for 20th-century modernists and structuralists.

Though he made much of his preoccupation with intellectual problems and incurred the particular displeasure of the Surrealists for his scathing attacks on poetic inspiration, there is ample evidence in Valéry's work that he remained all his life keenly responsive to the pleasures of the senses: the voluptuousness of his female nude studies ("Luxurieuse au bain," "La Dormeuse," and the picture of Eve in "Ébauche d'un serpent"), the warmth with which he writes of the lovers' embrace ("Le Cimetière marin," "Fragments du Narcisse," "La Fausse Morte") or of the sun, sky, and sea, which he had loved since his Mediterranean childhood—all show that he must not be too closely identified with his arid Monsieur Teste.

The distinctive feature of his prose and poetry, even when he is dealing with the most abstract of subjects, is sensuousness; his prose is aphoristic and graceful, his poetry rich in natural images and allusions, always classical in form, and, at its best, as sinewy, subtly rhythmical, and melodious as the very best verse of the great dramatist Jean Racine or the Symbolist poet Paul Verlaine.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 10:** How did Charles Baudelaire influence Mallarme?

**Q 11:** What, according to Mallarme, was the task of the poet?

**Q 12:** What is Verlaine's contribution to French Poetry?

**Q 13:** How did Rimbaud preach his poetic purpose?

**Q 14:** Comment on the importance of Rimbaud's *Illuminations.*

## 2.6 IMPACT OF SYMBOLISM AND AESTHETICISM ON ENGLISH POETRY

[Adapted from *New Princeton Encyclopedia,* Page 10]

You must have by now understood that the French Symbolists exploited an order of private symbols in poetry of rich suggestiveness rather

than explicit signification. They succeeded in rendering an immense influence throughout Europe in the 1890s, and later in England and America on poets such as Arthur Symons and Ernest Dowson as well as on English poets such as W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Dylan Thomas, Hart Crane, E. E. Cummings, and Wallace Stevens. Major symbolist poets in Germany are Stefan George and Rainer Maria Rilke.

In the decades following World War I, you will find a notable era of symbolism in literature, especially in the field of English poetry and fiction. Instances of a persistently symbolic procedure occur in English lyrics such as Yeats' "Byzantium" poems, Dylan Thomas' series of sonnets and longer poems, Hart Crane's *The Bridge,* T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land,* Wallace Stevens' "The Comedian as the Letter C", and in novels such as James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake,* William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and so on. As you finish reading this unit, you will learn that many of the major writers of the period exploit symbols, which are in part drawn from religious and esoteric traditions and in part invented.

However, while discussing Symbolism, we cannot but refer to the idea of Astheticism. It signifies that the work of art is self-sufficient and autonomous. Therefore, in judging the work of art, the critic should reject moral, social, political, religious, and other non-aesthetic standards as irrelevant. The origin of this view of art can be traced to the writers and philosophers of the German romantic movement such as Kant, Schelling, Goethe, and Schiller. Kant stressed the "pure" and disinterested existence of the work of art; Schelling, its fusion of the universal with the particular; Goethe, its life as an independent organism; and Schiller, the all-importance of its form. In England, such ideas were diffused by Coleridge and Carlyle; in America by Emerson and Poe; in France, by Mallarme.

The first robustly self-conscious expression of Aestheticism in modern literature is that of Theophile Gautier, who humorously but emphatically denied in the Preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) that art could in any way be useful. From Gautier and Poe, with his belief that poetry is "the rhythmical creation of Beauty", Baudelaire derived his aesthetic view of experience and advocated, in writing his criticism and poetry, the sovereignty of the creative imagination and the aspiration to apprehend an

ultimate reality through the perceptions of the senses. You have already learnt that the French symbolist movement with Mallarme and Verlaine as its leaders, assimilated Baudelaire's concept of perception as constituting "a forest of symbols" to which the poet must give order, as well as his theory of the "correspondences" between sense impressions and "spiritual reality" and between one sense and another. The symbolists tried to communicate concentrated feeling by the use of evocative symbols rather than by rational statement, and they also tried to refine and purify language to obtain intimations of the ineffable and the transcendent. Following Poe, they held that poetry was to approximate the disembodied emotion to be found in music and that an Ideal Beauty was to be sought beyond the visible world, though paradoxically to be evoked in terms of the visible world—or of symbols. The symbolists were also conscientious craftsmen interested in the complex and subtle relationships among the poem's words and images.

Aestheticism in England was the product of native and French influence both. In the 1850s, 60s and 70s, the Pre-Raphaelites appropriated Keats' predominantly aestheticist values, Tennyson's sensuousness and Ruskin's enthusiastic worship of beauty to foster a decorative conception of art and literature instead of an ethically oriented one. However, Baudelaire's grotesquerie and satanism and Verlaine's insistence that verse strive for the condition of music influenced the English poets of the 1890s more than did Mallarme's emphasis upon uncompromising artistry and the work of art conceived as the only indestructible reality. You should note that Symons in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) introduced the two British and American pioneers of modern poetry, Eliot and Pound, to the work of the French symbolists. They incorporated into the Anglo-American tradition, what was most vital in the Aestheticism of French poetry, the concepts of the objective and impersonal existence of the poem and of the artist as rigorous creator. In England, the followers of Eliot such as Auden, Day Lewis, Spender, and Mac-Neice absorbed the all-important concept of the autonomy of art, despite their earlier sociological and political orientations.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 15:** Name the English poets who got inspired by the French Symbolists.

**Q 16:** How would you explain the idea of Aestheticism?



## 2.7 LET US SUM UP

From your reading of this unit, you have learnt that Symbolism in literature was a complex movement that deliberately extended the evocative power of words to express the feelings, sensations and states of mind that lie beyond everyday awareness. The impact of the Symbolist Manifesto was tremendous. The writers who were part of this movement were recognised as symbolists. As a bold, clear statement of symbolism, Jean Moréas' *Le Symbolisme* is often taken as the model document for all symbolism. His close allies also wrote their own responses to the Manifesto, differing on points of evidence. Gustave Kahn, for example, preferred to situate symbolism in the realm of Impressionism rather than as an evolution of Naturalism. The open-ended symbols created by Charles Baudelaire brought the invisible into being through the visible, and linked the invisible through other sensory perceptions, notably smell and sound. Similarly, along with Symbolism, aspects of Aestheticism signifying works of art as self sufficient and autonomous, greatly influenced the poetry of modern English poets such as T. E. Hulme, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot.



## 2.8 FURTHER READING

1) Symons, Arthur. (1899). *The Symbolist Movement in Literature: A Collection of Short Essays on French Symbolist Writers and Poets.*

2) Bradbury, Malcolm & James McFarlane. (Eds.). (1978). *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*. Penguin.

3) Wilson, Edmund. (1936). *Axel's Castle:* A Study in Imaginative Literature Of 1870-1930.

4) Bowra. C. M. (1943). *The Heritage of Symbolism.*

5) Preminger, Alex. & T. V. F. Brogan. (Eds.). (1993). *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton University Press.

**Websites and Electronic Resources:**

https://www.britannica.com/art/Symbolism-literary-and-artistic-movement

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symbolist_Manifesto

https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/brief-guide-symbolists

https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Baudelaire

https://www.britannica.com/biography/Stephane-Mallarme

https://www.britannica.com/biography/Verlaine-Paul

https://www.britannica.com/biography/Arthur-Rimbaud

https://www.britannica.com/biography/Paul-Valery



## 2.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

**Ans to Q 1:** Symbolism originated as part of the revolt of certain French poets against the rigid conventions poetic technique and theme in traditional French poetry… …the symbolists wished to liberate poetry from its expository functions and its formalised oratory… …to describe the fleeting, immediate sensations of man's inner life and experience… …they tried to evoke ineffable intuitions and sense impressions of man's inner life… …used highly personal metaphors and images that lacked precise meaning.

**Ans to Q 2:** Jean Moréas in *Le Figaro* published the Symbolist Manifesto… …The Manifesto attacked the descriptive tendencies of Realist theatre, Naturalistic novels, and Parnassian poetry… … Moréas proposed replacing the term *décadent*, which was used to describe a poet like Baudelaire, with the terms *symboliste* and *symbolisme… …in* their efforts to escape the rigid metrical patterns and to achieve freer poetic rhythms, the Symbolist poets resorted to the use of *vers libre* (free

verse), which become a fundamental form of early modern poetry.

**Ans to Q 3:** The symbolists had a strong influence on much British and American literature in the 20th century… …their experimental techniques greatly enriched the technical repertoire of modern poetry as practiced by poets like W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot… …modern novels of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf in which word harmonies and patterns of images often take preeminence over the narrative.

**Ans to Q 4:** The purpose was to launch a new literary movement called Symbolism against romanticism and naturalism… …it is reflective of how creative minds approach the creation of art… … Moréas, Gustave Kahn and others distinguished themselves from a group of writers associated with Anatole Baju and *Le Décadent*. … … for them the self-identified decadent writers represented both an earlier stage of development on the path towards symbolism, and also a frivolous exploitation of the language and techniques of the movement.

**Ans to Q 5:** The first case for Symbolism was to present an aggressive and frank definition of movement, its beliefs and priorities… …as a reaction against the authority of rational naturalism, the Manifesto described symbolists as enemies "of education, declamation, wrong feelings, [and] objective description."… …as a reaction against the newly self-styled decadents, the Manifesto sought to stipulate the primacy of "the Idea."

**Ans to Q 6:** The Manifesto concludes by first explaining the power of art and literature to bring together streams of thought and transform them into new and grand things, implying both its grandeur and its wonder… …that the symbolists are free to work with things both mechanical and mythical, things seen ahead and recalled from behind.

**Ans to Q 7:** Charles Baudelaire' reputation rests primarily on *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857; *The Flowers of Evil*), which was perhaps the most important and influential poetry collection published in Europe in the 19th century… …his *Petits poèmes en prose* was also the most successful and innovative early experiment in prose poetry of the time.

**Ans to Q 8:** Poe's thought and temperament as a writer… …subsequently,

Baudelaire embarked upon the task of translation that was to provide him with his most regular occupation and income for the rest of his life… …he translated Poe's *Mesmeric Revelation, Extraordinary Tales* and *New Extraordinary Tales* into French which are now considered classics of French prose… …Poe's examples gave Baudelaire greater confidence in his own aesthetic theories and ideals of poetry.

**Ans to Q 9:** As both poet and critic, Baudelaire stands in relation to French and European poetry as a crucial link between Romanticism and Modernism… ...his poetic ideas and forms influenced other poets like Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Stephane Mallarme, Paul Valéry, Rainer Maria Rilke, and T. S. Eliot… ...with "evocative magic" of images and sounds, blending of intellect and feeling, irony and lyricism, Baudelaire moved decisively away from the Romantic poetry of statement and emotion to the modern poetry of symbol and suggestion.

**Ans to Q 10:** Mallarmé was influenced by Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* ("The Flowers of Evil") which was largely concerned with the theme of escape from reality… … Mallarmé was already becoming obsessed with that idea but he was of a much more intellectual bent, and his determination to analyse the nature of the ideal world and its relationship with reality is reflected in the two dramatic poems *Hérodiade* ("Herodias") and *L'Après-midi d'un faune* ("The Afternoon of a Faun").

**Ans to Q 11:** The poet's task is to perceive and crystallise these essences… …the poet becomes more than a mere descriptive versifier, transposing into poetic form an already existent reality… …he becomes a veritable God, creating something from nothing, conjuring up for the reader, the ideal flower that is absent from all real bouquets… …to crystallise essences in this way, to create the notion of floweriness, rather than to describe an actual flower, demands an extremely subtle and complex use of all the resources of language, and Mallarmé devoted himself to putting his theories into practice.

**Ans to Q 12:** Verlaine was an initiator of modern word-music and marked a

transition between the Romantic poets and the Symbolists… …he showed how the French language could communicate new shades of human feeling by suggestion and tremulous vagueness… …he tried to capture the reader by disarming his intellect.

**Ans to Q 13:** Rimbaud wanted to serve as a prophet, a visionary, or, as he put it, *voyant* ("seer")… …he believed in a universal life force that informs or underlies all matter… …this force, which was referred to simply as "the unknown", can be sensed only by a chosen few… ..Rimbaud set himself the task of striving to "see" this spiritual unknown and allowing his individual consciousness to be taken over and used by it as a mere instrument.

**Ans to Q 14:** The *Illuminations* consist of a series of theatrical tableaux in which Rimbaud creates a primitive fantasy world, an imaginary universe complete with its own mythology, its own quasi-divine beings, its own cities, all depicted in kaleidoscopic images that have the vividness of hallucinations. Within this framework the drama of the different stages of Rimbaud's own life is played out.

**Ans to Q 15:** In the decades following World War I, French Symbolist influenced the English poets—in Yeats' "Byzantium" poems, in Dylan Thomas' series of sonnets and longer poems, in Hart Crane's *The Bridge,* in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*… …in novels such as James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake,* William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and so on.

**Ans to Q 16:** Astheticism signifies that the work of art is self-sufficient and autonomous… …in judging the work of art, the critic should reject moral, social, political, religious, and other non-aesthetic standards as irrelevant… …Kant stressed the "pure" and disinterested existence of the work of art; Schelling, its fusion of the universal with the particular; Goethe, its life as an independent organism; and Schiller, the all-importance of its form… …such ideas were diffused by Coleridge and Carlyle in England; by Emerson and Poe in America, by Mallarme in France.



## 2.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

**Q 1:** How would you explain the term Symbolism? Write a note on the Symbolist movement with particular reference to the French Symbolist poets.

**Q 2:** How did the French Symbolist Manifesto formally launch the symbolist movement in poetry? Discuss.

**Q 3:** Write in detail about the impact of Symbolism on 20th century English Poetry.

**Q 4:** The Symbolist movement deliberately extended the evocative power of words to express the feelings, sensations and states of mind that lie beyond everyday awareness. Discuss.

**Q 5:** Write short notes on the following:

a. The Symbolist Manifesto

b. Charles Baudelaire

c. Stéphane Mallarmé

**Q 6:** Elaborate on how the different French Symbolist poets conceived the idea of a Symbol?

**Q 7:** How did Arthur Rimbaud proclaim the idea of “The Unknown” and how did it contribute to French Structuralist poetry?

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# UNIT 3: WAR POETRY

## UNIT STRUCTURE


3.1 Learning Objectives

3.2 Introduction

3.3 Poetry and War

3.4 Let us Sum up

3.5 Further Reading

3.6 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

3.7 Possible Questions


## 3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- explain the significance of War poetry in the context of modern poetry
- identify the different war poets and assess the role they played
- discuss how poetry became one of the best ways to tell war experiences
- appreciate the war poets and their poetic works based on different contexts.

## 3.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the third unit of the Block. In this unit, we shall try to discuss some of the important aspects as well as contexts of 20th century war poetry. If we consider the poetry of World War I, we find that a substantial number of important British poets were soldiers, writing about the experience of War. However, by World War II, the role of 'War Poet' was so well established in the mind of the general public that they anticipated that the out break of War in 1939 would produce a literary response equal to that of World WarI The truths told by war poets continue to disconcert, not least because they encompass what Wilfred Owen called the 'exultation' of war as well as the futility, the imaginative opportunities as well as the senseless horrors. The war poets cannot wholly regret even the most appalling experiences, as

they transform violence, death, atrocity, into the pleasing formal aesthetics of art. W. H. Auden once rightly stated, “Poetry, we never cease to be told, makes nothing happen”; but war makes poetry happen. As you finish reading this unit, you will be able to acknowledge both the contexts of War Poetry and the contributions of the war poets into English poetry of the 20th century.

## 3.3 POETRY AND WAR

In this section, we shall try to read about some of the English poets whose contribution to English poetry during the time of World Wars is remarkable. Their poetry also helps us to understand how these poets reacted to the War and politics of the time.You have already read in Block 4, Course 1 of Semester I that World War I brought to public notice many poets, particularly among the young men in the armed forces, while it provided a new source of inspiration for writers of established reputation. Many of the war poets were either killed or died in the struggle. A representative selection of the work of poets of this War is to be found in *Anthology of War Poetry,* edited by Robert Nichols (1943). Broadly, two phases in War Poetry may be distinguished—the patriotic fervour and rejoicing in the opportunity of self-sacrifice in the cause of human freedom, and a revival of the romantic conception of the knight-at-arms. Poets like Rupert Brooke (1887-915), Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), and Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) are some of the most renowned of the war poets. Brooke is usually considered typical of the early group of war poets and wrote with a youthful, healthy joy in life. While Siegfried Sassoon based nearly all his important works on his experiences in the War. A lover of the countryside, of rural sports, of music and painting, Sassoon represented a class, which was fast disappearing, and his work provides an admirable picture of a life of cultured leisure. Wilfred Owen was the greatest of the war poets. With a frankness, Owen set out to present the whole reality of war—the boredom, the hopelessness, the futility, the horror, occasionally the courage and self-sacrifice, but, above all, the pity of it. He himself wrote, “I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity.”However, the following are some excerpts from Matthew Campbell’s

Essay "Poetry and War" which shall not only refer to the war poets mentioned above, but shall also provide a well-contained discussion on the relation between poetry and war.

In order to discuss war poetry, we shall adapt Matthew Campbell's Essay "Poetry and War" in Neil Roberts edited *A Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry.* You will be required to understand the different important connotations of war poetry from your reading of the essay.

Before he published his translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* in 1952, Cecil Day Lewis sawout the 1930s with a version of the *Georgics*. It was published in 1940, in the earlydays of the Second World War, a poem of retreat written in a besieged Britain. In the'Dedicatory Stanzas' (to Stephen Spender) which preface his version, Day Lewis confronts Shelley's declaration of the part that the poet plays in history and asks the question of one of his own most famous lyrics, 'where are the war poets?'

It gives us the hump
To think that we're the unacknowledged rump
Of a long parliament of legislators.
Where are the war poets? The fools inquire.
We were the prophets of a changeable morning
Who hoped for much but saw the clouds forewarning:
We were at war, while they still played with fire
And rigged the market for the ruin of man:
Spain was a death to us, Munich a mourning.
No wonder then if, like the pelican,
We have turned inward for our iron ration,
Tapping the vein and sole reserve of passion,
Drawing from poetry's capital what we can.

Day Lewis, like many Irish and English writers of the 1930s, ended that decade with little hope for the legislative influence of the Shelleyan poet and turned deliberately 'inward'. The global market is now pursuing takeover and merger by violent means,so, 'Drawing from poetry's capital what we can', poets must tune the martial resonance of political poetry

down to aesthetic questions of adequacy and appropriateness in the midst of a historical trauma which is 'No subject for immortal verse'. Failing in this, poets can find themselves taking sides and then defending 'the bad against the worse' ('Where are the War Poets?' 1940).

A poet such as Day Lewis feels that he can no longer allow himself to sing, in Dryden's version of Virgil, of 'arms and the man': in 1952, his version of the *Aeneid* opens as flatly as he can manage: 'I tell about war and the hero…' For many, most notably Theodor Adorno, the horrors of the 20th century leave little room forlyric, let alone the martial concerns of epic. Yet throughout the century, poets continually worried over poetry's response– in terms of genre as much as subject matter–to the horrors of 20th-century history. The poetry from Britain and Ireland which was written about the wars in which those countries engaged–imperial andcivil wars as well as the world wars – is a poetry which no longer feels that it can singin celebration of arms and the man, but rather must turn to Wilfred Owen's theme,the 'pity of war' or its absurdity.

There was much heroic verse written during the century as there was verse, which invoked the mythic: David Jones's *In Parenthesis* (1937) writes his experience of the Great War through classical and Arthurian legend. There was also verse written inpraise of revolutionary struggles for freedom, in Spain, Ireland, Russia, Latin Americaor Africa. But, for all the 20th-century soldier-poets, there were many who,though they viewed war from a distance, felt its effects no less. Even a poet who wrote for Empire, Rudyard Kipling, found that the unfolding of the century would turnthe martial camaraderie and the heroism of the White Man's Burden to the elegiac note, which the loss of his son in the First World War taught him. In his excellent anthology, *The Oxford Book of War Poetry*, Jon Stallworthy includes thirty-four of Kipling's epitaphs of the Great War. They are written from the 'Home Front', but memorialise with sympathy and horror experiences of war, which cast any previous urge for epic into the delicate and powerless responses of epitaph:

**A SON**

My son was killed while laughing at some jest. I would I knew

What it was, and it might serve me in a time when jests are few.

**THE COWARD**

I could not look on Death, which being known,

Men led me to him, blindfold and alone.

**SHOCK**

My name, my speech, my self I had forgot.

My wife and children came – I knew them not.

I died. My mother followed. At her call

And on her bosom I remembered all.

Bereavement, the unheroic, psychic distress, the forgetting in this life matched onlyby the irony of knowledge in immortality: all of these responses could be felt at the heart of the establishment as well as by the Shelleyan radical poet. The tone is often closer to overwhelming irony than debilitating horror, yet from both–irony andhorror–come a set of aesthetic issues, which face the war poem, of response, representation,adequacy and eventual failure. Objecting to 'Jean Baudrillard's notorious analysis of the Gulf War as a series of rhetorical performances unattached to any material reality', Simon Featherstone says that poems written *at* war 'seem to insist on the closeness of writing to often appalling personal experience.'……..The literary collaboration of the two most-celebrated of Great War poets, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, was cemented in a psychiatric hospital in Scotland, well away from the experiences which had put them there.

Given such a long time to fill not thinking about impending death or mutilation,the war poet must attend to a problem of style similar to that which also confronts the historian. Paul Fussell summarises the questions of rhetoric and style which faced Kipling, writing one of his 'most decent and honourable works'.

*The Irish Guards in the Great War*: *…how are actual events deformed by the application to them of metaphor, rhetorical comparison, prose rhythm, assonance, alliteration, allusion, and sentence structures and connectives implying clear causality? Is there any way of compromising between thereader's expectations that written history ought to be interesting and*

*meaningful and the cruel fact that much of what happens – all of what happens? – is inherently without'meaning'?*

We could adapt these questions to ask them of poetry written about war. Kipling's subject is war, and a war which killed many in the Irish Guards along with his son.But, finding an appropriate language, according to Fussell, would mean finding 'theclinical–or even obscene –language' which 'would force itself up from below…It was a matter of leaving, finally, the nineteenth century behind'.

For all its economy as it faces its terrible subject matter, the artistic achievement of 'A SON' is rhetorical: it suggests the correct tone for marking both grief and the terrible irony of the manner of the laughing son's death. At the same time, while itmay accede to Fussell's 'cruel fact that much of what happens…is inherently without meaning', the 'happening' of the response recreated in the poem has in itself created meaning. This meaning is not consolation or in any way redemptive of the ironies of a violent death; rather it is a pointing up of the irony and, in the epitaph form, amemorial to the unforgettable. Fussell's 'much of what happens', inevitably drawn at first to horror but ultimately to irony, suggests a famous elegy of W. H. Auden,written while Europe was contemplating another world war in 1939 and 1940:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

('In Memory of W. B. Yeats')

Auden's riposte to the political efforts of Yeats may have come from the same disillusion which prompted Day Lewis's repudiation of the Shelleyan poetic role, faced with Europe's return to war. Certainly, his grudging 'way of happening, a mouth', inwhich poetry is a conduit, a medium, rather than an effective historical agent in itsown right, places poetry well away from the scenes of politics or war.Yeats himself had acted as observer and elegist

on the subject of war, no matter how he too had indulged in the hubris of wondering if his poetry had exercised effective political agency. In 1939, reviewing his career, he had asked himself the question,'Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?' ('Man and theEcho'–the reference is to *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, 1900, and the execution of the leaders of the Easter Rising in Ireland in 1916). But it is in 'Lapis Lazuli', viewing a Europesuffering under new wars of annexation and aerial bombing, as well as the obliteration of ancient cities, that Yeats attempts to find a poetry which both faces the destruction of culture and attempts to find an aesthetic response.

On their own feet they came, or on shipboard,
Camel-back, horse-back, ass-back, mule-back,
Old civilisations put to the sword.
Then they and their wisdom went to rack:
No handiwork of Callimachus,
Who handled marble as if it were bronse,
Made draperies that seemed to rise
When sea-wind swept the corner, stands;
His long lamp-chimney shaped like the stem
Of a slender palm, stood but a day;
All things fall and are built again, And those that build them again are gay.

('Lapis Lazuli')

This poem was written in 1938 while the Spanish Civil War was underway, and views the refugees and emigrants swarming from previously settled societies with some ambivalence. In Yeats's authoritarian worldview, traumatic historical change may notentirely be a bad thing. And there is an aesthetic rather than political embrace of there building of societies as a necessary, comic, resolution. Yeats will not allow that the wiping out of cities and civilizations is merely an aestheticised act of history:

*Irony remains, in that the classical form of the architect Callimachus stands but aday in these circumstances. But it is perhaps a chilling act of artistic ambition thathe attempts to push tragic circumstances out to the*

*comic resolution where there builders, whether or not they also be the destroyers, are 'gay'.*

It is Yeats who mounted the strongest arguments against the very possibility ofwar poetry in the 20th century. If 'joy' is a mark of great art, then poets who'felt bound…to plead the suffering of their men' were not included in Yeats's *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, because 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry'. Consequently, 20th-century war poetry loses the mythic or heroic along with the loss of joyfrom the tragic:

*In all great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies; in Greece the tragic chorus danced. When man has withdrawn into the quicksilver at the back of the mirror no great event becomes luminous in his mind; it is no longer possible to write ThePersians, Agincourt, Chevy Chase: some blunderer has driven his car on to the wrong sideof the road – that is all.*

If war is necessary, or necessary in our time and place, it is best to forget its suffering as we do the discomfort of fever, remembering our comfort at midnight whenour temperature fell, or as we forget the worst moments of more painful disease. (Introductionto *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, 1936)

Yeats makes only a small move from war as motor accident to the forgetting of historical necessity, since it is no more significant than a bout of 'flu. But the shock ofYeats's call for such forgetting does ask important questions about the representation of a suffering which may, in Fussell's words respecting Kipling, have no meaning at all. Even Yeats, in his elegy for his friend Lady Gregory's son, killed in the Great War,knows that tragic joy is not an easily achieved consolation for bereavement after violent death. His poem fails to achieve the heroic at its end, tactfully granting the overpowering fact of death.

I had thought, seeing how bitter is that wind
That shakes the shutter, to have brought to mind
All those that manhood tried, or childhood loved
Or boyish intellect approved,
With some appropriate commentary on each;
Until imagination brought

A fitter welcome; but a thought

Of that late death took all my heart for speech.

('In Memory of Major Robert Gregory', 1918)

'Appropriate commentary' is not appropriate in these circumstances. Yet such appropriateness is a major aesthetic preoccupation of those British poets of the Great War who were excluded from Yeats's anthology……Thenew 20th-century genre which Yeats dismisses, that of the war poem, emerged from these poets. This new genre shares much with the elegy, particularly as the Romantic conception of that literary form often founders on the ineffable, momentslike that of Yeats above, where the heart is taken for speech. The genre of elegy performs, in therapeutic terms, the 'work of mourning', a work in which the conclusion of the poem ought to coincide with consolation: Yeats's conclusion above seeks consolation through the very act of writing its 'appropriate commentary', which promises to provide a kind of therapy, while still facing the absolute sense of loss. The losses of bereavement can be daily occurrences for those at war, but the related problem for the early twentieth-century war poet, the accompanying loss of meaning (patriotism or a cause along with mental stability or even sanity), mounts powerful opposition to the generic expectations of a form which ostensibly performs this 'work ofmourning'– reintegration of the bereaved personality through the consolations of elegy.

Take these two poems written from within the hell of war, 'The Rear Guard',by Siegfried Sassoon and 'Strange Meeting' by Wilfred Owen. Both Sassoon and Owen enlisted to fight and were decorated for bravery. The Sassoon poem was writtenten days after arriving in hospital, supposedly suffering from shell-shock, a diagnosis, according to Sassoon, which was repudiated by the quality of his poem. It tells of an officer groping by torchlight through the tunnels of the Hindenburg Line, and is filled full of the detritus of an experience which presents itself to the soldier in terms of overpowering smell and the discarded objects of war,alternately vivid and obscure according to the beam of the torch: 'Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know'. The packed stresses at the beginning of thisline, followed by the regularizing iambic beat show Sassoon's sense of great formal control over

his verse, even as it suggests those horrors which are held just outside perception….Both experience and memory of the experiencehave literally and metaphorically been unloaded by the very writing of the poem, a poem resolutely shifted by its ill author into the third person.Yet at the centre of 'The Rear Guard' is an encounter which may not be so easily unloaded by the consolations of this elegiac pattern. The officer trips and seeing 'someone' he assumes to be asleep, asks for directions. Hearing no response he then makesan order followed by a sudden moment of frustrated savagery:

'Get up and guide me through this stinking place.'
Savage, he kicked a soft unanswering heap,
And flashed his beam across the livid face
Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore
Agony dying hard ten days before;
And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound.

A pause now follows in the text and narrative of the poem, before the officer is supposedly led out of this hell. But it is the absence of appropriate commentary afterthis experience of beating a ten-days-dead body that resounds most strongly through the poem. We have been presented with a number of objects an army has left behind and one of them is a human body. The officer's eye is led from the unannounced 'lividface / Terribly glaring up', across the body into the eyes and finally to the 'blackening wound', in a sort of numb assessment of information. This is then forced,by a necessary act of repression in the text, to lie without commentary behind the staggering man seeking the light above hell. There is no effort to find meaning here, just to seek escape.

Sassoon's lyric is formally quite enclosed between its rhyming first and last lines,and plays with triple rhymes throughout. Such a technique, and the encounter with the dead in the underworld, suggests Dante. Wilfrid Owen's 'Strange Meeting' is alsoa Dantesque dream of conversation with the dead, and is no less remarkable for itsattempt to find a prosodic form for the experience. In Owen's case this is achieved by sustaining para rhyming couplets throughout the poem. If the Sassoon poem was a

deliberate attempt to enclose the experience in poetic form–and therefore to leaveit behind–Owen's poem refuses the consolations that the aesthetic completion of full rhyme might bring. The poem was written only a few months before its author's death and was, of course, not prepared for publication by the poet: but it ends with a lacuna,the truncated 'Let us sleep now…', which suggests that such experience cannot beallowed to complete itself.

It is in these terms that 'Strange Meeting' suggests a development from the significant achievement of Sassoon's poem. It looks to immortality as it thinks of the life after death of the war poet; but it also looks to the irony that after such experience wars will continue, and that writing poetry about war, or from war – this very poem– will have minimal effect on the future. The dead man whom the poet meets in his dream reveals himself at the end as the enemy he killed yesterday. Yet he too is a poet,a poet who mourns that poetry has proved supremely ineffective in this war. In hisway, the dead enemy is the poet Owen used to be:

Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.

Yeats had excluded Owen from his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* because his poetry told only of suffering and pity, and did not achieve tragic or comic resolutions. Here Owen gives us a late 19th-century Yeatsian poet, but also one who might suggest his Romantic masters, Shelley and Keats. The lyric poet chases after the'wildest beauty', careless of mortality and time given the generic opportunity ofthe luxury of elegy where he can grieve 'richlier than here'. That is lost forever to Owen and his vision, and is added to by the irony of his own imagined death, where what he could have said, 'The pity of war, the pity war distilled', is now denied tothe world due to that death. Owen views history – the progress of nations and capital– inevitably girding up to repeat this experience. …

All that is left is the ineffective Keatsian poet cleaning up after the massacre:

Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths which lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.

Two previous texts haunt the poet's task here. The first is from Homer, and the description of the chariot wheels of the unquenchably bloodthirsty Achilles at the end of Book XX of the *Iliad*, where, in Pope's translation, 'The spiky wheels through heaps of carnage tore; / And thick the groaning axles dropp'd with gore'. The other is from Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale', where the poet had asked to die while the bird was'pouring forth thy soul abroad / In such an ecstasy!' Here Owen's poet thinks of what he could have done with poetry after war, pouring his spirit through poetry and achieving the psychic cleansing of this experience. The dead poet's speech reaches backto epic for some possible analogy for this cleansing. Yet it concludes such argument as it presents with a riddling last line: 'Foreheads of men have bled where no woundswere'.

….After numerous 20th-century wars, the deathof poetry has long been proclaimed by those who found, along with Owen and Auden, that the poet's cultural cleansing through pouring out his lyric spiritwill make nothing happen. Like Day Lewis and Kipling, much of this effect was felt by those who were not soldiers themselves, but who felt the long memories of war suffered by their parents and grand parents resonate throughout the century. British culture has memories of significant victory to look back on when thinking about war, but epic triumphalism has not generally been the tone in which poetshave written. Writing about family experiences in the Great War, personal experience of the Blitz, or facing the fact of the Holocaust, poets who choose to write onpublic subjects, like Ted Hughes or Geoffrey Hill, filter them through the difficult questions of appropriateness and genre that the war poets raise.When the troubles broke out again in Ireland in the 1970s, poets turned againto the genre of war poetry in order to find form for

writing not only about contemporary horrors but also the responsibilities, political as well as artistic, of the poet. Seamus Heaney returns to elegy through Dante, talking, like Sassoon or Owen, with the ghosts of the dead. These include the seeming 'enigma' presented by an Irish nationalist First World War poet, Francis Ledwidge ('You were not keyed or pitched like these true-blue ones / Though all of you consort now underground').

But the more recent dead in 'The Strand at Lough Beg' and the explicitly Dantesque *Station Island* sequence, exist uncomfortably between the British war poem and conventional elegy. Not that comfort would be provided by solving the generic problem, dependent on irony as it is. These are the ghosts of the violent dead which face Heaney:

I turn because the sweeping of your feet
Has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees
With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes,
Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew
To wash you, cousin.

('The Strand at Lough Beg', 1978)

The cleansing of the elegiac poet amounts here to no more than the laying out of abody in a ritual–religious and aesthetic–which approximates burial rites. The action of the poet is of course, as the Irish poet Eavan Boland says, 'always too late'…Heaney's plea for forgiveness is in its way an Audenesque show of bad faith, to berejected peremptorily by its recipient. The ghost here was the 'perfect, clean, unthinkable victim', but becomes eventually one more in a series of the wasted male youthof the century killed in wars which they had no part in starting, and little sense of how to prevent: 'all that's above my head'.

The prophecy of Owen's dead enemy carries on through the century, like wounds which refuse to heal. In Michael Longley's elegy 'Wounds' (1972), his father, wounded in the First World War, carries not only vivid memories, but also the lead traces which would flare up and kill him fifty years later: the wound is unhealableby time or poem. The father is buried as other wounds erupt into more than irritation, and a long unhealed history

results in explosions, assassinations and theunaccommodated ironies of the war poem. In such contemporary wars there is not even the difference of language to separate combatants. At the end of 'Wounds'a killer turns to the wife of the man he has killed in front of her, addressing her inthe intimacy of the vernacular: 'I think "Sorry Missus" was what he said'……



## 3.4 LET US SUM UP

As you have finished reading this unit, you have learnt about the relationship between poetry and war. A representative selection of the work of war poets who were either killed or died in the War is to be found in *Anthology of War Poetry,* edited by Robert Nichols (1943). Broadly, two phases in War Poetry may be distinguished—the patriotic fervour and rejoicing in the opportunity of self-sacrifice in the cause of human freedom, and a revival of the romantic conception of the knight-at-arms. Poets like Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen are some of the most renowned of the war poets. Matthew Campbell's essay "Poetry and War" has provided an overall idea of the major concerns of the war poets which must have also helped you to discuss the war poetry of the 20th century more critically.



## 3.5 Further Reading

1) Howarth, Peter. (2005). *British Poetry in The age of Modernism.* Cambridge University Press.

2) Kendall, Tim. (2006). *Modern English War Poetry*. Oxford University Press.

3) Preminger, Alex. & T. V. F. Brogan. (Eds.). (1993). *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton University Press.

4) Roberts, Neil. (2001). *A Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry*. Blackwell Publishing.



## 3.6 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

**Q 1:** Write in detail about 20th century war poetry with reference to the famous English war poets.

**Q 2:** "The losses of bereavement can be daily occurrences for those at war, but the related problem for the early 20th-century war poet was the accompanying loss of meaning." Discuss.

**Q 3**: World War I and II had a profoundly disturbing impact on Western society. Discuss.

**Q 4:** Briefly compare the main themes of the poets writing before the World War I and after World War II.

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# UNIT 4: POETRY AFTER WW II

## UNIT STRUCTURE


4.1 Learning Objectives

4.2 Introduction

4.3 Apocalyptic Poetry

4.4 Movement Poetry

4.5 Other Developments

4.6 Let us Sum up

4.7 Further Reading

4.8 Possible Questions


## 4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- identify the major concerns of the poets following World War II
- enlist the characteristics of Apocalyptic poetry, Movement poetry and other poetic developments following World War II
- explain the characteristics of Movement Poetry with particular reference to the works of Phillip Larkin
- appreciate the major achievements of modern poetry after World War II.

## 4.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the last unit of this Block. In this unit, we shall have a look at the contexts of modern poetry following World War II. We shall in our discussion mostly consider Apocalyptic poetry as well as Movement poetry, which bear tremendous significance in the context of 20th century English poetry. The outbreak of World War II in 1939, just like in 1914, brought an end to the era of great intellectual and creative exuberance. Individual writers were dispersed; the production of magazines and books were affected; and the poem and the short story became the most convenient and favoured means of literary expression. No new beginning could be seen, although

the poets of the New Apocalypsemovement produced some anthologies in between 1940–45. Only three new poets Alun Lewis, Sidney Keyes, and Keith Douglas (all of whom died on active service) showed some promise. It was a time, T.S. Eliot, produced his *Four Quartets* (1943),a masterpiece of the war. Reflecting upon language, time, and history, Eliot searched, in the three quartets written during the war, for moral and religious significance in the midst of destruction and strove to counter the spirit of nationalism inevitably present in a nation at war. However, the last shining of New Apocalypse poetry could be perceived in the the flamboyant, surreal, and rhetorical style of poets like Dylan Thomas, George Barker, David Gascoyne, and there emerged what came to be known as The Movement. Poets such as D. J. Enright, Donald Davie, John Wain, Roy Fuller, Robert Conquest, and Elizabeth Jennings produced a kind of verse anti-romantic in vein but characterised by irony, understatement, and a sardonic refusal to strike attitudes or make grand claims for the poet's role. However, the most preeminent practitioner of this style was Philip Larkin. In Larkin's poetry—*The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), *High Windows* (1974), a melancholy sense of life's limitations throbs through lines of elegiac elegance. With an acute awareness of mortality and transience, Larkin's poetry is also finely responsive to natural beauty, while also darkened by the fear of death or sombre preoccupation with human solitude. John Betjeman, poet laureate from 1972 to 1984, shared both Larkin's intense consciousness of mortality and his gracefully versified nostalgia for 19th- and early 20th-century life. Thus, as you finish reading this unit, you will gain sufficient ideas on the contexts of English poetry following World War II.

## 4.3 APOCALYPTIC POETRY

As you have already got certain ideas on the preoccupations of the Apocalypse Poets, you will note that these poets, also known as the Apocalyptics, were a network of British writers centred around the largely forgotten Apocalypse poetry movement. Apocalypse poetry, inspired by the notion of Surrealism stripped of its automatism, was a reaction to the poetic

dominance of the Auden Generation during the 1930s. Aesthetically, Apocalypticism dealt in nightmarish images, engaged with mythology, and meditated on war. Politically, it tended towards anarchism.

Poets such as Henry Treece (1912–1966) and J. F. Hendry (1912–1986) became acquainted with one another while contributing to the literary magazine *Seven*. They developed an Apocalyptic Manifesto in 1938 in collaboration with Dorian Cooke (1916–2005). The following year, Treece and Hendry edited an anthology of poetry entitled *The New Apocalypse* (1939). They later anthologised two more collections of Apocalyptic poetry: "The White Horseman" (1941) and "The Crown and the Sickle" (1943). By the time the second anthologywas published, the Apocalypse movement had lost much of its momentum and, along with another short-lived movement, Personalism, was subsumed under an emerging New Romanticism.

## 4.4 MOVEMENT POETRY

[Adapted from Stephen Regan's article "The Movement" in Roberts, Neil. (Ed.). (2003). *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry.* Blackwell Publishing Ltd.]

In the critical discussion of postwar British poetry, a frequent reference is made of a group of writers known as the Movement. It is commonly assumed that the Movement waslargely a reaction against the inflated romanticism of the 1940s, a victory of commonsense and clarity over obscurity and mystification, of verbal restraint over stylisticexcess. Such elements and aspects marked the poetry of Philip Larkin and Dylan Thomas. Criticswho admire the rationalism of Larkin's verse have also emphasised the importance of the Movement and its continuing influence in contemporary poetry. Some have even gone farther to claim for the Movement a significant place in a tradition of modern poetry, usually dubbed 'the English line' extending back through Edward Thomas and Thomas Hardy to the poetry of William Wordsworth. However, there also exists a degree of scepticism about the aims and achievements of the Movement. This critical scepticism is compounded by the reluctance of the writers themselves to acknowledge their membership of a particular group. Philip Larkin, when interviewed by

Ian Hamilton, confessed 'no sense at all' of belonging to a movement, and Thom Gunn also stated, 'I found I was in it before I knew it existed…and I havea certain suspicion that it does *not* exist.' Elizabeth Jennings was similarly inclined to play down the idea of a movement among a particular generation of postwar poets, "They may have common aims–but this is something very different from that deliberate practice and promulgation of shared views which a true literary movement implies."

If the Movement did not exist as a coherent literary group, it certainly operated asa significant cultural influence. It was the product of specific views about literature and society, which in turn it helped to establish and disseminate. Those critics whohave disputed the idea that the Movement was a well-organised group with a clear and consistent programme of ideas have nevertheless recognised among its alleged participants a shared set of values and assumptions closely related to the moods and conditions of postwar England. Neil Corcoran in his book *English Poetry Since 1940* even claimed that the preference for traditional forms and methods in Movement poetry was part of a determined effort to rebuild the intellectual culture of the postwar years: 'Syntax, measure and alogic of statement were, in the Movement poem, almost an act of postwar reconstruction: to build the decorous shape of the poem was to provide a defence against barbarism.' (P-83)

To understand the origins of the Movement, it is necessary to return to the autumn of 1954, when the arrival of a new poetic trend was announced in the literary journals. However, what emerged from the early articles and reviews announcing 'the Movement' is not so much a departure from the alleged romanticism of the 1940s,as an awareness of the continuing dominance of W. H. Auden and the poets of the1930s. In his article, 'Poets of the Fifties' (generally thought to herald the Movement);published in the August 1954 issue of *Spectator*, Anthony Hartley begins by asking, 'What do most readers mean whenthey talk of modern poetry?' He offers the following reply:

*In the eyes of the general reader, it is the Thirties that continue to typify the modern movement in verse…Now, however, there are signs that*

*this twenty-year-old domination is coming to an end. New names in the reviews, a fresh atmosphere of controversy, a new spirit of criticism–these are signs that some other group of poets is appearing on the horizon. pp. 260–1)*

At the same time, signalling a shift in direction, the new poetry retains its roots inthe work of the 1930s. In Anthony Hartley's estimation, 'the return to romanticism which came between was essentially a sport'. Hartley does not consider the new movement tobe a school of poets with a specific programme and manifesto, but there is evidence, he argues, 'that the present generation has been sufficiently affected by common influences and circumstances for a not too vague *seitgeist* to be apparent in their productions.' 'Poets of the Fifties' is perhaps the earliest and the most useful description of the Movement as it was perceived in its own time.

*Hartley goes some way towards explaining the characteristic features of the newpoetry: 'It might roughly be described as "dissenting" and non-conformist, cool, scientificand analytical . . . the poetic equivalent of liberal, dissenting England'.*

You will note that perhaps, it was here that for the first time, a Movement ideology had been identified. The poetry of Philip Larkin isonly briefly mentioned, along with the work of John Wain, Donald Davie, KingsleyAmis and Thom Gunn, but already a group personality was seen to have existsted. Stylistically,these writers share an avoidance of rhetoric, an austere tone and a colloquial idiom.The importance of Hartley's early review is that it acknowledges the political and cultural contours of a dominant literary tendency in postwar England. The 'liberalism' to which Hartley refers can be traced back to the kind of liberal idealism espoused by E. M. Forster in the early part of the 20$^{th}$century: 'A liberalism distrustful of too much fanaticism, austere and sceptical. A liberalism egalitarian and antiaristocratic. A liberalism profoundly opposed to fashion in the metropolitan sense ofthe word'. This remains one of the best descriptions of Movement ideology.

Hartley's remark that 'we are now in the presence of the only considerable movement in English poetry since the Thirties' is echoed in J. D Scott's article in the October issue of *Spectator* entitled, 'In the Movement'

where he agrees that 'the English literary scene' has not been transformed in such a way since the1930s, and contrasts the social, political and moral consciousness of that age with the seeming disengagement of the 1950s. Once again, the Movement was sought to be defined by Scott in terms of a lost idealism and in terms of a vigilant readjustment to an unsettled postwar England:

*The Movement, as well as being anti-phoney, is anti-wet; sceptical, robust, ironic, prepared to be as comfortable as possible in a wicked, commercial, threatened world which doesn't look, anyway, as if it's going to be changed much by a couple of handfuls of young English writers.'*

It was the appearance of poems by a particular group of writers in several anthologies of the 1950s, which gave further impetus to the idea of a movement in English poetry. For example, the editors of *Springtime: An Anthology of Young Poets and Writers* (1953) refer to a kind of poetry which is 'going through a period of consolidation and simplification…of reaction against experiment for its own sake, and they further claim that their chosen contributors are 'poets of an analytical habit of mind,whose aim is to clarify, by stating plainly, typical complex situations'. The same emphasis on 'honesty of thought and feeling andclarity of expression' can be found in D. J. Enright's introduction to *Poets of the 1950s:An Anthology of New English Verse*, but Enright is clearly alert to the cultural conditions that have prompted this kind of poetic response. Echoing the *Spectator* articles,Enright acknowledges 'a new spirit stirring in contemporary English poetry' (Enright,1955, p. 15). He presents his anthology *not* as the work of a movement, however, butas a selection of poems by individual writers, some of whom share common attitudes.

Like the *Spectator,* Enright stresses the distinction between the political commitment that characterised the poetry of the 1930s and the desired neutrality of the 1950s. The liberal humanist perspective identified by Hartley is given further clarification by Enright, who speaks of the need to 'resuscitate the idea of the dignity ofthe human individual' and of the way in which 'private responsibility' sometimes outweighs 'social responsibility'. Despite Enright's disclaimers about a group identity, his poets seem to share

a common set of values and assumptions: a vigilant individualism, a careful distancing of the private from thepublic, and a cautious avoidance of political commitment. Enright further stated that these poets were 'moderate', they exemplified 'chastened common sense' and they eschewed obscurity 'becausethey find it unnecessary'. In listing these 'virtues', Enright felicitously alludes to the title of Philip Larkin's 1955 volume of poems, *The Less Deceived*.

Had Enright's anthology been more widely distributed and read, the political and cultural significance of the Movement poets and their anxious relationship with the poetry of the 1930s might have been better understood by a later generation of readers and writers. However, the anthology which had the greatest impact and which was generally held to be most representative of the Movement was Robert Conquest's *New Lines* (1956). It was Conquest's introduction to the anthology, which was largely responsible for encouraging the idea of a reaction against the excesses of 1940s romanticism. The poets of that decade, Conquest argues, were 'encouraged to produce diffuse and sentimental verbiage', while the new generation holds to 'a rational structure and comprehensible language.' Conquest shows little concern for the social and historical circumstances of postwar England and instead resorts to dubious cultural metaphors of sickness and health. The attitude to poetry in around 1940 sinduced a 'sort of corruption'; it led to 'a rapid collapse of public taste, from which we have not yet recovered'. The poetry of the 1950s, however, represents 'a new and healthy general standpoint…the restoration of a sound and fruitful attitude topoetry.' Conquest's bombastic description of the new poetry is frequently cited as a manifesto for the Movement poets:

*If one had briefly to distinguish this poetry of the fifties from its predecessors, I believe the most important general point would be that it submits to no great systems of theoreticalconstructs nor agglomerations of unconscious commands. It is free from both mystical and logical compulsions and – like modern philosophy – is empirical in its attitude to all that comes. This reverence for the real person or event is, indeed, a part of the general intellectual ambience (in so far as that is not blind or retrogressive) of ourtime.*

What Conquest seems to be saying here is that the poetry of the 1950s is characterised chiefly by its anti-dogmatic ideals, by a kind of aesthetic purity and philosophical detachment. There is an apparent disregard for the poetry of the 1930s in his jibeat 'theoretical constructs', but the principal target would seem to be Dylan Thomas. Conquest assumes that poetry can maintain a 'free' and neutral stance, and that 'empiricism' is, in itself, a guarantee of this neutrality. These are also the problems of a good deal of so-called Movement poetry and they were partly responsible for its eventual demise.The pose of neutrality and objectivity could not be sustained indefinitely; the tensions and conflicts of post-war England continued to disturb the equanimity of such poetry, and what began as something separate and detached was either made to look increasingly defensive and withdrawn, or pushed towards a point of declaration. In the case of Philip Larkin, the fastidious restraint of *The Less Deceived,* gradually gaveway to a much more confrontational and openly polemical writing, especially in *High Windows*.

The prevailing tone of Movement poetry is urbane and academic, and many of the anthologised pieces are too neatly prescriptive or look like pieces of versified literary criticism. Some of the titles provide an indication of a 'bookish' or 'middlebrow' attitude:

*Kingsley Amis's 'A Bookshop Idyll', D. J. Enright's 'The Verb to Think', Donald Davie's 'Rejoinder to a Critic' and 'Too Late for Satire', and John Wain's 'Reason fornot Writing Orthodox Nature Poetry' and 'Poem Without a Main Verb'. One of the shortcomings of Movement poetry is its tendency to make a virtue out of the civilised sensibility, to value intellectual detachment and 'urbanity' above all else. Thiscool, ironic aloofness can be mildly shocking, as in Amis's 'Shitty', but more often than not it leads to a shallow denial of human potential for change and development,as in Davie's 'A Christening', with its cynical insistence: 'What we do best is breed'.*

Perhaps the most significant 'manifesto' within Movement poetry is Davie's 'Remembering the Thirties', which in many ways epitomises the cautious outlook of the Cold War years in its declaration that 'A neutral tone is nowadays preferred'. What thepoem demonstrates most forcefully,

however, is that the example of Auden and his contemporaries continued to have a powerful impression upon the postwar generation of writers.It is also the case; however, that Movement poetry probably displays far more diversity and daring than subsequent critical accounts have given it credit for.

Literary history has too readily equated the work of the Movement with parochialism and provincialism. Looking back on Robert Conquest's anthology is to be reminded of the cosmopolitan,international interests of several contributors. Larkin appears resolutely English, but the *New Lines* volume also contains 'Afternoon in Florence' and 'Piazza San Marco' by Elizabeth Jennings; 'Lerici' by Thom Gunn; 'Evening in the Khamsin' and 'Baie des Anges, Nice' by D. J. Enright; 'Nantucket' and 'Near Jakobselv' by Robert Conquest; and 'Woodpigeons at Raheny' by Donald Davie. Davie's *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (1952) is often thought to have set the standard for a neo-Augustan discipline in Movement poetry, promoting a particular kind of English traditional lyricism, but this aspect of Davie's critical endeavours needs to be set agains this intense and prolonged engagement with the poetry of Ezra Pound and with post-Poundian poetics in the United States. It is certainly the case that critical appraisals of Movement poetry have tended to repeat the formulas and generalisations associated with 1950s and 1960s anthologies rather than exploring the extent to which the work confounds those familiar summaries.

One of the earliest appraisals of Movement poetry can be found in *Rule and Energy* by John Press (1963). Although Press gives little credence to the publicity surrounding the Movement in the mid-1950s, he nevertheless ventures a critique of itsaims and achievements. The new poets 'advance no systematic theory of poetry andoffer no rigid set of dogmatic beliefs', but it is possible, Press claims, to summarise the main characteristics of their work:

*They all display a cautious scepticism, favour an empirical attitude, speak in carefully measured accents, and examine a problem with an alert wariness…All of these poets, mistrusting or ignoring the legacy of the Romantics and aiming at colloquial ease,decorum, shapeliness, elegance,*

*are trying to bring back into the currency of the language the precision, the snap, the gravity, the decisive, clinching finality which have been lost since the late Augustan age.*

Here, Press is referring not just to a reaction against the 'neo-Romanticism' of the1940s but to the whole trend of English poetry since the early 19th century.The Movement poets, in this respect, are seen to represent a new 'classicism' in English poetry. Yet it is clear throughout *Rule and Energy* that this distrust of inflated rhetoricand large emotional gestures is only one aspect of a much broader postwar tendency.The most striking characteristic feature of English poetry in these years, according to Press is, 'the general retreat from direct comment on or involvement with any political or social doctrine'. This is particularly noticeable, he adds, 'ifwe contrast the verse of the past two decades with that of the 1930s'.However, what disturbs Press most is the peculiar passivity of postwar poetry. He speculates that the establishment of the Welfare State may have mitigated some of the more glaring political and social injustices, but continues: 'it is absurd to pretend that in our affluent society a poet can find nothing to arouse his compassion or his savage indignation.'

According to Morrison in his book *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s,* what emerges in the work of the Movement, then, is an uneasy combination of class consciousness and acceptance of class division; an acute awareness of privilege, but an eventual submission to the structure which makes it possible…As spokesmen for the new self-proclaimed lower-middle-class intelligentsia, the Movement was forced intoan ambivalent position; on the one hand opposed to the 'old order'; on the other hand indebted to, and respectful towards, its institutions. Morrison attributes this ambivalence to the fact that most of the Movement poets were scholarship boys in centres of learning still largely dominated by the upper middleclass and therefore subject to pressures to understate social difference. Larkin refers to this process in the introduction to his novel *Jill*, where he admits that in Oxford in 1940 'our impulse was still to minimise social differences rather than exaggerate them.' Furthermore, the influence of thinkers like F. R.Leavis, especially in such subjects as English,

undoubtedly helped to promote the kindof conformity and spirit of national unity that Morrison detects.

However, despite its mood of dissent and its anti-establishment attitude, the Movement offered only ‘a token rebellion’, and did not attempt to change the prevailing social structure. The ambivalence of Movement politics becomes particularly evident in the immediate context of the postwar years and manifests itself in a wavering liberal attitude towards the changing balance of power in the new society. The Movement poets were clearly influenced by the democratic idealism that accompanied the Labour victory of 1945, however short-lived that spirit of optimism might have been, and yet most of them were distrustful of egalitarian political ideals and remained deeply suspicious of radical change. Blake Morrison diagnoses the Movement predicament very astutely and shows how it operates in their poetry. Donald Davie’s poem ‘The Garden Party’, for instance, seems at first sight to be severely critical of both class division and capitalism, yet the speaker of the poem has benefited too well from the current social structure to wish to change it. The poem ends in compromise, seeming to offer a critique of existing social arrangements but carefully maintaining a sense of distance and neutrality. The Movement, then, for all its initial anti-establishment fervour, proved to be politically inoffensive. In contrast to the poets of the 1930s,many of whom were upper-middle-class political activists, the poets of the 1950s werelower-middle class and politically neutral.

It is not surprising to discover in the work of Movement writers a sense of nostalgia and regret in the face of Britain’s inevitable decline as a world power. Neil Corcoran claims that ‘Some of the most interesting poetry of the Movement in the 1950s may be read as inscribed with the sense–anxious, distressed, nostalgic, stoic–of a great national termination and reorientation.’Morrison, too, acknowledges the impact of the end of empire on Movement poetry and shows how a seemingly innocent lyric poem like Philip Larkin’s ‘At Grass’ might be read within this context. He claims that the reason ‘At Grass’ became one of the most popular postwar poems is that ‘by allowing the horses to symbolise loss of power, Larkin manages to tap nostalgia for a past “glorythat was England”’. Accordingly, Morrison

identifies 'At Grass' as 'a poem of postimperial *tristesse*'. What is particularly impressive about Morrison's thesis is that it demonstrates how the Movement's social and political ambivalence extends into the formal and structural texture of the poetry in terms of hesitations, qualifications and conversational asides. In fact, the whole sense of an audience in Movement poetry, Morrison argues,is shaped by questions of socio-political identity, especially by the difficulty of appealing to an academic elite and at the same time being responsible to the general publicin a modern democracy.

Further confirmation of the Movement's political caution can be found in Robert Hewison's well-documented account of the post-war years, *In Anger: Culture in the Cold War 1945–60* (1981). Rather comically, Hewison reminds us that 'the movement did not exist' (it was, he believes, an effective piece of stage management), but he himself can hardly avoid using the label. His essential point is thatthe attitudes of the Movement poets reflect the restrictive conditions of the Cold War. In other words, the neutrality, caution and self-limitation of these writers belong to the mood of fear and suspicion created by the continuing opposition among the military and diplomatic forces of East and West after 1945.

There are, of course, important ways in which Larkin's poetry departs from Movement principles, and these tendencies were evident even before the Movement dissolved into divergent lines. Blake Morrison claims that Larkin is much more astute thanhis peers in his sense of audience and perhaps more sympathetically attuned to the Romantic influences the Movement poetry professed to scorn. Samuel Hynes in reviewing Morrison's book in "Sweeping the Empty Stage" In *Times Literary Supplement* claims that Larkin's work is more 'expansive' and more 'wide-ranging' than that of other Movement poets. Many critics are convinced that Larkin is a 'better' poet than Amis, Wain, Enright and Davie. Implicit in their evaluation is a belief that Larkin's poetry, in contrast with the work of other 'Movement' writers, not only exemplifies a deeper imaginative apprehension of social experience and its contradictions, but also exhibits a far greater range of formal and stylistic devices and a more profound sense of the linguistic and aesthetic possibilities of modern colloquial English.

In 1963, Robert Conquest published a second anthology of contemporary poetry,*New Lines II*, in which he once again paid tribute to the persistence and variety of 'the central current of English verse'. Modernist innovations such as might be found inthe poetry of Ezra Pound were, for Conquest, little more than 'peripheral additions to the main tradition of English poetry'. Acknowledging the work of Philip Larkin as an essential continuation of this tradition, Conquest continued in a vein of stridentanti-modernism:

*One even comes across the impudent assertion that English poets were unaware of the existence of the darker elements in the human personality, and of large-scale suffering,until psychoanalysts and world wars drew attention to them, and this is compounded with transparently spurious logic, by the notion that the way to cope with these forcesis to abandon sanity and hope.*

Without being explicit about the matter, Conquest was responding to a rival anthology,*The New Poetry* (1962), in which Alfred Alvarez had strongly criticised the workof the Movement (and Larkin in particular) for failing to deal with the full range ofhuman experience. The obvious irritation in Conquest's rejoinder is an indication ofthe profound impact that Alvarez had made on contemporary literary criticism. You should note that by throwing 'tradition' and 'experiment' into sharp relief, *The New Poetry* undoubtedly stimulated one of the liveliest debates in the history of 20th century poetry. Alvarez also helped to shape a climate of opinion in which the poetry of Ted Hughes,Sylvia Plath and others–a poetry seemingly at odds with the work of the Movement–might flourish. By 1962, however, any sense of a coherent Movement project had largely dissolved and the writers who were briefly identified with it had already gonetheir separate ways.

## 4.5 OTHER DEVELOPMENTS:

[Adapted fromhttps:// www.britannica.com/art/English-literature/The-literature-of-World-War-II-1939-45#ref308824]

In contrast to a kind of traditionalism among the Movement Poets, is the poetry of Ted Hughes, who succeeded Betjeman as the poet laureate (1984–98). In extraordinarily vigorous verse, beginning with his first

collection, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), Hughes captured the ferocity, vitality, and splendour of the natural world. In works such as *Crow* (1970), Hughes added a mythic dimension to his fascination with savagery (a fascination also apparent in the poetry of Thom Gunn produced throughout the late 1950s and 60s. Much of Hughes's poetry is rooted in his experiences as a farmer in Yorkshire and Devon. It also shows a deep receptivity to the way the contemporary world is underlain by strata of history. This realisation, along with strong regional roots, is something Hughes had in common with a number of poets writing in the second half of the 20th century.

Britain's industrial regions received particular attention in poetry too. In collections such as *Terry Street* (1969), Douglas Dunn wrote of working-class life in northeastern England. Tony Harrison, the most arresting English poet to find his voice in the later decades of the 20th century—*The Loiners* (1970), *From the School of Eloquence and Other Poems* (1978), *Continuous* (1981), came, as he stresses, from a working-class community in industrial Yorkshire. Harrison's social and cultural journey away from that world by means of a grammar school education and a degree in classics provoked responses in him that his poetry conveys with imaginative vehemence and caustic wit: anger at the deprivations and humiliations endured by the working class; guilt over the way his talent had lifted him away from these. Trenchantly combining colloquial ruggedness with classic form, Harrison's poetry kept up a fiercely original and socially concerned commentary on such themes as inner-city dereliction, the horrors of warfare and the evils of censorship.

From the late 1960s, onward Northern Ireland, convulsed by sectarian violence, was particularly prolific in poetry. From a cluster of significant talents—Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Medbh McGuckian, Paul Muldoon—Seamus Heaney emerged as the most prominent poet. Born into a Roman Catholic farming family in County Derry, he began by publishing verse—in his collections *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969)—that combines a tangible, tough, sensuous response to rural and agricultural life, reminiscent of that of Ted Hughes, with meditation about the relationship between the taciturn world of his parents and his

own communicative calling as a poet. Since then, in increasingly magisterial books of poetry—*Wintering Out* (1972), *North* (1975), *Field Work* (1979), *Station Island* (1984), *The Haw Lantern* (1987), *Seeing Things*(1991), *The Spirit Level* (1996)—Heaney has become arguably the greatest poet Ireland has produced, eventually winning the Nobel Prise for Literature in 1995. Having spent his formative years amid the murderous divisiveness of Ulster, he wrote poetry particularly distinguished by its fruitful bringing together of opposites. Sturdy familiarity with country life goes along with delicate stylistic accomplishment and sophisticated literary allusiveness. Present and past coalesce in Heaney's verses: Iron Age sacrificial victims exhumed from peat bogs resemble tarred-and-feathered victims of the atrocities in contemporary Belfast; elegies for friends and relatives slaughtered during the outrages of the 1970s and '80s are embedded in verses whose imagery and metrical forms derive from Dante. Surveying carnage, vengeance, bigotry, and gentler disjunctions such as that between the unschooled and the cultivated, Heaney made himself the master of poetry of reconciliations.

The closing years of the 20$^{th}$century witnessed a remarkable last surge of creativity from Ted Hughes (after his death in 1998, Andrew Motion, a writer of more subdued verses, became poet laureate). In *Birthday Letters* (1998), Hughes published a poetic chronicle of his much-speculated-upon relationship with Sylvia Plath, the American poet to whom he was married from 1956 until her suicide in 1963. With *Tales from Ovid* (1997) and his versions of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* (1999) and Euripides' *Alcestis* (1999), he looked back even further. These works—part translation, part transformation—magnificently reenergise classic texts with Hughes's own imaginative powers and preoccupations. Heaney impressively effected a similar feat in his fine translation of *Beowulf* (1999).



## 4.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have tried to gain some ideas on the development of English poetry following the World Wars, through a reading of Stephen

Regan's article "The Movement" available in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry.* You have briefly read about the developments of Apocalyptic Poetry, Movement Poetry, Poetry of Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney, while also identifying the dominant themes in the works of the poets mentioned. It is hoped that, you are now in a position to address the different aspects of modern poetry in its nuanced totality.



## 4.7 FURTHER READING

1) Albert, Edward. (1975). *History of English Literature*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

2) Corcoran, Neil. (Ed.). (2007). *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-century English Poetry*. Cambridge University Press.

3) Daiches, David. (1984). *A Critical History of English Literature.* Vol. IV. Allied Publishers Private Ltd, Delhi.

4) Preminger, Alex. & T. V. F. Brogan. (Eds.). (1993). *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton University Press.

5) Roberts, Neil. (Ed.). (2003). *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry.*Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

6) Sander, Andrew. (2000). *The Short Oxford History of English Literature.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Websites and Electronic Resources:**

https://www.rem.routledge.com/articles/apocalypse-poets

https://www.britannica.com/art/English-literature/The-literature-of-World-War-II-1939-45#ref308824



## 4.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

**Q 1:** Explain the methods adopted by the modernist poets to articulate their departure from older traditions since 1940s.

**Q 2:** Explain the methods adopted by the modernist poets following World

War II to articulate their departure from older traditions.

**Q 3:** World War I and II had a profoundly disturbing effect on Western society. How did the modern poets especially those related to the Movement group react to these effects?

**Q 4:** Provide a comparative analysis of the main themes of the poets writing before the World War II and after it.

**Q 5:** Write a note on the major tendencies of the different groups of modern poetry in general with particular reference to 'The Movement'.

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# UNIT 5: G. M. HOPKINS: "THE WINDHOVER" & "PIED BEAUTY"

## UNIT STRUCTURE


5.1 Learning Objectives

5.2 Introduction

5.3 G. M. Hopkins: The Poet

5.4 Reading the Poems prescribed

5.5 Major Themes

5.6 Hopkins' Poetic Style

5.7 Reception of Hopkins

5.8 Let Us Sum Up

5.9 Further Reading

5.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

5.11 Possible Questions


## 5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- gain ideas on the life and works of the poet G.M. Hopkins
- explain G.M. Hopkins's "The Windhover" and "Pied Beauty" as poems, providing insight into God the Creator and the divine manifestation of nature
- trace the 'crisis of faith' that characterised the Victorian era
- relate the text of the poems to the images used
- identify the literary devices of the curtal sonnet, sprung rhythm, inscape and instress
- appreciate the poems that admire God's creation, the aspects of the sensuous and sacramental beauty of nature and ultimate reverence to God.

## 5.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of Block 2 of the course on Modern Poetry. This

unit will introduce you to G. M. Hopkins and his poems "The Windhover" and "Pied Beauty" both of which were written in 1877. The poems have in common, the religious fervor with which the poet admires God as the Divine Creator, which is evoked through the rich imagery woven in both the poems. "The Windhover" is written in the form of a sonnet (14 lined poem) and "Pied Beauty" in the form of a curtal sonnet (10 and ½ lined poem) respectively. Hopkins is remembered as a major poet in the history of English poetry, with his poetical and technical brilliance. He is also considered a religious poet and one of the precursors of modern English poetry. Hopkins made a radical attempt to alter the nature of poetic expression from that of his contemporaries in late Victorian times. He lived the austere life of a Jesuit priest and had converted to Roman Catholicism by choice, while at Oxford. The smart 18 year old Hopkins had entered Oxford University and his residential college of Balliol in April 1863. He was also reputed as the "Star of Balliol" for his academic excellence and it was his posthumous fame that established him, among the leading Victorian poets of his time. His poetry had a significant influence on the poetic revolution of the British and American poetry of the 1920s and 1930s. Hopkins was one of the first **religious poets** in English since Milton and also the creator of an original poetic medium. But his importance also lies as one of the pioneers of modern poetry. He well-understood the nature of the crisis in English poetry of his time, and also the means by which this crisis could be overcome. The first means was the integration of spiritual and sensuous experiences, and the second was the adoption of certain reformist techniques which would give fresh vitality to the language and meter in English poetry.

## 5.3 HOPKINS: THE POET

G. M. Hopkins (28 July 1844—8 June 1889) was born to Catherine (Smith) Hopkins and Manley Hopkins in Stratford, Essex as the oldest of the eight children from an upper middle class family. His father Manley Hopkins owned a form of marine insurance firm and for a time was the British Consul General in Hawaii. Also, he was a Church Warden and a published, self-taught writer who also reviewed poetry for *The Times* and

wrote practical manuals and a novel. Manley Hopkins's works include *A Philosopher's Stone and other Poems* (1843) and *Pietas Metrica* (1849) and *A Gathering of Verses by Manley Hopkins* (1892). Catherine Hopkins had a taste for music and reading particularly German philosophy, Literature and the works of Charles Dickens. Both the parents were High Church Anglicans and deeply religious.

Manley Hopkins shifted his home to Hampstead along with his family in 1852 which was near to the place where John Keats had lived 35 years ago. Gerard Manley Hopkins was sent to a boarding school called High gate School, at the age of ten from 1854 to 1863. Here, he made early attempts at asceticism, and also composed his earliest poem titled "**The Escorial**" in 1860. Hopkins's early ambition in life was to be painter and continued to sketch throughout his adult life, inspired by the works of **John Ruskin** and the **Pre-Raphaelites**. He was also a skilled draughtsman and his early training in visual art went hand in hand with his work as a poet. He was an innovator in the time of traditional verse with his experimental forms of the **sprung rhythm**, ideas of **inscape** and **instress**, the **curtal sonnet,** and his striking use of imagery.

Hopkins studied Classics at Balliol College, Oxford from 1863-67. It was here that he built a lifelong friendship with Robert Bridges. He began his student life at Oxford as a socialite and a prolific poet, but later there were changes in his behaviour, which led him to be more studious. He was unusually sensitive as a student and poet, as reflected in his class notes and his early poetic pieces. During his life time, he published few poems and it was through the efforts of his friend, the Poet Laureate Robert Bridges that his works were destined to reach out to the outside world. Hopkins had burnt all his poems on entering the Jesuit novitiate. But, the ones he had sent to Bridges survived as the only copies to be published as *Poems* in 1918 as a slim collected edition by him.

Hopkins was deeply impressed by the works of Christina Rossetti whom he had met in 1864. He also studied with the prestigious writer and critic Walter Pater who tutored him in 1866. Hopkins composed his most ascetic poem "The Habit of Perfection" in 1866. In the same year he had

decided to become a Catholic. John Henry Newman had received him into the Catholic Church on 21 October, 1866 after Hopkins had travelled to Birmingham in September, to consult the leaders of the Oxford converts. His decision *estranged* him from both his family and friends. Newman provided him with a teaching post at the Oratory in Birmingham after his graduation in 1867. It was here that he inspired himself to learn the violin.

He felt the call to join the Ministry as a Jesuit priest and began his Novitiate at the **Society of Jesus** at Manresa House, Roehampton in 1868, and moved to St. Mary's Hall, Stonyhurst in 1870 for his philosophical studies. This was followed by his vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. His decision to convert to Roman Catholicism at Oxford and his later decision to enter the Society of Jesus in 1868, isolated him from the mainstream English life. Between 1868 and 1875, he wrote a detailed prose journal and also composed songs. Also, he sketched and wrote sermons and verses and other religious pieces for the Church. During this period, he had a twin conflict in terms of writing poetry which prevented him from devoting himself completely to religion. It was only after reading the 13$^{th}$ century philosopher Duns Scotus in 1872 that he came to realize that the two did not necessarily conflict with each other.

He taught Classics at Manresa House in 1874 and chose the vocation to the Jesuit priesthood. Having failed to clear the theology exam meant that although he was ordained as a priest in 1877, he would never be promoted in the order. The Jesuit life was hard and rigorous but provided him some stability. Hopkins took up the duties as Sub minister and teacher at Mount St. Mary's College where he taught Greek and Latin. He served as a Curate at a Jesuit Church in London and then at Oxford, Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow. While he was ministering in Oxford he became a founding member of Oxford University. Hopkins was temperamentally and physically not suited for the order with its exhausting schedule of study, teaching, preaching, grading papers, carrying parish work and visiting the sick.

Hopkins became a Professor of Greek and Latin at University College, Dublin in1884. Here, he was much depressed due to isolation and

his general health had also deteriorated as his eyesight began to fail. After being in ill health for several years and suffering bouts of diarrhoea, Hopkins passed away due to Typhoid fever in 1889. His funeral took place in Saint Francis Xavier Church located in Dublin and was finally laid to rest in Glasnevin Cemetery. On his death bed his last words were **"I am so happy, I am so happy. I loved my life."**



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 1:** What were the varied innovative literary forms that Hopkins had experimented with for his poetry?

**Q 2:** Describe his student life at Oxford from 1863-1867.

Hopkins began writing poetry in his school years expressing his appreciation of natural beauty in a sensuous **Keatsian** manner. But, while at Oxford he found himself into the religious conflicts of the 1860s and this created in his Oxford verses, an ascetic streak. It was as if, it reflected a considerable chastening of his enthusiasm for nature. The decision of 1868 is the most vital point for understanding his artistic life, and the intense religious life that he entered is essential to comprehend his poetry. But, this was also the year when he burnt all his poems, before joining the Jesuits, feeling that the sensuous writing was improper for the new order that he had chosen. The early poems available today are only those that survived accidentally in diaries and manuscripts. Like Keats, the development of Hopkins' mind can be traced through ***The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*** and his correspondences with Dixon, Patmore and others.

Although, Hopkins was not a professional poet, his letters to Bridges reflect his dedication to both theory and the practice of poetry in equal measure. Hopkins was fortunate to have had poet-friends such as Richard Watson Dixon and Robert Bridges. It was the efforts of the Poet Laureate Robert Bridges who became Hopkins' literary executor and editor, after his demise and his efforts introduced Hopkins' poetry to a wide readership

bringing the poet posthumous acclaim that he much deserved. Bridges had published a collected edition and introduced 750 copies of Hopkins's poems in a 1918 Oxford University Publication. Following then, an expanded edition, prepared by Charles Williams appeared in 1948.

Hopkins continued to write poetry until the end of his life. From 1875 onward his writing was completely religious. He moved to various places like Manchester and Liverpool among others and saw the evils of the industrial revolution which became the cause for the widening gap between man and nature. His poem "*Felix Randal*" is an example of his sympathy with man's soul. His most personal and intense poems belong to the period when he was in Dublin (1884-89). The passionate sonnets of 1884-89 stand out as his greatest poems, revealing an intense period of depression that he had lived through. An example of such a sonnet is "Carrion Comfort" which describes his defiant refusal to give in to this despair.

The Jesuit superiors failed to understand his poetic talent and cast him away from prospective readers. It was since 1875, that he started writing poetry again, beginning with the radical poem "The Wreck of Deutschland", which the editor of the Jesuit periodical *The Month* had stated he "dared not print." During his lifetime, Hopkins published only a few poems. No representative edition of his work appeared until 1918. Even though, he had made a bon-fire of all his poetry, before his entry to the Jesus novitiate, some of the poems that he had sent to Bridges and other friends had survived.

In 1884, he was the professor of Greek and Latin at the University College of Dublin, where his English origins, his disagreement with Irish politics, his isolation in Ireland and his personal oddities made him an ineffective teacher. The gloom and loneliness reflected in what came to be known as the "**Terrible sonnets**" such as "I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark." According to Canon Dixon, they were not terrible because of the quality but rather they reached the "terrible crystal" in which all the melancholy of the later part of his life had crystallised.

Most of his surviving works are centered on the presence of God and his evidence in the creation of his works and they also explore the

presence of violence and mystery in the sufferings of human. Hopkins' achievement lies in his breaking out of the tradition of the contemporary Victorian poetry and also of the Romantic mode of poetry with his original treatment of personal sorrow and his deep love for nature. Notable collections of Hopkins manuscripts and publications are kept in Campion Hall, Oxford; the Bodleian Library, Oxford; and the Foley Library at Gonzaga University in Washington.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 3:** Which year is considered the most vital point of Hopkin's writing career?

**Q 4:** How did Hopkins receive posthumous acclaim for his great works after his demise?

**Q 5:** During which period of his writing career did Hopkins write his "Terrible sonnets"?

**Q 6:** Why did Hopkins burn his early poems?

## 5.4 READING THE POEMS PRESCRIBED

**"The Windhover" To Christ our Lord**.

I caught this morning morning's *minion*, king-
dom of daylight's *dauphin*, *dapple*-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and *striding*
High there, how he rung upon the vein of wimpling wing
In his *ecstasy*! Then off, off forth on swing,
As a *skate*'s heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
*Rebuffed* the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, - the achieve of the mastery of the tiny!
Brute beauty and *valour* and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! And the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my *chevalier*!
No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down *sillion*
Shine, and blue bleak embers, ah my dear
Fall, *gall* themselves, and gush gold-*vermillion.*

**"Pied Beauty"**

Glory be to God for dappled things- (1)
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in *stipple* upon *trout* that swim;
Fresh-fire coal *chestnut*-falls; *finches*' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced- fold, *fallow*, and plough;
And all the trades, their gear and tackle and trim (6)
All things counter, original, spare, strange
Whatever is *fickle*, *freckled* (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet; sour; *adazzle*; dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him

**"The Windhover"**

"I caught this morning morning's minion, king- (1)
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the vein of wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! Then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, - the achieve of the mastery of the tiny!" (8)

"The Windhover" is one of the finest poems by Hopkins. He himself opined that it was "the best thing" he ever wrote. Perhaps, this was the reason behind his decision to dedicate such an achievement to Christ. The windhover, also known as the kestrel, is the commonest bird of prey in Britain. It has a unique ability unlike any other bird in the sky, to remain stationary in the air at the relatively low altitude of 30-40 feet while scanning for mice and other small prey on the ground below. In order to maintain itself in the air without forward motion, it constantly makes quick adjustments to various wind speed and currents of air. For the same reason the bird moves in place up and down, instead of moving forward.

The poem is a distinctive expression of the mystery of Christ the Redeemer, the lesson of Christ's life, and His victory after Death. Like all

his nature poems "The Windhover" too has a deep spiritual significance. From Hopkins' letter to Bridges, it was evident that he wanted his poetry to be understood, even if they did not yield their meaning easily, and wished this poem to be 'rightly' understood. It was only after six years of having written the poem, that he inserted the dedication "To Christ our Lord". Perhaps, this was to emphasise the truth about the meaning of the poem. A serious student of Hopkins, Donoghue is of the opinion that only the dedication and not the composition of the poem was a religious act. However, one cannot overlook the religious or spiritual impulse in the poem.

The first octet (first eight lines) of the poem opens with the poet's catching sight of the bird as the minion of the morning, the crown-prince of the Kingdom of Daylight. It was riding the steady air, striding high above the sky. In its ecstasy, the windhover halted with the wings as if it were pulling back on a horse's rein and then again launching itself like a child on the swing. Like a skater sweeping gently around a bend, it hurled itself against the wind, gliding and mastering the morning air. The observing poet's heart stirred in excitement on seeing the mastery of the tiny bird. The vitality of the bird excites in the reader a desire for his own mastery and achievement. If the bird could show such beauty and power drawing so much of admiration and excitement, then one could expect the unimaginable from Christ, from whom are all things.

"Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here (9)
Buckle! And the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!
No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue bleak embers, ah my dear
Fall, gall themselves, and gush gold-vermillion." (14)

In the content of the sestet (last six lines) of the poem is the meaning of the poem. The keywords in these lines are the sudden realisation of the poet in the "Here" (line 9) and "Then" (line 10). The beauty and power of the bird is something that is a physical reality, at once evident and visible. But, the true beauty and power of Christ lies in His ***transcendental*** reality or a higher principle, in His Passion and greatness, through which the beauty of

virtue, love and sacrifice glow like fire. The admiration which the bird stirs in him at the beginning is "then" stirred by Christ and this realisation makes the narrator cry: "O my Chevalier!"

In the last three lines, the poet finds in nature the same paradox of mystery and meaning of Christ, that from destruction a new life will spring out. This he evokes through two examples, the first of which is the ploughshare for the simple plodding work of a ploughman. It should be rather, soiled and blackened in the mud due to being dragged through the clay. But, at the end, it emerges from the ground with an increased shine and brightness from its polish against the cut earth. And, the second example is of the coal in the grate that seems to lose all its heat and yet, reveals a gold-vermillion fire. Similarly, Christ's Passion and greatness rises from eternal sacrifice.

In the poem, from the freedom of the skies in which the windhover is ecstatic, the reader descends to the sheer plod, plough, sillion and dying embers. The mortal birds when they fall on the ground reveal the beauty of their red and gold crests even in death. But, in essence the poem glorifies the significance of the life, death and Resurrection (life after death) of Christ, the Lord. Everything in the Universe bears the stamp of the divine in it. The idea is also employed by J.R. Tolkien who compares the Creator to a perfect prism and creation to the refraction of perfect light.

**"Pied Beauty"**

"Glory be to God for dappled things- (1)
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-fire coal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced- fold, fallow, and plough;"
And all the trades, their gear and tackle and trim (6)

The poem "Pied Beauty" is full of wonder at the world and also the awe at man's relation to this beautiful universe. Hopkins' desire for both rule and freedom finds him partly following and partly breaking the rule of the sonnet form. It is written in the experimental form of a ***curtal sonnet***. It opens with the declaration "Glory be to God" that suggest the poet's

reverence for God the Creator. This phrase stems from the motto "Ad marjoram Dei gloriam" (to the greater glory of God) of Hopkins's Jesuit Society. The same phrase is found throughout the Bible like the well known passage of Luke 2: 12-14, which details the birth of Christ, following the glorification of God.

In the opening ***strophe***¸ the Creator appears indirectly in his works, through the visible created world, the phenomenal world of motion. The variety of the "dappled things" in nature, the artistic placement of one shade or colour against another is defined through the words "pied", "dappled", "couple-colour" and "brinded." The poet describes how falling chestnuts resemble coals bursting in fire due to the reddish brown edible insides that are exposed when the shell break against the ground, he also wonders at the "couple-colour" in the cattle, the swimming trout and the outstretched wings of the finches.

The ancient four elements are evoked in the poem through the reference of the "skies" (air), "swims" (water), "fire coal chestnut falls" (fire) and "landscape" (earth). The poet observes the landscape that is "plotted and pieced" in to fields by agriculture.

"All things counter, original, spare, strange (6)
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet; sour; adazzle; dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him." (11)

The second stanza turns from the corporeal to the spiritual. The poet lists several contrasting traits that can be grouped as swift-slow, sweet-sour, adazzle-dim. Man's fickle will make him freckled with sin which lacks a common ground with God. The unchangeable Divine beauty of God in the concluding ***antistrophe*** is contrasted to the variable earthly beauty described in the opening strophe. The reader notes a spiritual conflict in the last lines because the poet draws another paradox in his puzzled idea of beauty.

The title "pied" itself implies two meanings, the first of which means spotted, mottled or freckled and the second which means confusion; such

is the nature of beauty which is appealing to all. Even though, God is the Creator of all beautiful things, his own beauty is not "pied" (perfect beyond change). His beauty may appeal much less than the beauty of the world. God "fathers-forth" and is the ultimate Creator of all things diverse and variable, all the physical, material, spiritual and beyond. God is seen as the ideal artist, the Impressionist in the eyes of the poet emphasizes that God's beauty is "past change", for which one is to "praise him." The poem is not without its paradoxes and irony but Hopkins unites these opposites excellently with his call to join in such praise and reverence. To the poet, nature is a manifestation of God's beauty alone.



**LET US KNOW**

This was a century in which most writers and intellectuals of the time abandoned Christianity and faith in God which was also termed as the "Victorian doubt." During, this time, Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and David Hulme's 18th century studies created a major rupture between science and religion. Several other thinkers like John Stuart Mill, Georg Wilhelm, Friedrich Hegel, Thomas Carlyle and Karl Marx among others created a cultural shift from organized religion. But, with Hopkins religion was still central and important. The above poems "The Windhover", "Pied Beauty", and "God's Grandeur" carry the same religious and spiritual impulse.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 7:** To whom is the poem "The Windhover" dedicated and why?

**Q 8:** What are the images of the living world evoked in the opening strophe of "Pied Beauty"?

## 5.5 MAJOR THEMES

The following are the important themes in the poems about which

you are reading in this unit.

**Changing Patterns of an Industrialised World:**

The rapid changes in the Victorian world, brought about by the advances in science and technology, the growth of democracy and the decline of Christian faith, had left the Victorian frame of mind in a mixed state of anxiety and optimism. 19th century England under the reign of Queen Victoria was ideal for imperial and industrial growth because it was aided by political stability and social reform. The urbanisation and industrialisation of England led to a rapid growth of the English towns, causing changes in the demographic pattern and the home-based industry. The industrial revolution turned cities like Manchester and Liverpool into bustling hubs of trade, commerce, industry and urban culture. The first modern railway line was constructed between the two cities. The movement of more than half of the population by mid-19th century, led to a drastic change in the demographic pattern in the English cities. The benefits of urban life with transportation along with the railways and the telegraph opened up communication from the earlier insularity of country life. But, the constant noise, poor work conditions, pollution, crime and other factors did crop up in the wake of the industrial revolution.

**The Crisis of Christian faith:**

A crisis connotes a turning point or re-analysis of what had been accepted as the earlier norm. Prior to this crisis, religion had dominated both the cultural and intellectual fabric of English life. From the 1830s, the successive geological and biological discoveries of Charles Lyell, Robert Chambers and Charles Darwin generated a stir with the controversies of the theories of evolution which came as a blow to the prevalent religious orthodoxy. Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-33), *Vestiges of Creation* (1844) and then Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) challenged the origins of divine origin and intensified what came to be termed as the 'great Victorian doubt' or the crisis of religious faith, as a result of the conflict between science and religion, that characterised the Victorian era.

Darwinian ideas weren't easily accepted, as people couldn't shake

off their age-old belief in the story of Genesis or the biblical idea of Adam's creation, and yet they couldn't deny attention to the scientific evolutionary theories on the origin of man. And it was only by the end of the century, that most of the ideas of Darwin came to be regarded with favour by the majority of the people and not just intellectuals of the time. The tension of doubt and faith, science and religion much affected the Victorian mind. The same crisis is reflected in literary works like Tennyson's "In Memoriam" and Matthew Arnold's famous poem "Dover Beach". But, strikingly the tendencies of the Victorian age were not reflected in the poetry of G.M. Hopkins, who saw in nature the divine manifestation of God the creator.

**Nature as the Embodiment of Divine Energy: (as in "Pied Beauty")**

Hopkins' aestheticism or appreciation of beauty was influenced by the preceding Romantics and the aesthetics of the late 19th century. His aesthetics were grounded in his love of nature which found reflection in his poetry and remained deeply personal. Hopkins' ascetism as a Jesuit priest made him aware of the demands of his religion and yet, it was his sensuous expression in poetry that bridged his conflicting desire for both the spiritual and the sensuous life. Instead of chronicling nature, Hopkins tried to extract a deeper meaning from nature and it was his study of Dun Scotus that led him to anchor his personal aesthetic with religion. Hopkins found the means to convert his love of nature into an act of admiration and celebration of divinity through his verses. He appreciated Arnold's aesthetic which was based on the need of a higher meaning in art in order to be relevant. His close observation of nature and his religious conviction led to the use of the ideas of **inscape** and **instress** in his poetry. The early journals of Hopkins were filled with detailed descriptions of flowers, clouds and various aspects of nature. The ***Journal*** of Hopkins that he kept during the "silent years" (1866-75) shows his remarkable painter's eye for details in nature.



**LET US KNOW**

**Inscape and Instress**:

A very important element of Hopkins's poetry was his concept of "Inscape" and "Instress". Inscape has to with the individual essence and uniqueness of everything in the Universe. This concept was derived from the medieval Theologian Duns Scotus. The inscape of an object was communicated by its instress ensuring the transmission of its specific distinctiveness and importance in the wider creation. For an example, in his poems, God is the inscape or the essence of His created world. It is the '**instress of inscape**' that leads one to the realisation of Christ. Hopkins felt that it was the artist's job to express such uniqueness, through his works, to find 'images' that would nail the inscape down for the readers.

**Emphasis on the Essence of Experience:**

Hopkins' notebooks reveal how he details what appears unique to him, be it a particular sunset, cloud formation or the waves. Hopkins's devotion to the theologian Duns Scotus was in direct contrast to the preference of Thomas Aquinas by the Jesuit order of the time. This also raised a lot of suspicion among his superiors. They favoured Aquinas for his understanding of the unity of all things over the individual "thisness" or distinctiveness of Scotus. The "thisness" of Scotus was "that which makes this oak tree, this particular oak tree only, or this rose this particular rose only, or this person this person only and not another- something unique and separate, God's infinite and incredible freshness of Creation every nanosecond of everyday world without end." In "The Windhover", the poet experiences the essence of divine transcendental beauty through the visible and physical reality of the ecstatic bird in flight. It is the poet's admiration for the majestic bird which dawns in him the realisation of God's omnipresence in nature as the poet exclaims "O, My Chevalier!" referring to Christ. Thus, the poem begins with an address to Christ and the figure of Christ is presented as the essence of His created world. His omnipotent presence is

felt in His creation of nature at its best. And Hopkins directs the reader to the same realisation through the poem.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 9:** To what extent, did Charles Darwin affect the Christian Faith?

**Q 10:** Comment on Hopkins' views on nature.

## 5.6 HOPKINS' POETIC STYLE

The poem "Windhover" is written in the form of Italian sonnet of fourteen lines divided into a octave and sestet. The rhyme scheme of the poem is "aaaaaaaa" in the octave which is quite different from conventional sonnets. Hopkins' other innovation is that each line of the octave ends with the 'ing' sound. While the poem "Pied Beauty" is written in the form of Curtal sonnet, another invention of Hopkins. In this form the main qualities of a sonnet are retained, but within a smaller compass. Instead of an octave (8 lines) and sestet (6 lines), this poem has 6 plus 4 and ½ lines. The metre used is described as 'sprung paeonic'.

Hopkins believed that poetry required a language that was rich to both the senses and the intellect. His vocabulary is drawn from many sources of ***archaic, colloquial*** and ***dialect*** words. He was always precise in his use of words and a supporter of **linguistic purism** in English which is reflected in an 1882 letter to Robert Bridges which states: "It makes one weep to think what English might have been; for in spite of all that Shakespeare and Milton have done…no beauty in language can make up for want of purity." The major influence in his writing was the **Old English**, which to him was "a vastly superior thing to what we have now" and he took a long time to learn it well. The Welsh language which he learnt while studying Theology at St. Beuno's College influenced him a lot and the poetic forms of Welsh Literature became a prominent feature of his work.

This also added to his use of ***alliteration***, ***assonance, onomatopoeia*** and rhyme. The occurrence of multiple words with the same sounding prefix, is known as *alliteration* i.e., "daylight's dauphin, dapple-

dawn-drawn" ("The Windhover") or "swift, slow; sweet, sour" ("Pied Beauty"). *Assonance* is the repetition of vowel sounds in nearby words, which are used to reinforce the meanings of words or to set the mood (notice u: /o/ou/ ue sounds repeated within a sentence) i.e. "Glory to be God/ then off, off forth on swing" ("The Windhover") or "My heart in hiding/ fold, fallow and plough" ("Pied Beauty"). *Onomatopoeia* suggests a word that imitates the source of the sound that it describes i.e. "riding" "rolling", "striding", "gliding" ("The Windhover") or "swift", "slow", "dim", "adazzle" ("Pied Beauty").

The imagery he used was remarkable for its richness. For example, in his poem "The Windhover", the poet catches the sight of a "morning's minion", which is the windhover. Here, the poet's use of the royal imagery is significant. For example, the bird is likened to a falcon in flight and is addressed as a prince of the kingdom of daylight and the imagery that is created through the words, describing the bird in motions of sweeping, striding, hurling and gliding, bring alive the mental image of a bird in an ecstatic flight. His appreciation and a **sensuous love of nature** based on detailed observation characterised much of his poetry before 1878. His early struggle to negotiate his sensuous love for nature and his ascetic life finally resulted in his ***sacramental*** view of natural beauty." The exactness of his detailed expression is similar to that of the Pre- Raphaelite painters.

Hopkins also used a lot of **religious imagery** in his works that stemmed from his interest in Theology and religion. For example, in the poem "Pied Beauty", the poet through the ending lines "He fathers —forth whose beauty is past change: Praise him" refers to God the creator, who is central to the poem, as intended by the poem. Similarly, the poem "The Windhover" begins with the address "To Christ, our Lord" and the poet in a sudden realisation in his admiration of the ecstatic bird, exclaims "O, my Chevalier!" with a reference to Christ. Nearly, all of the poems written by Hopkins stems directly or indirectly from his personal association with the ministry.

One of the most important poetic techniques of Hopkins was the "**Sprung Rhythm**" which appeared in his poem "The Wreck of Deutschland". It is based on the irregular verses of *Samson Agonistes* and about the

sinking of a German ship carrying exiles of five Franciscan nuns in 1875. **Sprung Rhythm** is a poetic rhythm, designed to imitate the rhythm of natural speech. The basic principle of this attempt is to break away from strictly conventional patterns in containing one stressed syllable, followed by any number of unstressed syllables in a foot of a poetic metre. Hopkins described it as a system of prosody in which the only stressed syllables are counted and the unstressed ones are ignored. He claimed to have discovered this unnamed poetic rhythm in the folk songs, spoken poetry, in the works of Shakespeare and Milton. He also employed the "**curtal sonnet**" in his works, which was an eleven-line (or more accurately, ten and a half line) sonnet.

As a Jesuit, Hopkins was to devote his intellect to the service of Christ which meant giving up writing poetry. But, through his own reading and understanding of his twin conflicts of the religious and the secular, of the priest and the poet in him, he himself said in one of his own sermons, that the poet and his works are creatures of God. Even Dixon was of the opinion that "**surely one vocation cannot destroy another**" and encouraged Hopkins saying "and such a Society as yours will not remain ignorant that you have such gifts as have been given by God to man."In his distinctiveness of poetic forms, he recognised the risk of being criticised as "queer" but to write real poetry it was a risk worth taking. A full appreciation of his excellent technical abilities requires careful analysis of his individual poems.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 11:** Which are the major characteristics of Hopkins' writing style?

**Q 12:** What is the 'curtal sonnet' form that Hopkins employed in his poetry?

**Q 13:** What is 'Sprung Rhythm' as one can find in a poem like "The Wreck of Deutschland?"

## 5.7 RECEPTION OF HOPKINS

Hopkins had decided never to publish his poems but he also realized that any true poet required an audience for criticism as well as encouragement. In an exchange of correspondence with his friend, fellow poet and Anglican cleric Richard Watson Dixon, Hopkins wrote: "the only just judge, the only literary critic is Christ, who prizes, is proud of and admires, more than any man, more than the receiver himself can, the gifts of his own making." John Berryman in *Eleven Addresses to the Lord* quoted: "Father Hopkins said the only true literary critic is Christ." The English humanist critic F. R. Leavis proclaimed the greatness of Hopkins in his critical essay on the writer which was included in the *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of Contemporary Situation* and it also remains one of the best account. Paul Mariani published Hopkins' full length biography *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Life* where he writes of the poet's creativity in the months before his ordination and following his writing of "The Wreck of Deutschland" which is an extraordinary contribution to modern poetry.

Hopkins' work inspired poets such as Elizabeth Bishop and John Berryman and continues to influence young poets and the criticism of academicians. **W. H Auden** pronounced himself "uneasy" at the intensity of Hopkins's confessional mode but others like **Robert Lowell** celebrated the poet's "inebriating exuberance." Some contemporary critics believed that the poet suppressed elegiac longing and erotic impulses in his poetry like the poems "The Bugler's Fist Communion" and "Epithalamion". Much of this has been discussed by critics such as Robert Martin's controversial biography *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life* (1991) and Julia Saville's book *A Queer Chivalry* among others. But, in no way the poet's distinctive brilliance can be tarnished for the same. One contemporary critic M. M. Taylor, has argued for the inclusion of Hopkins with the **Uranian Poets**, a group whose writings derived in many ways from the prose works of Hopkins' academic tutor Walter Pater. His work did share the subjective love of nature the Pre-Raphaelite or Neo-romanticism schools and yet, was distinctively original in its own way. For the same reason, he is seen as the

**precursor to modernist poetry** or as the bridge between the two poetic eras.



## 5.8 LET US SUM UP

You have just finished reading about Hopkins and two of his poems "The Windhover" and "Pied Beauty". The poems through its rich imagery find in all creation of nature, the mastery of God. And the poet expresses the awe and admiration, at the beauty of God which surpasses earthly beauty. Along with the prescribed poems, you have learnt about the poet's life and his works which earned him the delayed but much deserved posthumous acclaim. Although he was a Victorian poet, the crisis and the conflicts of his age, did not reflect in his work. Instead, in striking contrast to the Victorian crisis of faith, God was central to Hopkins's poetry. He presented in his work a rare combination of the intellect, of both a poet and a priest and harnessed his thoughts of both the secular and the religious. Hopkins employed and popularised the ideas of **Inscape** and **Instress** in his poetry, among other poetic forms like the **Curtal Sonnet** and the **Sprung Rhythm**, which have been discussed in this unit. These poetic techniques are very integral to Hopkins' writing. The themes in this unit, cover some of the important and associated aspects and ideas related to the poems, in order to enhance the learner's understanding and appreciation of Hopkins and his poetry.



## 5.9 FURTHER READING

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2) Daiches, David. (2007). *A Critical History of English Literature*. *Volume II.* New Delhi: Random House.

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thought in Hopkins 'The Windhover'." *Victorian Poetry.* Vol 27, No 2. West Virginia University Press: 1989. Available at http://www.jstor.org/stable/40002344.

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6) Kuhn, Joaquin. (1978). "The Completeness of Pied Beauty." *Studies in English Literature.* 1500-1900, Vol. 18, No 4. Rice University:

7) Lowenstein, Amy. (1976). "Pied Beauty: A Key to Theme and Structure." *Victorian Poetry.* Vol 14, No 1. Virginia University Press.

8) Sampson, George. (2006). *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature.* New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.

9) Sanders, Andrew. (1999). *The Short Oxford History of English Literature.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

**Websites and Electronic Resources:**

Available at http://www.jstor.org/stable/450198.

Available at http://www.jstor.org/stable/40001861.

## 5.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

**Ans to Q 1:** Sprung rhythm… …Inscape and Instress… …Curtal sonnet… …use of imagery etc.

**Ans to Q 2:** Studied classics at Balliol College, Oxford… …met his lifelong friend Robert Bridges… …social life at Oxford university… …changes in behaviour.

**Ans to Q 3:** The year 1868 is important… …Hopkins' entry into religious life… …the tussle with artistic life… … burning of his poems in the same year… …feelings that sensuous writing is improper for new Jesuit order.

**Ans to Q 4:** The efforts of Bridges… …Hopkins' literary executor and editor… …Introducing his poetry to readers… …the posthumous acclaim… …Bridge's 750 copies of Hopkins' poems… …1918 collected edition.

**Ans to Q 5:** In around 1884… …he became Professor of Greek and Latin… …the gloom and loneliness reflected in poems that came to be known as "terrible sonnets"… …but according to Canon Dixon, they are not 'terrible' because of its quality… …the crystallised melancholy of the period.

**Ans to Q 6:** In1868, before joining the Jesuits, Hopkins' felt that the sensuous writing was improper for the new order he had chosen. The early poems available today are only those that survived accidentally in diaries and manuscripts.

**Ans to Q 7:** The poem is dedicated to Christ… …its an expression of mastery of Christ… …his life and death… …if a wind hover is so beautiful then Christ's beauty and power is unimaginable.

**Ans to Q 8:** The tension of doubt and faith, science and religion, caused by Darwin's theories much affected the Victorian mind… …examples are Tennyson's "In Memoriam" and Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach"… …But, strikingly the tendencies of the Victorian age were not reflected in the poetry of G.M. Hopkins, who saw in nature the divine manifestation of God the creator.

**Ans to Q 9:** Hopkins found the means to convert his love of nature into an act of admiration and celebration of divinity through his verses… …his close observation of nature and his religious conviction led to the use of the ideas of inscape and instress in his poetry.

**Ans to Q 10:** Chestnuts… … cattle… …trout… …finches… …landscape… …fields of agriculture… …four elements (air, water, fire, earth).

**Ans to Q 11:** Old English… …Welsh language… …poetic forms of Welsh Literature… …alliteration… …assonance… …onomatopoeia… …rhyme… …religious imagery.

**Ans to Q 12:** Eleven line sonnet.

**Ans to Q 13:** A poetic rhythm… …basic principle… …breaking away from conventional pattern… …one stressed syllable with a number of

unstressed syllables… …discovered in folk songs, spoken poetry, works of Shakespeare and Milton.



## 5.11 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

**Q 1:** How did Hopkins's student life at Oxford influence his early works? Would you like to discuss Hopkins as a religious poet?

**Q 2:** Describe the phase in Hopkins's writing career when he had a twin conflict in terms of his writing career. How did he resolve that crisis?

**Q 3:** Account for the struggle between poetic sensibility and religious commitment in Hopkins's poetry reflected through a poem like "The Windhover".

**Q 4:** How did Hopkins spend his final years in Dublin where he wrote his most passionate works from 1884-89?

**Q 5:** Explain briefly the content of the poem "The Windhover." Describe the significance of the imagery used in the poem "Pied Beauty."

**Q 6:** Do you think the line- "He fathers–forth where beauty is past change" sums up the content of the poem "Pied Beauty." If yes/no, why?

**Q 7:** What do you understand by the concepts of 'Inscape' and 'Instress'? Illustrate with actual examples from Hopkins' poetry.

**Q 8:** How were the works of Hopkins critically received after his death?

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# UNIT 6: W. B. YEATS: "THE SECOND COMING"

## UNIT STRUCTURE


6.1 Learning Objectives

6.2 Introduction

6.3 W.B. Yeats: The Poet

6.4 Reading the Poems prescribed

6.5 Major Themes

6.6 Yeats' Poetic Style

6.7 Reception of Yeats

6.8 Let us Sum up

6.9 Further Reading

6.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

6.11 Possible Questions


## 6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- read briefly about the life and works of the Irish poet W. B. Yeats
- discuss some basic features of modernism through W. B. Yeats' poetry
- interpret the poem prescribed in terms of its different aspects
- identify the themes, philosophy, and concerns of Yeats as a modern poet
- discuss the poem "The Second Coming" in its nuanced totality.

## 6.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the second unit of Block 2 in this unit, you will interpret a 'modern' poem "The Second Coming" composed by W. B. Yeats. You must have already read that Yeats was a great Irish poet, dramatist, and prose writer. However, he is more famous as one of the greatest English language poets of the 20th century. He also received the coveted Nobel Prize for literature in 1923. The poem "The Second Coming" was composed in 1919,

and first printed in *The Dial* in November 1920. Subsequently, this poem was included in his collection of verses titled *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921). You will find it interesting to read that the poem allegorically uses many Christian images regarding the **Apocalypse** and **Second Coming** to describe the atmosphere in post-war Europe of the early decades of the 20th century. The title of the poem is derived from the Christian belief in the Second Coming of Christ, but the god to be born, supposedly in the second Bethlehem, is a beast. There is a succession of "uncontrollable mysteries" which is antithetical to the Christian nativity. The new age to be born will be a reversal of the last. This idea is significant in the sense that it was written shortly after the Russian Revolution and World War I, between the Black and Tan War in Ireland, and just before the rise of Fascism under Mussolini in Italy. Thus, in this unit, you will get to read how Yeats, in order to showcase the disintegration of the modern society, uses the Christian background in this poem. Yeats as a modern poet was troubled by a sense of life's complexity. Very often, he sought to juxtapose the messiness of life with the neatness of art (through his creation of the ideal and mythical world of Byzantium) as a move towards writing poetry in the modern times. This was however not a poetry of 'escape' but rather an acknowledgement of the gap between reality and the artist's dream of an order in a society in turmoil.

## 6.3 W.B. YEATS: THE POET

**His life :**

William Butler Yeats was born in Sandymount, Dublin on June 28th 1865. His father was John Butler Yeats, a barrister but became a portrait painter later. His mother Susan Pooexfen belonged to a rich merchant family of Sligo, Ireland. After two years of his birth in 1867, Yeats' family went to London although young William spent much of his childhood days with his grandparents in the countrysides of Sligo. It is to be noted that the natural beauty, folklore and the supernatural legends of the country shaped many of Yeats' later works and would form the setting of many of his poems. However, he received his school education in Dublin where his family moved

in 1800. In 1883, in the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin he received the most important education through his meeting with many poets and artists.

Because of his parents, Yeats could claim lineages with various Anglo Arish Protestant families, which are present in many of his works. However, it is important to note that Yeats never identified himself with his own Protestant tradition, which represented a powerful minority against Ireland's Roman Catholic majority. However, he was also away from the Roman Catholic tradition because he could not share their faith, he felt annoyed by their concerns for material success. Instead, he was in favour of cultivating a tradition more profound than both these two historical traditions. Subsequently, he took side with the tradition in Ireland lying hidden and existing largely in the old customs, beliefs, and holy places more Pagan than the Christian.

Yeats' first publication was in the form of two lyrics published in the *Dublin University Review* in 1885. However, it was in 1887 that he adopted the career of a writer when his family again went back to London. There he joined the Theosophical Society, whose mysticism attracted him a lot mainly because it was a form of imaginative world far removed from the common humdrum day-to-day life. Gradually, his disavowal of the advances of science and his visionary ideals enveloped him with various types of poetic images. Along with it, he began to study the prophetic books of William Blake, which showed him ways into other traditions like the Platonic, the Neo-Platonism, the Swedenborgian, and the alchemical.

Soon Yeats became an active member of the London literary circle. He befriended William Morris and W. E. Henley, and along with his friends Lionel Johnson and Arthur Symons he co-founded the famous Rhymer's Club. In 1889, he met Maud Gonne, an Irish girl, and as Yeats himself writes, from then on "the troubling of my life began." Maud was very beautiful, brilliant and ardent. He hopelessly fell in love with her. Although Maud admired him, she was never in love with him. Instead, she was an Irish patriot, a rebel always trying to assert her commanding personality. In fact, when Yeats joined in the Irish nationalist cause, he did so mostly for the love of Maud. When Yeats staged his play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Maud played the lead role.



## LET US KNOW

**Rhymer's Club:**

The Rhymers' Club, founded in 1890, was a group of London-based poets. Originally, not much more than a dining club, it produced several anthologies of poetry during 1892 to 1894. The members of the group usually met in a London pub in Fleet Street. The poets who were frequent visitors to the club were Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Francis Thompson, John Gray, John Davidson, Alfred Douglas, Arthur Symons, and so on. The group as a whole matched quite closely Yeats' retrospective idea of 'the tragic generation', destined for failure and in many cases early death. The members also published two volumes of verse. The first, entitled *The Book of the Rhymer's Club* was published in 1892. *The Second Book of the Rhymer's Club* appeared two years later in 1894.

By this time, Irish politics was undergoing rapid changes. After the death of the controversial leader Charles Parnell in 1891, Yeats thought that the Irish political life had lost its early significance. Yeats thought that the vacuum could be filled only by literature, art, poetry, drama, and legends. You perhaps know that Yeats' famous *The Celtic Twilight* (1893) was a move toward this end. In 1898, he met Lady Gregory who became a playwright and a close ally of Yeats. She was already busy in collecting old stories of Western Ireland. Yeats felt that if this lore could be treated in a strict or high style he would be able to create a realm of poetry unique to his own identity. Subsequently, he spent much time with lady Gregory at her home and purchased a ruined Norman castle called Thoor Ballylee in the neibourhood. This structure, under the name of the "Tower" would become a symbol of his best poems in later times.

In 1899, Yeats asked Maud Gonne if she would marry him but she refused his proposal. After that, Yeats devoted most of his time to literature and drama as he had great faith in poetry and plays that would help

transfigure an Irish nation. Soon he became one of the most prominent originators of **Irish Literary Theatre** performing its first show in Dublin in 1899 with Yeats' play *The Countess Cathleen.* Till the end of his life Yeats remained the director of this theatre, which reappeared as the **Abbey Theatre** in 1904. Some of his plays that became a part of the Abbey repertoire are—*The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894), *The Hour Glass* (1903), *The King's Threshold* (1904), *Deirdre* (1907) and so on. It was during the same time that Yeats published volumes of poetry like *Poems* (1895) and *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899) typical of his early verse based on Irish folklore and legends. However, in collections like *In The Seven Woods* (1903) *and The Green Helmet* (1910), Yeats gradually shifted to Celtic influences. However, the changes in his poetry in between 1909 to 1914 can be perceived through the collection of poetry *Responsibilities: Poems and a Play* (1914) where Yeats hardens his verse lines with more resonant imagery and directness. In 1917, he published "The Wild Swans at Coole" which show perfections of his own poetic techniques. In 1918, he published *The Tower,* named after the castle Yeats owned. Some of his other great poems were published in *The Winding Star* (1929).



**LET US KNOW**

The most interesting development in dramatic literature of the early 20th century can be traced through the revival of poetic drama in the plays of W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot. Yeats started by writing dreamy plays on Irish mythologies but often presented a symbolic power in both action and imagery suggesting different labels of meaning English drama had not experienced for a long time. For example, the play *The Countess Cathleen* is the story of the Irish countess who sold her soul to save her people but finally she reached heaven. This play caused riots among the Dublin audience. Yeats' treatment of the **Deirdre story** in the play *Deidre* concentrates on the final moments with a heroic dignity, which was part of his notion of tragedy. However, his later plays are based on neo-Platonic and other mystic notions and

symbols, and are highly stylized in the manner of the Japanese **Noh drama** by which the writer was considerably influenced. *Cavalry* (1920), *The Resurrection* (1931), *Purgatory* (1939), *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939) are some of his important symbolic plays which threw light on the ironic contemplation of human psychology and history. However, to understand such plays we need to be ware of Yeats' 'symbolic system'.

Yeats' hostility towards the modern city life and his return to the ideals of the Renaissance or of Byzantium, of courtly Japan, or of Ireland's heroic age, might suggest that his works were out of touch with his time. His preoccupation with the ancient, the traditional, the mystical and the mythical may also seem to point to that direction. Yeats has been one of the first modern writers to be conscious of the need for the mythical in literature. Because, he believed that this method was 'simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense range of futility and anarchy which is apparent in contemporary history. This method was an alternative to the lives in cities, which killed the meditative passive life. However, the esoteric, archaic cultivation of tradition might also invite considerable political risks. Yet Yeats' works represent a cumulative and coherent response to the spirit of the modern age.

Yeats was much influenced by the fact that in certain parts of Ireland the oral tradition was still visibly alive. Gaelic poems and stories were still part of a world in which the common men had some share in imaginative literature. In contrast to this modern English literature was almost entirely the product of the printing press influencing its character and even determining its nature, and was directed primarily towards a small group of literate readers. With the passage of time however, the central distinctions between oral and written, between English and Irish continued to influence his own poetic and imaginative enterprises. An interest in folklore, ballads and other literary traditions of the countrysides characterise most of his poetry in general where the language and rhythms of speech are markedly very prominent. He was aware of his responsibility towards the claims of the oral threatened by the prominent tendencies of contemporary English

culture. His own poetry is the product of what he calls 'conscious, deliberate craft'. In a letter to his father in 1913, he writes: "I have tried to make my works convincing with a speech so natural and dramatic that the hearer would feel the presence of a man thinking and feeling." Later Yeats also insisted that he must 'write for the ear', so that he might be 'instantly understood as when an actor or folksinger stands before an audience."

The interesting life history of Yeats personal life does not end here. In 1917, Yeats asked Iseult Gonne, Maud Gonne's daughter to marry him. Sometime later, he proposed another girl George Hyde Lees and they were happily married in 1917. In 1922, Yeats accepted an invitation to become a member of the new Irish Senate. In 1923, when he received the coveted Nobel Prize for literature, Yeats had already become one of the most significant modern poets. In 1926 *Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935*—a collection of poems he loved most was published. His last two collections of poems *New Poems* and *Last Poems and Two Plays* were published in 1938 and 1939 respectively.

Yeats died in January 1939 when he was abroad. The intention was to bury him in Sligo but the decision was thwarted because of the outbreak of World War II. In 1948, his dead body was finally shifted to Sligo and was buried in a little Protestant churchyard. Yeats has to his credit the rare expertise of producing his greatest works between the ages of 50 and 75. The poems written during this period, show clear instances of his experiments in a range of forms of poetry, drama and prose, and his own spiritual growth and gradual acquisition of personal wisdom which he incorporates into his own idea of mythology.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 1:** How did Yeats perceive the use of myths in his poetry?

**Q 2:** What is the significance of Rhymer's Club?

**Q 3:** From where is the poem "The Second Coming" taken? How does Yeats' use of Christian imagery reflect the contemporary age?

**His Works :**

For reasons of space, it is difficult to provide a detail discussion on the range of poetic works that Yeats had written. However, I do insist that you read more and more about Yeats' works from books like *WB Yeats: Selected Poems* for having a better grasp of the concerns and philosophy of Yeats as a modern poet. For your convenience, a short discussion of his poetry is provided period wise. Another fact is that his poetry is so full of references to people and events and reflects so much of his own spiritual and intellectual developments that it is really difficult to single out one particular poem as his best.

**1885 –1889**

You are already told in the previous section that Yeats' first publication was in the form of two lyrics published in the *Dublin University Review* in 1885. Since then he began to associate himself with other writers and intellectuals who recognised his talent for a would-be writer. In the next few years, his association with the Theosophical Society produced a number of poems like "The Indian upon God", "The Indian to his Love", "The Sad Shepherd" etc. again published in the *Dublin University Review*. At the same time, he also wrote an article on Samuel Ferguson whose poetry had attempted to interpret Celtic Ireland. Yeats' intention was to criticise the Englishness of the Trinity College Intelligentsia and to proclaim his belief in the National Celtic literature. His connection with the Irish patriot John O'Leary inspired his vision of a nationalist Ireland and this new attitude inculcated in him an idea that "all poetry should have a local habitation when at all possible." However, the purpose of nationality was to transcend that very nationality and to resort to universalism which according to Yeats could be attained "through what is near you, your nation, or, if you be no traveller, your village and the cobwebs of your walls." By this time Yeats was becoming recognised as a writer, and a Dublin publisher commissioned the publication of a selection of the works of some contemporary Irish poets, which was subsequently, issued as *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland*. Meanwhile, he was also working on a long narrative poem –"The Wanderings

of Oisin" which was published as Crossways in the *Collected Works* published in 1889.

**1889-1892**

This period remains important for the ups and downs in young Yeats' personal life. You have read that Yeats was deeply in love with Maud Gonne who had told Yeats that some passages in "The Wanderings of Oisin" had moved her to tears. This was a fair enough cause for Yeats to fall in love with her. Sometime in 1891, he proposed to her only to be repelled. Throughout the rest of his life, Yeats wrote several poems on her beauty, his hopelessness in love, and the bitterness of experience, which were transformed into poetry of passionate intensity. Yeats' Irish nationalism was differently inspired and with the help of poetry, he wanted to inspire in other writers an idea of the Celtic nation that would lead all men to a heroic conception of human life. However, after the death of the leader Charles Parnell in 1891, Yeats thought that the Irish political life had lost its early significance. Pernell's death prompted Yeats to write the poem "Mourn—and then Onwards", published in United Ireland.



**LET US KNOW**

Yeats' interest in the symbolism of the Theosophists and the Golden Dawn was that of a young man who habitually thought in images. **He was absorbed in trying to understand the world, created by imagination. He believed that mind and nature are unified.** This was also the time (**1889-1892)** to be inspired by the symbolism of William Blake, which further influenced Yeats' own use of symbols. Blake's vision of the world in four parts, which relate to the four aspects of the human mind, the four elements or the four points of the compass meant that there is an essential unity in the universe for those who can apprehend it with imagination. This understanding helped Yeats to develop the idea of **Phantasmagoria**—a structure of related images which would express the essence of all things. In his first such structures the emblems of the **Rose** and **Cross** predominate.

**1892-1910**

Yeats was becoming popular through for his writings in English periodicals, and reviews of Irish writers. In 1893, he published *The Celtic Twilight*, a collection of stories and legends collected from the peasants of Connaught. In 1894, his play *The land of Heart's Desire* was produced at Avenue Theatre. In the same year was published another collection of stories *The Secret Rose* in which again he wrote deeply about the peasant lives. For the next two years, he lived with Mrs. Olivia Shakespeare. However, Olivia soon discovered his passion for Maud and left him. This situation is explicitly presented in the poem "The Lover Mourns the loss of Love." During 1896, he befriended Lady Gregory, George Moore, Edward Mertyn and John Middleton Synge who together as a group founded the **Irish Theatre**. The next few years he lived in Coole and when he suffered from nervous breakdown, Lady Gregory nursed him back to health. During this time, he continued to write short stories and poems in which he sought to combine the two traditions— "noble and beggar man". In 1899, he published his third volume of poems *The Wind Among the Reeds* roughly owing to Irish mythology but also echoing P. B. Shelly's "Ode to The West Wind". Other concerns of the poems are about unrequited love, yearning for the beloved, yearning for actual beauty possible only through death. At the same time, he was also helping his friend Arthur Symons on *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. After this, Yeats tuned his interests towards theatre and the Irish literary movements. In 1910, he published *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* of which the majority of the poems are tinged with bitterness and disillusion.



**LET US KNOW**

**Abbey Theatre:**

The Abbey Theatre also known as the National Theatre of Ireland is located in Dublin, Ireland. The Abbey first opened its doors to the public on 27th December 1904. Despite losing its original building to a fire in 1951, it has remained active till today. The Abbey was the first state-subsidised theatre in the English-

speaking world. In its early years, the theatre was closely associated with the writers of the Irish Literary Revival, many of whom were involved in its founding and most of whom had plays staged there. The Abbey served as a nursery for many of the leading Irish playwrights and actors of the 20th century, including William Butler Yeats, Augusta, Lady Gregory, Sean O'Casey and John Millington Synge. In addition, through its extensive programme of touring abroad and its high visibility to foreign, particularly American, audiences, it has become an important part of the Irish tourist industry.

**1910-1921**

Yeats' next volume of work appeared in 1914 under the title *Responsibilities.* However, before its publication he visited America twice. In between the two visits, Yeats travelled widely. He stayed at Maud Gonne's Normandy house at Coole Park and occasionally at English country houses in the weekends. His interest in India had also led him to work with the poet Rabindranath Tagore on his translation of *Gitanjali* from Bengali to English. Ezra Pound praised both *The Green Helmet* and *Responsibilities* for their 'new robustness'. Between 1914 to 1019, Yeats produced a number of important poems. During the World War I, Yeats refused to write any **war poem** as his political interests were confined only to Ireland. He wrote in "On Being Asked for a War Poem": "A think it better that in times like these/ A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth/we have no gift to set a statesman right." Yeats might have been influenced by Maud Gonne who was nursing the wounded in France as well as Lady Gregory who supported the British War preparations. Yeats believed that Irish nationalism should co-operate with England and the last two years of the War. Two events inspired him to write poems about them – **Easter Rising of 1916**, and the death and active services of Major Robert Gregory in 1918 which was made to be the subject of his poems like "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" and "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death." While the poem "The Double Vision of Michael Robertes" is another very important poem, which helps in understanding

Yeats' philosophy better. Michael Roberts is a fictitious character with something of the visionary about him and represented what Yeats believed to be part of his own divided nature. He is contrasted with another character Owen Aherne having affinities with Yeats' 'public self'. Thus, the poem expresses a conflict of which Yeats was always conscious – between a dreamer and an active Irish Nationalist.

During 1919-1921, Yeats wrote "The Wild Swans at Coole", and the next volume of poems *Michael Roberts and the Dancer* published in February 1921. Most of the poems were based on the thoughts of *A Vision* a unique example of which can be traced through his poem "The Second Coming." In the lengthy explanatory notes for "An Image From a Past Life" and "The Second Coming" are both attributed to Roberts and the 'Preface' expresses a hope that 'my selection from the great mass of his letters and table talk' my soon be published. Yeats' happy married life is clear from several poems including "A Prayer for My Daughter."

**1922-1939**

In 1923, Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. During the next few years, he was working hard to complete his philosophical 'system' to finish his *A Vision.* His holiday tour to Sicily and Italy during 1924 enabled him to have interest for the first time in the Byzantine Mosaics of Pelermo and Monreale, and in Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel in Rome. In 1928, "The Tower" was published. This period is famous also for the excellent poems like "Sailing to Byzantium", "Leda and the Swan", "Among School Children" etc. During 1929-1930, he reached the end of his *A Vision*, which he had been revising and rewriting in recent times. Yeats spent some time in between 1935-36 translating the Hindu Upanishads—the Hindu treatises on the nature of man and the universe. Subsequently, he also edited *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. His last volume of poems called *Last Poems* contains all the poems published in 1938 as *New Poems.*



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 4:** Why are the years 1889-1892 important for Yeats?

**Q 5:** How is William Blake connected to Yeats?

**Q 6:** Mention some of the achievements of W. B. Yeats as a poet.

## 6.4 READING THE POEMS PRESCRIBED

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Yeats spent several years on his mystical theory of the universe that he described in *A Vision*. This theory issued in part from Yeats' lifelong

fascination with the occult and mystical, and in part from the sense of responsibility, Yeats felt to order his experience within a structured belief system. The theory of history Yeats articulated in *A Vision* centers on a diagram made of two conical spirals, one inside the other, so that the widest part of one of the spirals rings around the narrowest part of the other spiral, and vice versa. He believed that this image (he called the spirals "gyres") captured the contrary motions inherent within the historical process, and he divided each gyre into specific regions that represented particular kinds of historical periods (and could also represent the psychological phases of an individual's development). "The Second Coming" was intended by Yeats to describe the current historical moment (the poem appeared in 1921) in terms of these gyres. Yeats believed that the world was on the threshold of an apocalyptic revelation, as history reached the end of the outer gyre (to speak roughly) and began moving along the inner gyre.

The first 8 lines of the poem are concerned with the disintegration of the modern society with the spread of anarchy and the consequent violence and bloodshed. Under such conditions "Things Fall Apart; the center cannot hold" and there is a negation of the ceremoniousness which Yeats believed essential to the life of true dignity. However, for the soul to be 'innocent' it must be protected from vulgarity by rituals, or ceremony, and by custom hallowed by traditions. The poet calls it 'ceremony of innocence' which he wishes for his daughter in the final stanza of his other poem "A Prayer for my Daughter." The ruling classes, the would-be leaders, all fail to uphold such traditions as they lack "all convictions" and thus the mob violence of the 'worst' members of the community is unbridled. The opening 8 lines of the poem prepare the readers to understand the implications of the title of the poem about to be disclosed in the next stanza. Theosophical belief would help us to believe that every cycle of history has its own special deity and a new god comes regularly to replace the old. A turbulent time, as has been depicted in the poem would seem to denote the end of one cycle and imply the coming of some new deity.

The second stanza starts with a proclamation: "Surely some revelation is at hand". But, the readers wonder whether the expected

revelation is of some glorious deity that would usher in a new era of peace. But ironically, the 'vast image' is presented as troubling the poet's sights. His vision connects to the **Spiritus Mundi**—an image revealed as a terrifying beast that helps in recalling St. John's vision of **Antichrist**, the beast of Apocalypse, and is at the same time an image of the **Egyptian Phoenix**. The sense of dread increases as more details follow like the blank and pitiless gaze and the desert birds. With this, the poet's vision ends but he also proclaims about the knowledge he has gained. His knowledge seems to be that of a beast, having spent two thousand years of the Christian era in 'stony sleep' has been roused by a nightmare. The image of the 'rocking cradle' urges the monster to be born, and the fact that it 'slouches towards Bathlehem' together with the cradle image. Despite the poet's seeming assurance 'now I know', his uncertainty seems to be expressed by the fact that the poem ends not with an assertion but with a supposed question: "What is the nature of the brute to be born?" Thus, the title of the poem becomes ironic. In fact, there is no second coming of Christ, and the poem is about the birth of the beast/monster not the second coming of a god.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 7:** State the meaning of 'Gyre' as propounded by Yeats.

**Q 8:** What is the revelation all about?

## 6.5 MAJOR THEMES

The following are the important themes in the poem under consideration.

**The Poetic Self :**

Very few poets are so attentive to the deliberate creation of a poetic self. In "A General Introduction for my work" written towards the end of his life, Yeats stated:

"A poet writes always of personal life; in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never

speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a **phantasmagoria**…Even when the poet seems most himself, when he is Raleigh, and gives potentates the lie, or Shelly 'a nerve o'er which do creep the else unfelt oppressions of this earth,' or Byron 'and the soul wears out the breast' as 'the sword outwears its sheath' he is never the bundle of accident' and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete.

"Here Yeats is perhaps claiming that the poet is never isolated by the individuality of his existence since he is part of an imaginative and psychological history or **phantasmagoria** informing his own life and which can be drawn on as a poetic resource. In the poem "Second Coming", this dimension can be experienced in the legendary, the mythological, the occult, the supernatural and in the mysterious energy, which gathers round images and symbols such as the **Beast** of the poem, which is both personal and part of an ancient tradition.

**The Idea of Gyre :**

The growth, maturity and the decline of Civilization are divided by Yeats (as found in *A Vision*) into the 28 phases of the lunar month. History as a process therefore is conceived of as turning on a Great Wheel, which is a three dimensional figure, or sphere to which Yeats refers as gyres. Moving in this sphere are two interlocking cones formed by the motions of the gyrating points. From a place, one point moves spirally in ever widening gyrations until it reaches the circumference of the sphere and thus its movement is in the shape of a cone. From the plane, which forms the base of the cone, another point moves in the same way in the opposite direction. These whirling, interpenetrating cones are the image of the principle of conflict: one expands and the other contracts, opposition based on the natural and the supernatural, love and hate, war and peace, subjective and objective and so on. The word *gyre* in the poem's first line may be used in a sense drawn from Yeats' book *A Vision*, which sets out a theory of history and metaphysics Yeats claimed to have received from spirits. Yeats claimed that this image captured contrary motions inherent within the process of history, and he divided each gyre into different regions that represented

particular kinds of historical periods (and could also represent the psychological phases of an individual's development). Yeats believed that in 1921, the world was on the threshold of an apocalyptic moment, as history reached the end of the outer gyre and began moving along the inner gyre.

**Spiritus Mundi (or Animus Mundi) :**

Yeats firmly believed that dead souls could communicate with writers and artists and in so doing they were drawing on a general storehouse of images, or **Spiritus Mundi**, and the man whose imagination can fuse with it can thus draw on all images ever conceived by men. However, he can also create new ones. In the poem "The Second Coming", The speaker describes a nightmarish scene: the falcon, turning in a widening "gyre" (spiral), cannot hear the falconer; "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; anarchy is loosed upon the world"; "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/ The ceremony of innocence is drowned." The best people, the narrator of the poem says, lack all conviction, but the worst "are full of passionate intensity." However, the narrator asserts that the world is near a revelation: "Surely the Second Coming is at hand." But, he is also troubled by "a vast image of the **Spiritus Mundi** or the collective spirit of mankind: somewhere in the desert, a giant sphinx ("A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze as blank and pitiless as the sun") is moving, while the shadows of desert birds reel about it.

**Yeats' Prophesies :**

"The Second Coming" is viewed as a prophetic poem that envisions the close of the Christian epoch and the violent birth of a new age. The poem's title refers to the Biblical reappearance of Christ, prophesied in Matthew 24 and the Revelations of St. John, which according to Christianity, will accompany the Apocalypse and the Last Judgment. The principal figure in Yeats' *A Vision* is a sphinx-like creature with a lion's body and man's head, a "rough beast" awakened in the desert that makes its way to Christ's birthplace, Bethlehem. According to Yeats, as one gyre widens over a period of two thousand years, the other narrows, producing a gradual change in the age. The process then reverses after another twenty centuries have

passed, and so on, producing a cyclic pattern throughout time. In the early 20th century, Yeats envisioned the primary gyre, the age of Christianity, to be at its fullest expansion and approaching a turning point when the primary would begin to contract *and* the antithetical enlarge. Yeats wrote: "All our scientific, democratic, fact-accumulating, heterogeneous civilization belongs to the outward gyre and prepares not the continuance of itself but the revelation as in a lightning flash…of the civilization that must slowly take its place." Thus, in the poem "The Second Coming" scholars view the uncontrolled flight of the falcon as representative of the primary expansion of chaos while the coming of an antithetical "rough beast" in the desert becomes a harbinger of the new epoch.



**LET US KNOW**

**Yeats' Symbolism:**

Edmund Wilson in his book *Axel's Castle* writes that Yeats came to know about symbolism from his friend Arthur Symons as "the only movement that is saying new things". However, Yeats cannot be seen primarily as a symbolist poet mainly because in taking symbolism to Ireland he fed it with new resources and gave it a special accent. This led to the perception of his poetry from the point of view of its national qualities rather than its relation to the rest of the European literature. His symbolism develops from the use of mythology, which is not so easy to understand. Perhaps, Yeats himself never wanted the full meaning of his thought and tradition to be immediately comprehended. His own cyclic vision of history, a recurrence and convergence of images so that they became multiplied and enriched, may be traced in his works.

Yeats was one of the most self-conscious practitioners of the adoption of myth not only to poetry but also to his personal psychology and to his unique view of philosophy and history. For much of his life, Yeats used myth as a defence against the power of his own insight and a means of releasing unconscious knowledge of poetry. Yeats' adaptation of myths

indicates a need to impose order and unity on an apparent anarchy in his own mind and in the universe. His purpose is to use myths as a guide to reality both unconscious or personal, and historical or general. Subsequently, traditional mythological figures Leda, Helen, Sphinx, Achillis, Aeneas, Heracles— are adapted to the grand pattern of antithesis, regeneration and transcendence. These traditional figures are analogous to Yeats' own personal experience and this is what assigns a unique quality to Yeats' poetry.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 9:** How does Yeats consider the poetic self?

**Q 10:** Comment on Yeats' use of symbolism.

## 6.6 YEATS' POETIC STYLE

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

About the common quality of Yeats' poetry, Joseph Maunsel Hone the biographer of Yeats in his book *William Butler Yeats: The Poet in Contemporary Ireland* writes:

**"**His voice was musical, touched with melancholy, the tones rising and falling in a continuous flow of sound. He lingered on certain words to avoid as it were a hiatus, but the pauses when they occurred were timed and still full of sound, like the musical pauses in the execution of a master. This cadenced

utterance was most characteristic. When emphasis was needed he would introduce a hard metallic note, and this when passion intruded was like the clash of sword blades. His myopic gaze as he spoke was turned within, looking into the darkness, where, as he himself said, 'there is always something'. He seemed indeed to be discoursing with himself rather than to be persuading others…"

In his "A General Introduction for my Work" Yeats explained the importance of form. However, unlike most of the modernist poets who experimented with verse libre, Yeats gained mastery over the traditional poetic forms. Defending the use of traditional verse forms, Yeats tended to speak for his discovery of 'a powerful and passionate syntax, and a complete coincidence between period and stanza' and states the following: "If I wrote on personal love or sorrow in free verse, or in any rhythm that left it unchanged, amid all its accidence, I would be full of self contempt because of my egotism and indiscretion, and foresee the boredom of my reader. I must chose the traditional stanza, even what I alter must seem traditional…Ancient salt is best packing." This quotation can be usefully compared with T. S. Eliot's "Reflections on Verse Libre". Yeats perhaps wanted to revive the ancient potencies of symbols and the formal control provided by strictly regulated and received verse forms, which are often stanzaic.

However, "The Second Coming" is not stanzaic although it begins in rhyme. Yet the images of a disintegrating world are traced through brilliantly used blank verse. Yeats' understanding of politics and his own poetic activities needed for his vision of a world in which "the center cannot hold" would be written in a verse form, which embodied the gravitational pull of the center. What is important is the fact that Yeats approaches the subject of impending anarchy with a formal control, which might be described as classical. "The Second Coming" is written in a very rough iambic pentameter, but the meter is so loose, and seems closer to free verse with frequent heavy stresses. The rhymes are likewise haphazard; apart from the two couplets with which the poem opens, there are only coincidental rhymes in the poem, such as "man" and "sun."

## 6.7 RECEPTION OF YEATS

W. B. Yeats when alive had written several critical essays, stories, autobiographical works, both verse plays and prosaic plays, a considerable body of poems—narratives, dramatic and lyrical, which form the basis of his reputation as one of the greatest writers of the 20th century. He was also a playwright, literary journalist, critic, editor, public speaker, student and recorder of oral tradition, mythologist, theatre director and promoter of national literature. The range and diversity of Yeats' works may be surprising to a new reader.

The general relationship of *A Vision* to "The Second Coming" has been accepted by most critics, yet the elusive nature of Yeats' imagery has prompted varying interpretations of the poem. Many scholars have focused on its political character and especially on the sphinx-like beast of the poem's second half, seeing it as representative of the general forces of violence and anarchy, or more specifically of the Russian Revolution, World War I, the Irish Civil War of 1916, Fascism, or Communism. Such views typically emphasize the horrific and ominous nature of the beast, and associate its appearance with the decline of western civilization. Critics who have used *A Vision* extensively in their interpretations of the poem, however, have occasionally noted that the sphinx is not necessarily intended as a negative image—and that Yeats himself was not displeased to witness what he viewed as the close of the Christian era. Commentators have also seen "The Second Coming" in the context of other poems by Yeats that elicit similar or parallel themes, such as "Leda and the Swan" and "A Prayer for My Daughter." Additional areas of critical interest concerning the work include study of the symbolic nature of the falcon, exploration of the lengthy process of revision undertaken by Yeats, and consideration of the poet's ironic use of religious allusion in the poem. Others critics have also observed significant influences on the work, which contains echoes of Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound,* and have examined its philosophical underpinnings, particularly in relation to the conception of alternating cycles of human history proposed by Friedrich Nietzsche. Overall, "The Second Coming" has been well

received as one of the most evocative visionary lyric poems of the 20th century and widely praised for its technical excellence and extensive symbolic resonance.



## 6.8 LET US SUM UP

As you finish reading the unit, you find that the poem "The Second Coming" is an important statement about the contrary forces at work in history, and about the conflict between the modern and ancient world. The poem may not have the thematic relevance of Yeats' best work, and may not be a poem with which many people can personally identify; but the aesthetic experience of its passionate language is powerful enough to ensure its value and its importance in Yeats' work as a whole. You have learnt that Yeats spent several years on his mystical theory of the universe. Besides, this poem beautifully reflects Yeats' theory of history based on a diagram made of two conical spirals called 'gyres' which, according to the poet captured the contrary motions inherent within the historical process. Yeats divided each gyre into specific regions that represented particular kinds of historical periods. The poem is also considered to be a major work of Modernist poetry as a statement of the war ridden contemporary age of the early part of the 20th century.



## 6.9 FURTHER READING

1) Daiches, David. (2007). *A Critical History of English Literature. Vol: II.* New Delhi: Random House.

2) Entry on Yeats in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

3) Mathuen Notes. (1980). *W. B. Yeats' Poetry*. London: Mathuen paperback Ltd.

4) Webb, Timothy. (Ed). (1991). *W B Yeats: Selected Poems*. New Delhi: Penguin Books Ltd.

5) Wilson, Edmund. (2008). *Axel's Castle: A Study in Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930*. Read Books.

## 6.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

**Ans to Q 1:** Concern over modern city life… … his return to the ideals of the Renaissance or of Byzantium… …use of myths as a way of controlling, ordering, and shaping a disorderly world… …mythical life as an alternative to the lives in cities which killed the meditative passive life.

**Ans to Q 2:** Rhymers' Club was founded by a group of London-based poets… …produced several anthologies of poetry during 1892 to 1894… …poets like Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, John Davidson, Alfred Douglas, Arthur Symons, were frequent visitors… … Yeats' retrospective idea of 'the tragic generation'… …published two volumes of verse *The Book of the Rhymer's Club* (1892) and *The Second Book of the Rhymer's Club* (1894).

**Ans to Q 3:** The poem is taken from *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921)… …Yeats uses many Christian images like the **Apocalypse** and **Second Coming** to describe the atmosphere in post-war Europe… …but the god to be born is a monster… …Yeats showcases the disintegration of the modern society.

**Ans to Q 4:** Because of the ups and downs in young Yeats' personal life… … Yeats was deeply in love with Maud Gonne who repelled him… …Yeats wrote many poems on her beauty, his hopelessness in love and bitterness of experience… …Yeats' attempt to inspire in other writers an idea of the Celtic nation… …death of the leader Charles Parnell in 1891… …Yeats thought that Irish political life had lost its early significance.

**Ans to Q 5:** William Blake influenced Yeats' symbolism… …His vision of the world in four parts… …an essential unity in the universe to be

comprehended with imagination…. … Yeats developed the idea of Phantasmagoria.

**Ans to Q 6:** Yeats' developing the idea of Phantasmagoria… …he was one of the founders of Irish Theatre… …he translated Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* from Bengali to English… …In 1923, Yeats was awarded the Nobel prize for literature... ...he complete his philosophical 'system' called *A Vision.*

**Ans to Q 7:** Yeats spent several years on his mystical theory of the universe… …it is centered on a diagram made of two conical spirals… …one inside the other, so that the widest part of one of the spirals rings around the narrowest part of the other spiral, and vice versa… …this image was called spiral "gyres"… …it captured the contrary motions inherent within the historical process.

**Ans to Q 8:** the revelation is of an ambiguous deity… …revelation about **Spiritus Mundi… …**a terrifying beast that recalls St. John's vision of **Antichrist**… …or the **Egyptian Phoenix**. But the poet's vision is that of a beastlike figure that has spent two thousand years of the Christian era in 'stony sleep'.

**Ans to Q 9:** Yeats believed that the poet is never isolated by the individuality of his existence since he is part of an imaginative and psychological history or **phantasmagoria** informing his own life and which can be drawn on as a poetic resource. In the poem "Second Coming" this dimension can be experienced in the mysterious energy of the **Beast** of the poem, which is both personal and part of an ancient tradition.

**Ans to Q 10:** Edmund Wilson states that for Yeats' symbolism was "the only movement that is saying new things"… …but he was not primarily a symbolist poet… …he only fed Irish poetry with the new resources of symbolism… …Yeats' symbolism develops from mythology which is not so easy to understand.



## 6.11 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

**Q 1:** How does the poem "The Second Coming" reflect the age in turmoil? Do you find any hope in the poem?

**Q 2:** How would you describe the tone of "The Second Coming"? How does W. B. Yeats describe the state of things?

**Q 3:** Explain the meaning of the lines: "Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer." What does W. B. Yeats suggest about the contemporary world in terms of these lines?

**Q 4:** What is the "second coming?" What is it about the second coming that the poet seems to beseech? How does the second coming become darkly ironic by the end of the poem?

**Q 5:** What is the poet's vision? What do you think is the poet's attitude toward Christianity?

**Q 6:** Discuss W.B. Yeats as a modern poet with particular reference to his poetic response to the modern world.

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# UNIT 7: T. S. ELIOT: "THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK"

## UNIT STRUCTURE


7.1 Learning Objectives

7.2 Introduction

7.3 T.S. Eliot: The Poet

7.4 Reading the Poem

7.5 Major Themes

7.6 Eliot's Poetic Style

7.7 Reception of Eliot

7.8 Let us Sum up

7.9 Further Reading

7.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

7.11 Possible Questions


## 7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- read briefly about the life and works of the Irish poet T. S. Eliot
- discuss the poem "Love Song" from different perspectives
- identify the different themes and assess Eliot's poetic style
- appreciate the poem as the product of an age which in itself constitutes a particular literary movement.

## 7.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to the poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", by T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), one of the most eminent poet-critics of the 20th century. An American by birth and an Englishman by choice, Eliot made England his home from the time he became a doctoral scholar. This decision proved fateful as his creative output flourished in England and he established himself as a great literary figure of the modern age. His poetry was greatly influenced by the European literary luminaries like Dante and

Dostoevsky, and the impact of French Nineteenth Century Symbolist poets is evident in his early work. Eliot depicted himself as a "Classicist in Literature". By this, he meant that he preferred an anti-romantic attitude, which he adopted consciously. You will see this stance reflected in his major poems, which avoid, by his own admission, an "excess of emotion". Eliot's poetry has been hailed by critics like F. R. Leavis for what we now call the 'modernist' qualities. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" was completed in 1911 and published six years later in his first collection *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock and Other Observations*. Like his other early poems and his famed "The Wasteland" (1922), it explores the abjection, the personal dilemma and self-disgust in a way that a whole generation devastated by a horrific war could truly identify with. These poems lay bare the complex and even shocking aspects of post-war life with the help of techniques immensely suited for the purpose. You will note that in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", Eliot adopted the dramatic monologue and it helped him involve the reader in the agonies of Prufrock who is endowed with every quality of the anti-hero. The poem is fragmentary in plot but shows continuity in rhythm and tone. Although called a love song, it is actually an elegy where Prufrock pines for the impossible. The theme, treatment and technique combine to invest it with what has been termed the 'modern' element.

## 7.3 T. S. ELIOT: THE POET

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born on September 26, 1888 in St. Louis on the banks of the Mississippi river. His family had roots in Boston and the New England. His ancestors had left England in the 1650's and made their way across the Atlantic to Massachusetts on the east coast of America. Over time, they gained prominence in social and cultural circles. Later they migrated towards the South and settled in the state of Missouri. Eliot was raised to see destiny in terms of a life dedicated to the highest cultural ideas, and throughout his life never lost this sense of purpose. His staunch defence of tradition and the institutions that sustain it like the church, aristocracy, and education is the outcome of his inherited family values.

Eliot began his education in the best academies of St. Louis, read

widely and became a model student. He was admitted in Harvard in 1906 and remained there till 1914 pursuing a Master's degree and a doctoral programme. He had an affinity for the humanities and studied literature, languages, history, and philosophy. As part of his education, in 1910, he took a tour of Europe confined mainly to Paris with excursions to London and Munich. It was a year of serious study and his stint in the Sorbonne resulted in concentrated reading of the works of French greats like Charles Baudelaire, Jules Laforgue and Tresten Corbiere. In 1911, he graduated from Harvard and enrolled in the Master's programme there. In 1914, he met Bertrand Russell who had come to Harvard as Visiting Professor. Russell was impressed by Eliot's intellectual prowess and thought that a stint at Oxford University would suit him well. Consequently, in 1914, Eliot took up a Fellowship for a year's study at Merton College, Oxford, as part of his doctoral work. His rented accommodation in Bloomsberg gave him access to other writers and poets. The most notable among his acquaintances was the American expatriate Ezra Pound. The literary and personal relationship between the two lasted till Eliot's death in 1965. The poet had conceived of and written some of his early work including "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" while still a student at Harvard and in 1917, his first collection *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock and Other Observations* was published.

In 1914, Eliot met Vivian Haigh-Wood and married her after a three-month courtship. The marriage displeased his family and turned out to be an unhappy one. His wife suffered from ill health both physically and mentally and Eliot sacrificed a great deal of his time to take care of her. Moreover, as times were difficult during the First World War in London, he took up lecturing and teaching to make ends meet. He was not particularly suited for this but was more successful in book reviewing which he did principally for the *Times Literary Supplement*. This occupation benefitted his literary career greatly. Some of these reviews were later developed into his important critical essays. Moreover, he had the opportunity to read widely and kept himself abreast of the developments in philosophy and other related disciplines. Reviewing also clarified his writing style. As for teaching, it had a major influence on his prose style, so far as he developed a schoolmasterly fastidiousness in

definition of terms. At a much later stage, the schoolmasterly manner evolved into a persona of a cultural sage. The end of the World War did not put an end to Eliot's domestic and financial worries. His wife's ailments and his own nervous exhaustion led to a feeling of despair. Added to this was the post-war scenario in England and Europe, which engendered a sense of collapse and chaos. He was not yet fully integrated into English life and was in a way a figure in exile or to use his own term 'metoikos'.

In March 1917, he joined Lloyds Bank and began an eight-year career in banking. Within a few months of his joining the new job, Egoist Press published the first book of his poems *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock and Other Observations*. During the depressing conditions in the aftermath of the war, Eliot began to put together fragments of a long poem, which he provisionally called "He Do the Police in Different Voices". He kept working on it for years through disruptions brought on by family problems. Finally, in 1921, after a sojourn in Switzerland and Paris and with the help of his friend Ezra Pound, a whole poem now called "The Waste Land" emerged. The same year began his association with Lady Rothermere, the wife of a proprietor of a major London newspaper. She saw in Eliot a potential editor and he wanted an access to a periodical where he could propagate not only his ideas about literary criticism but also about social and cultural life. The new review named the *Criterion* was finally launched in October 1922, and Eliot published "The Wasteland" in the very first number. It was published in America a month later in the literary magazine, the *Dial*. Eliot's position as editor of the *Criterion* enlarged his profile and also gave him a financial stability leading him to give up his bank job. However, Lady Rothermere's commitment to the periodical ended in 1925. Eliot then found a patron in Geoffrey Faber who had recently invested in a publishing firm operated by Richard Gwyer. He became the literature editor of the new company Faber and Gwyer (Faber and Faber from 1929) and the *Criterion* got a new lease of life.

His friendship with Faber would last for the next forty years and the *Criterion* flourished for twenty years. Faber and Faber attracted new writing of the highest quality and became the benchmark of literary excellence in

England (and so it remains till date). In the 1950's, through Faber, he brought into prominence a new generation of post-war poets like Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes and Thom Gunn. Success in his literary career was not reflected in Eliot's personal life. Vivian's physical and psychological conditions declined and though Eliot remained a loyal caregiver, the marriage was dead by 1927. Amidst these unhappy circumstances, he moved closer to the Church of England, giving up his Unitarian faith. In a way, this allegiance to the Established church meant submitting to the English way of life. Within a few months of being confirmed to the Church of England, he also took up British nationality.

In 1932, Eliot went to America for a year as a visiting professor at his Alma Mater. 'The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism' was the outcome of these lectures at Harvard. On his return to Britain in June 1933, he took legal separation from his wife and the two never saw each other again. Now at the age of forty-five, he was in complete control of his destiny and able to devote undivided attention to his work and interests. At this point of his life, Eliot made a creative shift from poetry to drama, and published his first important play *Murder in the Cathedral*. While at Harvard in 1932, he renewed his acquaintance with an old Boston friend Emily Hale who was a teacher of drama at Smith College in Amherst. As Eliot's married life fell apart, he and Emily became close though he could not marry her because the Church of England discouraged divorce. Emily accepted his decision and made a series of visits to England to be with him. When Vivian died in 1947, she rushed to the country hoping to be married after a wait of fourteen years. Eliot was horrified at the prospect of marriage. While Emily worshipped him as he was, he worshipped the idea of her as an ethereal, unsullied figure, synonymous with the idea of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Emily of flesh and blood frightened him and he cited a vow of celibacy that he could not break. However, in 1957, at the age of sixty-eight, Eliot married Valerie Fletcher, his young assistant at Faber and Faber. This made a remarkable change in his life and he was, according to a biographer, "happy at last". Although Eliot was an eminent public personality and a successful publisher, his was not of a particularly happy or sanguine disposition. He battled

depression all his life and was often misunderstood. His humility was sometimes seen as arrogance because of his reserved nature. In his last years, he became infirm and was devotedly cared for by his wife. He died on January 4, 1965 and was honoured with a memorial service at Westminster Abbey with his friends, admirers and eminent public figures in attendance. His ashes were interred in the St. Michael's Parish Church at East Coker, Somerset.

In 1919, when Eliot was helping to bring about the modernist revolution in English literature, he wrote of "the existing monuments" of literature and how they have to be rearranged when a new "work of art" appeared among them. Over the next twenty-five years, it was his own poetry and criticism from "Gerontion" and "The Sacred Wood" to "Little Gidding" which came to dominate the museum of literature in English. It was declared the "Age of Eliot", thus conferring on him the status of a Classic in his own lifetime. Though that age and the taste for it had passed, Eliot still remains the poet for our time. Although he was a poet first, Eliot's role as a critic was of no less importance. The germinal ideas which he gleaned from his nineteenth century predecessors and various contemporaries inspired the major critical theories and practices in the 20th century. "Practical criticism" in England and "New Criticism" in America were shaped to a great extent by his critical thinking and seminal works like *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism*. In the area of popular discourse, Eliot is probably the most quoted poet of the 20th century. Quotes from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", "The Waste Land" and *Four Quarters* have been immortalised in names of books and films, in songs and as common sayings. His role as a literary giant is endorsed by the fact that his poetry continues to be included in numerous school and university curricula across the English-speaking world. It is imperative for every student of English to take up a course of Eliot-studies in order to understand the progression of modern literature.

While enumerating his works, it must be acknowledged that Eliot was a poet first and a critic second. Having said that it must also be remembered that in addition to being the most celebrated among the modern

poets, his role in creating the contemporary critical milieu was a crucial one. His critical writings were not confined to literature alone, but were extended to social subjects, politics and religion. Moreover, his poetry and prose do not constitute separate watertight compartments. You cannot think of one without the other and the principal themes of his work conjoin the two. The difference lie in the fact that Eliot's personal interest was in poetry and his academic interest in criticism. His penchant for poetry began early and "A Fable for Feasters" written when he was sixteen reveals certain panache and skill. While in college between 1906 and 1910, he edited the *Harvard Advocate* and contributed to it. His poem called "Spleen" published here contains many elements of Prufrock. In another early poem "The Death of Narcissus" has the sensibilities manifest in "The Wasteland". He wrote "Portrait of a Lady", "Preludes I and II" and began "The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock" while in his graduate years. In 1914, when he joined Oxford University and befriended Ezra Pound in London, his literary career took a new turn. Pound gave an excellent review of 'Prufrock' and was later responsible for giving the final shape to "The Waste Land". Eliot's first book of poems *The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock and Other Observations,* considered a key book of early modernist literature, was published by the Egotist Press in 1917. In 1920, he published a small volume of verse, *Poems* the first and most important poems in which was "Gerontion". Amidst the depressing scenario of post-war Europe and his conjugal worries, he began to put together the fragments of this long poem that he tentatively named "He Do the Police in Different Voices". The title was borrowed from a phrase in Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*. After two years of working on it through increasing tensions in his personal life and with active intervention of Pound, "The Waste Land" emerged. The most famous poem of the 20$^{th}$ century was first published in the *Criterion* edited by Eliot himself in 1922.

The impact of 19$^{th}$ century French Symbolist poets is clearly seen in his works up to around 1920. While Gautier's influence is in Eliot's quatrains, that of Jules Laforgue is in the movement and structure of his *vers libre*. His diction and phrasing bear the stamps of Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire, Malarme and Tristan Corbiere. Some of his lines were adapted or

paraphrased from the French models. Dostoevsky was another major influence. While in Paris, he read the French translations of *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov* and this went on to impact his poetry greatly. Eliot's affinity to Dante is perhaps the most notable feature in many of his poems including *The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock and Other Observations* and the *Four Quartrets*. The references and allusions from *The Divine Comedy* are galore but Dante's thoughts, the simplicity and beauty of his language, the clarity and force of his images and the pattern of his verse are all revived in Eliot's poetry.

From his Harvard days, Eliot displayed a curiosity and wariness about language and culture. This is evident in his 1916 thesis *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*. The focus on language took its most important form in his poetry and criticism. The German philosopher Heidegger says that in modernity, "language in general is worn out and used up" and that only "a very few" are able to revive it from its death throes. Eliot had mastered this difficult enterprise and even made it his special task. Reading of Baudelaire and Laforgue had opened up to him the possibility of making poetry out of language devitalised by "pedestrian chatter and triteness". The satiric use to which he put his early poetry may be seen in this context and understood vis-a-vis the smug upper-middle class milieu he grew up in. Stephen Spender in his *The Struggle of the Modern* states, "Modern art is that in which the artist reflects awareness of an unprecedented modern situation in form and idiom." If you accept this contention, Eliot's major poems would certainly fall into the category of modern art.

After the "Waste Land" period, Eliot had composed a verse drama *Sweeny Agonistes* in the 1920's but it was in 1935 that his first play *Murder in the Cathedral* was written and produced. The period saw a shift of his creative interest from poetry to drama. *The Family Reunion* was staged in 1939. After the War, Eliot again turned to playwriting producing three plays – *The Cocktail Party* (1948), *The Confidential Clerk* (1954) and *The Elder Statesman* (1959) – in eleven years.

The final poem in his *Collected Poems* (1910-1935) "Burnt Norton"

was written after a visit to the house of the same name in Gloucestershire. It defined a moment of visionary innocence, and would open ten years later his second long poetic sequence *Four Quarters*. The geographical locations inspiring these segments represented the significant points of an entire life. "East Coker" (1940) was his family's original English location and "The Dry Salvages" (1941) remembered his American homes of New England and Missouri. Here, the use of the *Gita* and the *Upanishads* as sources emphasised the idea of detachment. The last poem "Little Gidding" (1942), named after the small chapel at Little Gidding, had both historical and religious significance in the English context. It was the pilgrim's final destination.

Eliot's stature as a critic is no less formidable than his position as the most notable among the modern poets. His lectures in Harvard during his tenure of 1930-1933 were published as *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism.* This seminal work gave a new dimension to English literary criticism. His view of poetry here shows a shift away from the French Symbolists to a concept of 'Purity' both in the aesthetic and social senses. Earlier, in the essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", he challenged the dominant Romantic concept of art in the 19th century. As a counter to the idea that art is primarily an expression of the self, he adhered to the theories inherited from the great Classicists. Thus, according to Eliot, poetry was not merely an egocentric exercise but something more objective, something "impersonal". In *Sacred Wood* (1920), we find a very important critical concept, the "Objective Correlative" about which he writes in an essay on Shakespeare. Here he advances the theory that a work of art delineates not only a theme but also a whole gamut of experiences. His criticism breaks away from the past as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" breaks away from the nineteenth century tradition of poetry. He insisted that a poem must be dealt with as a poem and not as "another thing". He also maintained that the meaning of a work could be ascertained only by a comparative analysis of specific passages. His methods of close reading were in harmony with other modernist methods like 'Practical Criticism' of England and 'New Criticism' of America.

By the end of the Second World War, Eliot had attained the stature of a literary sage. He stood at the end of a line of Victorian stalwarts Carlyle, Ruskin, George Eliot, Dickens and Matthew Arnold. He carried on a dialogue with Arnold on the nature of poetry and culture for over a decade and this resulted in many of his important critical commentaries. His "Notes towards the Definition of Culture" continued this dialogue and found him dealing with the difficult issue of culture in a secular and materialistic environment. This work constitutes his most forceful statement on culture and society, putting forth in a comprehensive manner the views already revealed in his poetry and prose. For him, mixing of races was never ideal. "Gerontion", "The Waste Land", "Sweeney Agonistes" and other works, show that ethnic heterogeneity causes disharmony in society. Rather than the multicultural England of his times, he celebrates the Elizabethan era as the acme of British civilisation in "For Lancelot Andrewes" (1925). Earlier in his editorial in the *Criterion* and in "After Strange Gods", he maintained that industrialisation and urbanisation polluted ancient communities and alienated people from their roots. Hence, an agrarian way of life was the best to preserve the purity of society.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 1:** What were the important influences on T. S. Eliot?

**Q 2:** Comment on T. S. Eliot as a poet critic.

## 7.4 READING THE POEM PRESCRIBED

*osta fosse*
*sse al mondo,*
*nzapiuscosse.*
*di questofondo*
*i'odoilvero,*
*spondo.*

d I,
read out against the sky

Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question….
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"

Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.
The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
Rubbing its back upon the window panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—
(They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!")
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—
(They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!")
Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all:
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all—
Arms that arebraceleted and white and bare
(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)
Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
And should I then presume?
And how should I begin?
.....

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?…

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.
.....

evening, sleeps so peacefully!
rs,
halingers,
ere beside you and me.
akes and ices,
ce the moment to its crisis?

and fasted, wept and prayed,
head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a

ere's no great matter;
t of my greatness flicker,
rnal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,

worth it, after all,
malade, the tea,
mong some talk of you and me,

th while,
atter with a smile,
niverse into a ball
verwhelming question,
ome from the dead,
l, I shall tell you all"—
y her head,
: "That is not what I meant at all;
it, at all."

worth it, after all,
thwhile,
e dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
he teacups, after the skirts that trail along the

more?—

It is impossible to say just what I mean!
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
"That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all."

.....

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,

Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old … I grow old …
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.
I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" refuses at every point to reproduce the emotional satisfaction of the love song. What the poem brings vividly to our ears is the stammering into which a privileged humanist discourse had degenerated by Eliot's time. The poet is playing off the slightly absurd ring of J. Alfred Prufrock against the romantic expectation aroused by the words "The Love Song of". The poem also displaces the lover's lyricism. Donne's "Catch a falling star", referred to in it, has the capacity for achieving the effect of a song. Prufrock can only caricature this kind of lyricism. Even in his time, Eliot anticipated a postmodern construction of identity. The use of the dramatic monologue brings to light the gap between who you think you are and what others think of you. On one side of this gap lies abjection and humiliation, on the other side lies damnation. Eliot gave the name of J. Alfred Prufrock to this condition. Hence, Prufrock's problem is not a bad case of self-consciousness but a deeper philosophical dilemma.

The poem not only makes us look at the inherited conventions of being but also at certain forms of poetry, and questions language itself. The form of dramatic monologue is used not to reveal an interesting personality but to make the reader dismantle a personality. The monologue invites not only to observe but participate actively in the poet's creation. As for language, Eliot interferes with the conventional process of making poetry. Direct statements lose their straightforward character and the writing does not have a sense of direction.

As has been mentioned earlier, Dante's influence on Eliot has been the most comprehensive. In *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock and Other Poems,* he relates the experience of modern life to a Dantesque scene that is medieval inferno. The opening words of Prufrock take their point from the Dante epigraph. Prufrock is conducting us through the realm of a 20$^{th}$ century inferno and purgatory. The epigraph in Italian quotes words spoken by Count Guido in the Dante's "Inferno" (XXVII, 61-66). On his visit to the underworld, Dante finds Guido imprisoned in flame for his treacherous advice to Pope Boniface. Guido speaks freely to Dante because he believes that Dante is also one of the dead who will never return to earth to report what he says.

**Translation of the Epigraph:**

"If I thought that my reply would be to someone who would ever return to earth, this flame would remain without further movement; but as no one has ever returned alive from this gulf, if what I hear is true, I can answer you with no fear of infamy."

**Explanations:**

**Lines: 23-48**

The repetition of 'there will be time' is an echo and variant of a passage in the Bible. We may also compare the thought to that expressed by Marvel in "To His Coy Mistress" where the poet argues to his mistress that there would be time for delay only if their opportunities for lovemaking were endless.

**Line: 52**

An echo of the lovesick Orsino in 'Twelfth Night' _ 'That strain again! It had a dying fall'.

**Line: 73-74**

The reference to a crab is suggested by Hamlet's words in Act II, Scene. 2 when he is pretending madness 'you…should be as old as I am, if like a crab you could go backwards'. There are other 'Hamlet' references in ll.111, 117-118 and 119.

**Lines: 82-83**

A Biblical reference. The head of the prophet John the Baptist was brought to Herod on a dish.

**Lines: 92**

Another image from Marvell's 'Coy Mistress_ 'All/Our sweetness, up into one ball'.

**Lines: 94-95**

A reference to Lazarus whom Christ brought back from death and to the other Lazarus in the parable of Luke c.16 whom Dives in hell wanted to send back to earth to warn men of the danger of punishment.

**Lines: 119**

Full of high sentence: Given to learned conversation like the Clerk of Oxford in the Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Prufrock suggests that he is much more like Polonius than Hamlet. And sometimes he is like Yorick, the Fool in the play.

**Lines: 123**

Trousers with turn-up bottoms were becoming fashionable; Prufrock means that to counteract his increasing age he will dress and behave like a fashionable young man at a seaside resort.

**Line: 126**

Suggested by the line from Donne's 'Song' - 'Teach me to Hear Mermaids Singing'—a poetically unattainable thing, but Prufrock attains it in his dreams.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 3:** How should one consider Prufrock's dilemma?

**Q 4:** What is Dante's influence on "The Love Song"?

## 7.5 MAJOR THEMES

The themes of the poem are remarkably diverse and can be read in terms of binaries like youth and old age, work and idleness, spiritual life and death, commitment and indecision, dreams and actuality, action and analysis, courage and fear, interest and boredom, and so on.

**Life in the Modern Age:**

All the poems in *Prufrock and Other Observations* not only expose but also subvert the upper-middle class stability and smugness in which Eliot was born and bred. As an adolescent and as a young man he was the beneficiary of an elitist social milieu and his life of an emigre in England was an extension of his American origins. The poet's attitude towards this environment was ambivalent; he both enjoyed the benefits and loathed them. The satirical tone of his early poetry is the result of this ambivalence.

His methods serve to unsettle the smoothness of an unsettled life. The poems can also be seen as fragments of spiritual autobiography. They record a struggle within the psyche as to whether apprehension or mockery is the best way to survive middle class anxieties. Anxiety and self-doubt in a modern context are well-marked themes in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". The constant pressure of the unpredictable and the limits to one's knowledge had become evident by the beginning of the 20th century. This brought about a crisis in the meaningfulness that the established order deemed to prevail in life. The presence of others out there threatens our sense of personal control over our lives. Others see us in ways we can never fully understand or know about. There is always a gap between who you think you are and what others think of you. The need to invent a mask for yourself is enforced as well as undermined by the dread of how others might see you or see through your mask. On one side of this divide lie wretchedness and humiliation, on the other damnation. To this condition, Eliot gave the name of **J. Alfred Prufrock.** Though psychology was a new discipline at that time, the poet had already given a post-modern construction of personal identity in Prufrock. The poem engages the reader's inner life by involving us in Prufrock's miseries, so that they become our own in the course of reading the poem. It also makes us look past some established conventions like the existence of a well-defined identity and will power, of clearly defined gender differences, of male authority and so on. The poem does this by the system of displacement; by disparaging an individual character. The very epithet 'Love Song' is a disparagement because at every point the text refuses to produce the satisfaction of a love song. Instead, it downplays the notion that pleasure and excitement are inherent in love life. Profrock's failure to seize the moment, his choice to remain repressed, to avoid the element of risk that gives a spice to life is a central theme of the poem. In fact, the failure to live fully is a recurring idea in Eliot's poetry.

**Character of Prufrock:**

Prufrock's character reminds us of the unheroic and timid nature of modern men. His spiritual distress, helplessness and despair are characteristics of modern life. Prufrock's tragedy is a recurrent phase in

modern human civilisation. Prufrock represents a diseased civilisation where human life is trivialised. Prufrock is a tragic character whose tragedy is that of a man for whom love is beyond capacity but still within his desire. He should ask the 'overwhelming question' and seek love. However, he is timid and his inability to satisfy his love relation torments him a lot.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 5:** Mention some of the important themes in this poem "Love Song".

**Q 6:** What are the elements used by Eliot to represent modern life in his poem?

## 7.6 ELIOT'S POETIC STYLE

In his preface to "For Lancelot Andrewes" (1928), Eliot defined himself as a "classicist in literature". By "classicist" he meant a deliberate anti-romantic tone, an avoidance of theatrical, exaggerated emotion. By 1923, he identified "classicist" with "realist" and adopted classicism in principle. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" adheres to this principle both in theme and in technique. Emotions are kept in a tight rein by the use of a disparaging tone. This control is reinforced by the use of images that highlight the dreary landscape and the sordid experiences of Prufrock:

"When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;"

.....

"Streets that follow like a tedious argument....."

.....

"The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the windowpanes"

.....

"Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains"

.....

("They will say: 'But how his hair is growing thin!')

"When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,

Then how should I begin

To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?"

.....

"No I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;"

.....

"I grow old.....I grow old.....

I shall wear my trousers rolled."

There is a complete absence of lyricism and "flights of fancy" in the poem. The emotions of Prufrock are also far removed from the uplifting sentiments, a hallmark of the popular nineteenth century Romantic poetry. Instead, you find self-deprecation, abasement and despair being expressed through his emotions. The squalid surroundings combined with an abject dilemma and the failure to live life fully confer upon him the qualities of an anti-hero.

The poem is fragmentary in plot but shows continuity in rhythm and tone. Although it is called a love song, it is actually an elegy where Prufrock pines for the impossible. The recurrent images of his unattractive middle-aged figure and the allusion to mermaid singing heighten the tone of yearning. The *vers-libre* is an important stylistic device perfected by Eliot. Its judicious use juxtaposed with a prosaic narrative style introduces a sense of drama to the poem. Another notable element is the adoption of the dramatic monologue, which helps the poet, involves the reader in the agonies of Prufrock.

New rhythms, absence of rhyme, sudden and unexpected twists and allusions are used to fit the mood of the poem to the complexities and shocking aspects of post-war life. In the tradition of the Decadents, Eliot, along with Hopkins, Auden, Spender, Blunden and others broke with Victorian tradition by dwelling on sensual aspects and used symbolism and allusion in place of direct statements. These elements are evident in Prufrock too. Eliot's early poems show a profound impact of the nineteenth century French Symbolist poets. Influence of Gautier is seen in his quatrains, of Laforgue in the movement and structure of his *vers-libre*, of Rimband, Baudelaire, Malarme and Corbiere in diction and phrasing. Through the poetry of

Baudelaire, he discovered the "poetic possibilities" of "the more sordid aspects of the modern metropolis" which he used in many of his memorable creations like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", "The Hollow Men" and "The Waste Land". Although he writes in (1927) 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca': "What every poet starts from his own emotions", as a poet, he is famous for his impersonality.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 7:** What are the poetic techniques used by Eliot in this poem?

## 7.7 RECEPTION OF ELIOT

Eliot was already known to and read by the bohemian circle of writers and artists in London especially after the publication of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock and Other Observations.* In 1922, "The Waste Land" opened the doors to a much wider readership, and overnight he became a public figure, This poem with 'modernist' qualities shocked mainstream society, and popular media attacked the 'radical' work. The notoriety he gained was in part due to his *avant garde* leanings. Among the intellectuals, however, the pessimistic view of the modern world in "The Waste Land" struck an emotional chord. The meaning of the poem, which was difficult to decipher, gave it a visionary dimension. Moreover, it seemed to apprehend the problems confronting society of that time. In an age plagued by doubts and despair, the poem was a bold statement, even an enactment of despair. These and Eliot's ability to correlate modern dilemmas to ancient paradigms impressed this group.



**LET US KNOW**

The mood of the times was such that people could relate to the breakdown, failure and obscurity delineated in the poem. "The Waste Land", thus became a resounding success and a new generation of literary critics and

scholars took note of it. I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis and Helen Gardner in Britain, F. O. Mathiesson, Cleanth Brooks and others in America hailed Eliot as the poetic voice of a new age. This interest in Eliot continued unabated for several decades and soon extended beyond his poetry to his literary and cultural criticism, his career as editor and to his personal and public life. His association with the *Criterion* and Faber and Faber had turned him into one of the most influential editorial figures in the English-speaking world.

In 1927, Eliot declared his faith in the Church of England. This was a step, which brought him close to the Establishment and delighted church leaders. This movement towards mainstream society dismayed his *avant-garde* comrades who regarded this step as a betrayal of their aesthetic and cultural affiliations. Eliot's literal belief in the concepts of Christianity like original sin, hell, damnation and effectiveness of prayer went against the sceptical temper and intellectual sophistication of his age. His religious conversion brought about a sharp division among his readers and critics alike. Some regarded him as a courageous soul to have gone against the current scientific temper. Others regarded his act as a sell-out to the Establishment. This division continued throughout Eliot's career and persisted even after his death. On one side were those who saw him along with Ezra Pound, James Joyce *et al*, as modernising English literature and criticism. They looked upon him as the pioneers in liberating prose and poetry from the shackles of Victorian tradition, and infusing new experiences of urban existence, instability and change into the body of their work. Their innovative use of language and their flexible approach towards the relationship between words and the mind were seen both as an experiment and as a revival. On the other side were those who believed that Eliot and his ilk were indulging in destructive literary practice. They decried the modernist strategy of demolishing the nineteenth century Romantic tradition in literature. These critics believed Romanticism to be the benchmark of literary values and vehemently attacked Eliot for subverting those standards. Eliot faced criticism from a section of American intellectuals for his Europhilia. They saw in this a betrayal of American modernism, which was an attempt

to break away from the cultural bondage of Europe. Eliot, they felt, was trying to reverse this liberating process. With the growth of left-wing ideology among the intelligentsia of the North Atlantic world in the 1930's, he was perceived as a confirmed rightist. This view of Eliot was not confined to his poetry but was extended to his cultural and political beliefs. For many, his conservatism, especially after his religious conversion, constituted a force of regression.

Another point of debate was Eliot's alleged anti-Semitism. The controversy started with the publication of his "After Strange Gods" (1934) and continues in seminars and journals to this day. While his admirers tend to put his opinion about the Jews in historical perspective and minimise any personal animosity, his detractors find it aggravating Eliot's religious, social and cultural conservatism. His 'Four Quarters' was an important step in this direction drawing on the traditional wisdom and the enduring values of European culture. It gave succour to a people damaged physically and emotionally by an onslaught on their land, on their very civilisation. The poem is considered by many as the greatest to be composed in English in the 20th century. 'Four Quarters' became immensely popular and gave Eliot a new position of authority. He became a voice for the cultural unity of Europe and, after the war, kept speaking on this topic on different forums.

By the late 1940's and 1950's, he attained the stature of a literary sage in league with Victorian stalwarts like Carlyle, Ruskin, Dickens and Matthew Arnold. His renown was at such a height that his critics were silenced for a time. A section of scholars and critics of 20th century literature feel the need to reassess Eliot's significance in the literary culture of his time. With the passage of time, the old debate has diminished as the cultural and political climate has undergone a change. Critics today examine Eliot's work from a very different perspective in tune with the critical movements and theories that have evolved in recent times. These include Feminism, Structuralism and Post-Structuralism, new forms of materialistic inquiry, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic techniques and deconstructive methodologies. That the critical interest in Eliot remains unabated in the radically different socio-cultural and literary ambience of the twenty first century underscores his importance in the evolution of North Atlantic culture.



## 7.8 LET US SUM UP

By this time, you must have realised that as a poet Eliot had a profound and acute apprehension of the difficulties of his age. He was a modern poet who not only gave expression to modern sensibility in English poetry but also set up new trends and traditions which were adopted and developed by the other contemporary poets of Eliot. In this poem, Eliot expresses the problems and disillusionment of modern life through a unique poetic technique and the images of the metropolitan life. Prufrock is in love but his love song is never sung. He meditates too much and is often haunted by the problem if he should reveal his love to the lady. But besides being a modern poet, Eliot is also a traditionalist and depicted himself as a "Classicist in Literature". The best example of his being a classicist is perhaps the reference made to Dante's *Inferno* at the very beginning of the poem. Eliot in this poem finally presents a realistic picture of the neurosis and dampness generated by the modern industrial age. The depiction of the barrenness of man's contemporary spiritual state and sordid paraphernalia of the city life makes the "Love Song" one of the most important modern poems.



## 7.9 FURTHER READING

1) Bush, R. (1984). *T.S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style*. Oxford University Press.

2) Cooper, J.X. (2006).*The Cambridge Introduction to T.S. Eliot*. Cambridge University Press.

3) Jain, Manju. (2001). *A Critical reading of the selected poems of T. S. Eliot*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

4) Menand, L. (1987). *Discovering Modernism: T.S. Eliot and His Context.* (2nd ed). Oxford University Press.

5) Moody, A.D. (1984). *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot*.

Cambridge University Press.

6) Rain, C. (2006). *T. S. Eliot*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

## 7.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

**Ans to Q 1:** The impact of nineteenth century French Symbolist poets like Jules Laforgue, Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire, Malarme and Tristan Corbiere… …Russian novelist Dostoevsky impacted his poetry greatly… …Dante's influence is clearly visible in the *The Love Song* etc.

**Ans to Q 2:** Eliot's *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism* gave a new dimension to English literary criticism… …his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" challenged the dominant Romantic concept of art in the 19th century… …Eliot viewed poetry not merely as an egocentric exercise but something "impersonal"… … as a critic he insisted that a poem must be dealt with as a poem and not as "another thing".

**Ans to Q 3:** Not as a bad case of self-consciousness but a deeper philosophical dilemma… …postmodern construction of identity… …the gap between who you think you are and what others think of you.

**Ans to Q 4: "**The Love Song" relates the experience of modern life to a Dantesque scene in 'Inferno'… …opening words of the poem start with Dante's epigraph… …Prufrock's world is a 20th century inferno and purgatory.

**Ans to Q 5:** The themes of the poem are remarkably diverse and can be read in terms of binaries like youth and old age, work and idleness, spiritual life and death, commitment and indecision, dreams and actuality, action and analysis, courage and fear, interest and boredom, and so on.

**Ans to Q 6:** Instability and smugness of middle class life… …fragments of spiritual autobiography… …struggle within the psyche… …anxiety

and self-doubt and so on.

**Ans to Q 7:** Use of *vers-libre*… …dramatic monologue… …judicious use of poetry juxtaposed with a prosaic narrative style… …use of sudden and unexpected twists and allusions to expose the complexities and shocking aspects of post-war life.



## 7.11 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

**Q 1:** How does T.S. Eliot reflect the reality and ugliness of the modern world through his poetry? Assess Eliot's reception as a modern poet.

**Q 2:** What are the images and symbols used by Eliot to depict the realities of life through his poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"?

**Q 3:** How does Eliot leave the world of traditional poetry behind and bring in new ideas and a new poetic style?

**Q 4:** 'Prufrock' is a poem about the loneliness and fantasies of a sad 'gentleman dandy'. Discuss.

**Q 5:** Discuss T.S. Eliot's contribution to modernist poetry with reference to his poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"?

**Q 6:** In what ways does the "love Song" represent modern human life with all its sordidness and smugness? Discuss.

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# UNIT 8: T.S. ELIOT: “JOURNEY OF THE MAGI”

## UNIT STRUCTURE


8.1 Learning Objectives

8.2 Introduction

8.3 T.S. Eliot: The Poet

8.4 Reading the Poem “Journey of the Magi”

8.5 Major Themes

8.6 Eliot’s Poetic Style

8.7 Reception of Eliot

8.8 Let us Sum up

8.9 Further Reading

8.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

8.11 Possible Questions


## 8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- gain some ideas on the life and works of the modern poet T.S. Eliot
- make a summary of the poem “Journey of the Magi”
- discuss the emergent themes from the text of the poem
- analyse the style and language employed by the poet
- provide a critical reception of the poet and explore
- the poetry of T.S. Eliot at length and at your own leisure

## 8.2 INTRODUCTION

As the fascinating title of the prescribed poem “Journey of the Magi” suggests, T. S. Eliot recreates in his own remarkable poetic brilliance–the Biblical account of the three wise men, also referred to as the ‘magi’ who take up a long journey towards Bethlehem in search of the Holy Infant, Jesus Christ so as to bless Him and complete the purpose of their divinely ordained journey. From your reading of the previous unit, you should be familiar to the poetry of T.S. Eliot who is known as one of the most prominent

modern poets of the 20th century, a widely read essayist, playwright, as well as, a literary and cultural critic who has received wide critical acclaim through several decades. In fact, David Perkins in *A History of Modern Poetry* (2006) significantly, notes that it was Eliot's literary criticism that had set him apart from equally promising modern poets like Ezra Pound or W. B. Yeats and had "enormously enhanced his prestige" (5) ushering in new literary perspectives and practices that in turn brought about refined literary tastes in modern English Literature. Moreover, even the major literary critics like I.A. Richards, William Empson or F. R. Leavis among others saw enough reason and validity in Eliot's critical perspectives. The clarity in his critical thoughts or formulations and his sharp intellectual acumen made him a highly regarded critic and also made him a visible figure in the literary circles thereby also accounting for his reputation as a poet and writer. In this unit, we shall first briefly read about T. S. Eliot as a poet and then we shall explore the prescribed poem in a detailed manner.

## 8.3 T.S. ELIOT: THE POET

In the previous unit, you have read about the life and works of Thomas Stearns Eliot in some length. This section shall just help you to recollect some of the things that you have already read.

Thomas Stearns Eliot who had a happy childhood in St. Louis, Missouri was brought up as the youngest of six siblings by Henry Ware Eliot, Eliot's father who was a successful businessman and his mother Charlotte Champe Stearns, a social worker who also had a gift for poetry and a love for literature. The Eliots were a prosperous and a prominent family who were devout Unitarian Christians. Eliot's grandfather William Greenleaf Eliot was also a well-known Unitarian Minister who established a Unitarian church in Missouri and had a shaping influence on their perspectives, as well as, their way of life, given the moral propriety and decorum, sense of righteousness and duty that the old man had inspired in them.

Eliot who nurtured a love for literature from an early age had considered his childhood as the best years of his life and in the enriching

environment of St. Louis, he was raised in relative comfort with the best of education and opportunities like most of the extended Eliot family. From his days at the Smith Academy which he had attended from 1898 to 1905, Eliot developed an interest in studying languages like Greek, Latin, French and German and even in his later years under the tutorship of Irving Babbitt, he began to explore Pali and Sanskrit languages. He studied at the Milton Academy, Massachusetts and at the Harvard College where he studied philosophy from 1906-1909. Following his graduation, he studied at Sorbonne, Paris from 1910-1911 and yet again returned to Harvard to pursue Indian philosophy and then moved to Merton College, Oxford on a scholarship for a year in 1914. Eliot's first attempt at writing poetry began at the age of fourteen and his first poem titled "A Fable for Feasters" was published in the year 1905 and during his second tenure at Harvard, he had published his poems, "Portrait of a Lady" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in the year 1915 which are widely anthologized poems today.

John Cooper in considering the literary output of Eliot writes thus, "T.S. Eliot was a poet first and second a critic. We remember Eliot the poet more often in our time because of his steady interest in poetry. With the evolution of his critical thinking, his criticism is studied for its historical importance rather than for its own sake. But we cannot conceive of the contemporary critical milieu without acknowledging his important early role in creating it" (37). Some of the widely read works of Eliot are his first volume of poems titled *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), *Poems* (1919), a few of his poems published in the volume *Ara Vos Prec* (1920), *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939), *Poems Written in Early Youth* (posthumously in 1967) followed by an anthology titled *The Sacred Wood* (1920) comprising a score of his seminal essays. The anthology of *Four Quartets* (1943) which contained four poems written over a course of seven years i.e., from 1936-1942 namely, "Burnt Norton", "East Coker", "The Dry Salvages" and "Little Gidding" had eventually earned him the Nobel Prize in Literature in the year 1948. The learner may note that Eliot's fame as a poet rests on some of his literary masterpieces such as his poems also published independently as *The Waste Land* (1922), *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915),

*The Hollow Men* (1925), *Ash Wednesday* (1927) and *Little Gidding* (1942). In addition, Eliot was known for his talent as a playwright with works such as *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The Family Reunion* (1939), *The Cocktail Party* (1949), *The Confidential Clerk* (1953) and *The Elder Statesman* (1958) all of which were staged for audiences and enjoyed great success.

From an early age, Eliot had developed a sense of keen observation and independent thinking which, as he grew older and interacted with the best of teachers and fellow poets and writers had grown even sharper. Some of these positive influences on his intellectual development were his teachers the American critic, Irving Babbit and English philosopher George Santayana both of whom inspired in him a love for traditional classicism, as well as, the American novelist Conrad Aiken and English writer Percy Wyndham Lewis who were his closest friends. Through the course of his professional career Eliot lectured at Birbeck College University of London, taught at Highgate School in London, worked as a publisher for Faber and Faber, took charge as the church-warden of St. Stephen's Church in London following his conversion to Anglican faith in 1927 and briefly taught at Harvard University where he was offered the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 1:** Write a few words on the origins and early years of T. S. Eliot.

**Q 2:** Name the languages for which T. S. Eliot developed an interest from his early years as a student.

**Q 3:** Which are some of the widely read literary works of T. S. Eliot? Which major work had earned T.S. Eliot the Nobel Prize in Literature?

**Q 4:** Who were some of the positive influences in the life of T. S. Eliot?

## 8.4 READING THE POEM "JOURNEY OF THE MAGI"

The prescribed poem "Journey of the Magi" was first published in August 1927 and was considered a part of Eliot's 'Ariel Poems' comprising

poems such as: "A Song of Simeon" (1928) which was a recreation of the Biblical account of Simeon who had blessed the infant Christ before his death according to prophecy; "Animula" (1929) much inspired by Dante's philosophical reflections on the human soul; and "Marina" (1930) which derived its title from William Shakespeare's play with the same name that delves on the way Life takes unexpected turns and at times unravels amazing surprises. The "Journey of the Magi" which was the eighth poem to be published in the series of 'Ariel Poems' was illustrated by the artist Edward McKnight Kauffer.

The present poem strings together the Biblical account of the three wise men from the east, who had followed the star in the eastern sky in order to find their way to Jerusalem, where Jesus Christ was born. The Gospel, according to Matthew in the New Testament thus, describes how the magi from faraway lands in the east had undertaken a long and arduous journey to worship the Holy Infant in person and offer Him their presents of gold, frankincense and myrrh as they rejoiced in the birth of Jesus Christ. The jealous king, known as King Herod who had found out about the birth of Holy Infant who would be more powerful than him by virtue of his goodness, had requested the wise men to inform him about their meeting, so that he may worship the Holy Infant as well (although, in reality he had meant to harm him). The three wise men thus were led to the birthplace of the Holy Infant by the star in the east and that is how they had arrived at their destiny. Let us then take up the poem in small fragments and discuss these one at a time to grasp the experiences that the three wise men had in the course of their journey.

**Journey of the Magi**

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'

The opening lines of the poem "Journey of the Magi" instantly captures the gloom of winter season together with the harsh and unpredictable weather in which it is almost impossible to travel or undertake any kind of journey. It almost sets the tone of the poem, which is shrouded in mystery, and the unknown possibilities that lie ahead in the journey. Thus, in scanning the road ahead, the lifeless environment around and the biting cold, the narrator begins to describe the difficulties that they (i.e., the Magi) face as they embark on their journey.

Significantly, Eliot had also quoted these lines from a Christmas nativity sermon of Lancelot Andrewes, which was delivered in the presence of King James I in the year 1622 describing how the three wise men sacrificed their comforts for a larger significant cause given the fact that three wise men were also kings, namely Balthazar-King of Chaldea, Gasper-King of Garshish and Melchoir-King of Nubia with kingdoms to look after. However, as the Gospel of Matthew records, the prophets had long declared that there would be a Ruler among all the rulers who would be lead the people of Israel as the shepherd leads his herd. Thus, one of the magi narrates the experiences of the entire journey that is beset with many discomforts and difficulties.

> And the camels galled, sore-footed,
> refractory,
> Lying down in the melting snow.
> There were times we regretted
> The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
> And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
> Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
> And running away, and wanting their liquor
> and women,

Even the camels were galled or rather seemed annoyed, suffering sore-foot from miles of walking, turning restless when the camel men tried to control them, only wanting to rest for short periods on the melting snow out of complete exhaustion, refusing to budge or move ahead until they

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regained their strength. At such times, when all of them lost their enthusiasm and energy, when they felt that God was testing their endurance, they all experienced a sense of regret of having left the comforts that they enjoyed in life to undertake such risks. The wise men who enjoyed their life of ease in their summer palaces set atop lush green hills with sunny climates; where they had sufficient attendants to ensure the best of services, recalling the maidens who brought them refreshing sherbet while they now went thirsty for water. Thus, in sharp contrast to the life that they led, they found themselves weary of such a tiresome journey with their camel men growing impatient and frustrated with the stubborn and exhausted camels and experiencing a similar longing for the life that they had left behind, longing for their leisurely hours with wine and women.



**Snatches:** Fragments or parts of something

**Folly:** Foolishness or foolish act

And the night fires going out, and the lack of
Shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns
unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high
Prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

It was a strange feeling to find themselves in strange towns surrounded by crowds of unknown people, who were indifferent towards them and completely unwelcoming unlike people in their own homeland. Moreover, the villages were unkempt and dirty where there was no one to receive them with kindness and hospitality, no one to provide them with food and shelter for the night. Also, they were unable to make reasonable bargains for their goods owing to the high prices that were quoted in these strange market places. Perhaps, this could be explained by the fact that as travelers they were often easy targets of greedy sellers who took advantage

of the urgency of their basic requirements such as food and necessary amenities, which the travelers required to sustain themselves through their journeys.

Perhaps, the rushing winds at night had prevented their fires from remaining lit, thereby, leaving them in complete darkness, with feelings of insecurity, uncertainty and desolation. They were mostly disheartened to find themselves being completely avoided and unwelcomed by the people in these little hamlets, towns and cities that they came across in the course of their journey. In fact, nothing seemed to have stood in their favour, which possibly made it the most difficult journey of their lives. Not only were the natural elements and their circumstances unfavourable towards the traveling group but also their own fellow beings proved themselves hostile, indifferent and unapproachable towards them, which made them feel all the more alienated. It was at such moments that they felt that they had committed the biggest mistake of their lives of having decided to travel outside their own land, leaving behind their own people. Their conscience and their inner voices whispered o them that it was all a mistake, a blunder that they had committed. However, they had continued their journey without the slightest thought of return and travelled by night, following the star ahead while stopping every now and then to rest and catch up with a little sleep in all their tiredness.

> Then at dawn we came down to a temperate
> Valley,
> Wet, below the snow line, smelling of
> Vegetation;
> With a running stream and a water-mill
> Beating the darkness,
> And three trees on the low sky,
> And an old white horse galloped away in the
> meadow.

Finally, they were at the tail end of their journey and like a new morning to their countless nights of travel, a new feeling of having arrived

at their destined place had dawned on them. They had reached a temperate valley with a mild climate surrounded by fresh air, with a flowing stream and a water mill that harnessed the natural energies and with fertile soil that held lush green vegetation. They had survived their darkest hours to experience this new dawn. Here, they had observed an old white horse that galloped towards the green valley and particularly three tall trees against the sky, which hinted at the events that were to follow in the near future.



**Tavern: A**n inn or public house

**Lintel:** a Horizontal support across the top of a door or window

**Dicing:** Taking risks in a game

**Wine-skins:** Bags made of animal leather which stores water

Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves
Over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces
Of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we
continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too
soon
Finding the place, it was (you may say)
satisfactory.

In their search of a place to rest in and to ask about the whereabouts of Mary and Joseph- the parents of Holy Infant, they had come across an inn, which had vine leaves hung on the doorframe, indicating that it was not the kind of place that they had expected, a place for drinking and gambling. As they were about to enter the inn, they found to their surprise six people by the open door playing dice in order to win pieces of silver coins, stamping and kicking empty wine-skins which they had already emptied. However, they could not delay any longer as they could not find any relevant information and had to reach in time in order to see the Holy Infant, they continued their search. That same evening they had finally arrived at the birthplace of the Jesus Christ at just the right time, not a minute early, not a minute late when the Holy Infant was born. When they arrived at their destination, they found a sense of satisfaction of having completed their mission successfully.

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All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen
Birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth
Was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our
death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old
dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

Thus, the three wise men, their camel men, as well as, their camels had survived the challenges and hardships of their journey in terms of their physical, emotional and mental endurance without which it would not have been possible. The magi who narrates the entire journey in retrospect even expresses the confidence to be able to take up such a journey yet again. However, he also reflects the hardships hidden in the divine revelation that they had experienced together in their past when having worshipped the Holy Infant, they were already converted to a new faith, being reborn into Christianity in place of the religious faith that they had been born into. It was almost as if they were pre-destined to eventually turn into the followers of Christ and take this new religion to their own lands.

Their sudden Rebirth also had its share of difficulties as the change of one's old faith and complete change in one's belief systems is naturally accompanied with various emotional responses. Perhaps, Eliot had himself experienced such a sense of mixed feelings following his conversion from the Unitarian faith, which believed in oneness of God to the Anglican faith

which glorified Christ and emphasized on the liturgical texts such as *The Book of Common Prayer*. With regard to the magi, they were divided between their old and their new faith, the feelings of death of the old life that they had lived and the new life that embraced them before they could even realise that their entire lives had undergone a transformation. Therefore, they returned to their respective kingdoms where they had found that they were no more comfortable with the old religious and pagan practices. They felt disoriented or in other words all the more out of place among their own people, when they saw them worshipping idols and gods to whom the magi could no longer relate to. In fact, this had made them feel like they would willingly accept a second death if they were given a choice as they gradually became certain of their desires to follow Christ and his teachings leaving aside their old practices.

John Cooper in *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot* opines that "Journey of the Magi" is the best among his 'Ariel Poems', where as he notes, "[t]he greatness of the poem lies in is capturing something of the alienated state in which the Magus now finds himself as a result of significant transformation" (82). Also, Cleo McNelly Kearns in *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot* discusses the religious inclinations and reflections of Eliot which had a major influence on his literary output in the late 1920s that saw religious poems such as "Ash Wednesday", "Songs of Simeon" and "Journey of the Magi" to mention a few. Significantly, in one of Eliot's major literary essays titled "Tradition and the Individual Talent" which was first published in *The Egoist* (1919) and then in his anthology *The Sacred Wood* (1920), he himself had noted the importance of criticism thus, "but we might remind ourselves that criticism is as inevitable as breathing" (36). In this seminal essay, he had highlighted the significant role of the literary master, the transformative process of writing, the necessity of constructive literary criticism and the emphasis on literary tradition, which in his opinion was to be acquired by the dint of hard work rather than inheritance. According to Eliot, the 'literary master' or the 'poet' was endowed with great responsibilities whereby he or she extracted constructive criticism not on the basis of being judged as good and bad by critics or in comparison to

others but by his or her unique transformative role through the creative process of writing.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 5:** What is the source of the opening lines of the poem "The Journey of the Magi"?

**Q 6:** Who were the three wise men and what were their names?

**Q 7:** What did they feel in moments of crisis and when they faced difficulties in the course of their journey?

**Q 8:** What were some of the challenges that made it the most difficult journey of their lives?

**Q 9:** Briefly describe the mixed feelings of the three Magi after they had witnessed and worshipped the Holy Infant.

**Q 10:** What are some of the striking aspects of the poem "The Journey of the Magi"?

## 8.5 MAJOR THEMES

Some of the significant themes that emerge from the text of the poem are—journey and quest, as well as, the story of Jesus Christ portrayed through symbolical representation. However, the thematic concerns are not necessarily limited to the following discussion, and learners like you may identify more such thematic ideas through his your reading of the poem.

**Journey and Quest:**

The motif of journey and quest is clearly evident in the title, as well as, the substance of the poem itself where the magi undertake what proves to be a long and arduous journey in their search of the Holy Infant Christ so as to worship Him and offer their greetings of joy. The Magi were determined to make it to their destined place even as they were compelled into moments of crises and difficulties or as they were surrounded by uncertainty and several doubts regarding the completion of their journey, they reassured themselves of the greater purpose of their journey and that there was a divine hand that would ultimately ensure their safe travels. The Gospel of

St. Matthew too describes the divinely ordained journey of the magi thus, "behold wise men from the East came to Jerusalem", saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East, and have come to worship him" (Matthew 2: 1-2). Through the course of their journey, the wise men had endured a range of difficult experiences and had even risen above their initial despair to practically overcome their hardships without surrendering to their circumstances. In fact, they had pushed themselves beyond their limits to complete their journey and fulfill the divine purpose that had also culminated in their spiritual conversion.

Also, change and conversion are very much a part of any form of journey as travelling considerably layers ones experiences and enriches a traveler in many ways which explains why a person emerges all the wiser and experienced through the process of his or her journey or travels. Moreover, the journey described in the poem is also symbolic in many ways it is not an everyday journey but rather a spiritual quest in search of the Holy Infant Jesus Christ whom the wise men had visited at the cost of risking their own lives and leaving everything else behind them. Thus, the journey was significant owing to the spiritual transformation that had dissolved away their old faith, filled the magi with a sense of newness, and renewed vigour. Most importantly, the inner quest or soul-searching that they had experienced following their arrival at the birthplace of Christ, as well as, their return to their old kingdoms, the magi had come to realize that both their journeys, as well as, the subject of their quest had transformed their lives forever bringing them closer to Christ. This theme has been in tune with the modernist idea of the 'quest' to decipher the existential meaninglessness of life.

**The Story of Jesus Christ and its Symbolical Representation:**

The poem "Journey of the Magi" which alludes to the Biblical account of the life of Jesus Christ who had founded the Christian faith through his teachings also symbolically represents several scenes from the Bible. Jesus of Nazareth was born to Mary and Joseph through the divine blessing of God in Heaven who had pre-determined the events of His life, as well as, His death. Thus, Jesus Christ spent a good part of his life sharing his parables

and moral teachings, creating miracles and prophecies, touching and transforming the lives of many people who had turned into his disciples and ardent believers. When Christ was born, many infants across Bethlehem suffered deaths in the hands of the soldiers sent by the insecure ruler of Judea known as King Herod, after he had learnt of the Holy Infant destined to be the most powerful, from the unassuming and well-meaning magi who had approached Herod before undertaking their journey. However, Jesus' parents moved towards Egypt in time to secure their Infant, as well as, their own lives, as an angel had warned Joseph in his dreams regarding Herod's cruel intentions.

Significantly, the poem refers to the betrayal of Christ by his own disciple Judas Iscariot who in his desire for a bag of silver pieces had given away the identity of Christ to approaching soldiers who were on the lookout for Christ in order to arrest him and take him to be tried by the Chief priests. The poem also encompasses other symbolical representations such as that of the three distinct trees, which also symbolised the three crosses to which Jesus along with two other thieves were to be nailed mercilessly. Ultimately, the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate had a hand in the trial and eventual death of Christ as he had denied justice to Him despite knowing that Jesus was innocent of all the charges of blasphemy that were brought against Him by the Jewish Elders because Jesus indeed was the Son of God which they refused to believe and for which He was crucified to death. Thus, the spiritual truth that was to be revealed following this crucifixion is symbolically represented by the lowered skies that indicate how even the heavens had clearly made it apparent that Jesus Christ was indeed the Son and Messenger of God.

Thus, in the poem the reference to spiritual transformation and the renewal or rebirth (being reborn) in Christ – refers to the death of old physical desires and the dawn of the new spiritual self. The symbolical representation of the magi travelling through darkness to arrive at their destination in the light of a new dawn; the unpredictability of the natural forces that acted as hindrances in their journey; the experiences of alienation from their own fellow beings in times of need; the promises of new life writ all over the lush

meadows of the temperate valley; the singing stream and its pleasant music like a new source of life in a welcoming reception, symbolic of new hope; the white horse perhaps symbolising loyalty to its rightful Master Jesus Christ; the tavern in sharp contrast to the natural world symbolically reflecting the ignorance and indulgent vices together with Judas' betrayal and the three standing trees symbolic of the impending death of Jesus Christ. All in all, the poem represents the tug and pull of both the sensual and the spiritual with regard to the transforming experiences of the magi and symbolically portrays the Birth of Christ which had heralded a new beginning, marking an end to old beliefs and practices, superstitions and blind faith while also upholding the importance of moral righteousness and exemplary goodness at all times.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 11:** Which Gospel in the New Testament describes the divinely ordained journey of the magi?

**Q 12:** Mention some of the symbolical representations of the poem "Journey of the Magi".

## 8.6 ELIOT'S POETIC STYLE

In his 1927 preface to the anthology of essays *For Lancelot Andrewes,* Eliot considered himself "a classicist in literature, a royalist in politics, and a Anglo-Catholic in religion" (223) as he converted into the Anglican faith on 29 June 1927 at Oxfordshire which also had a profound influence on the poetry of this phase in his literary career. David Perkins notes that Eliot's baptism had considerably altered his perspectives as he writes that, "[v]irtually all his poetry from this time forth presents the struggle for belief and faith in one who has already made a religious commitment…Once he [Eliot] had joined he Church, he was punctilious in attendance and duties" and further that his later poetical output was "saturated with the rhythm and diction of the Anglican liturgy, which he heard daily" (14).

Some of the striking aspects in the text of the poem "The Journey of the Magi" can be found in the elements of symbolic significance conveyed through the spiritual and religious allusions; the presence of an underlying allegorical meaning; the vivid imagery that the poet conjures with its comparing and contrasting images; crisp and concise language with a sense of poetical restraint; the employment of understatement, as well as, narration through the dramatic monologue. Eliot takes up the Biblical account of the three wise men journeying in search of the Holy Infant Jesus being led by the eastern star to Bethlehem to which he adds imaginary details through his allusions of Biblical events, narration of subjective feelings of the magi, as well as, imagined experiences of the journey that the wise men had undertaken. In its presentation, the poem has a somewhat melancholic rather than a joyous overtone that is otherwise found in the description of the Gospel. It also portrays the magi in a pensive or rather a reflective mood which 'understates' the emotional joy that the magi had possibly experienced at the end of their long arduous journey. Thus, while Eliot maintains the central image of the Holy Infant as the subject of the quest, he also underplays the ecstatic joy that the magi had experienced by instantly clipping the details of when and how they had witnessed the Newborn Infant or how they had worshipped Him.

Eliot deftly employs the dramatic monologue infusing his characteristic note of irony in the poem where he remarkably captures the practicalities of a journey and the natural human responses to challenges, moments of despair, feelings of alienation and experiences of spiritual conversion. Although, the poem appears simplistic in terms of the language employed, yet it is layered with symbolical meanings, as well as, vivid imageries, which almost brings alive the changing landscapes, the transforming experiences and the significant events of the entire journey. Moreover, Eliot cleverly creates a tug and pull of the contrasting experiences, mixed feelings and changing circumstances described by his narrator- one of the three wise men. Here, the learner may note that Eliot considered it important to take into account the text of the poem in itself and avoid associating the poet with the poem in any manner thereby citing the

importance of 'depersonalisation' which was a necessary literary practice or convention that in his opinion defined the literary tradition itself.

Eliot in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" had also noted that "novelty is better than repetition" (37) which also explained his new take even on old subjects or events, as well as, his constant emphasis on new critical approaches towards literary practices whereby he replaced earlier romantic literary conventions with modern literary sensibilities. Thus, Eliot significantly wrote, "[t]here is a great deal, in the writing of poetry which must be conscious and deliberate. In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him 'personal'. Poetry is not a turning loose of emotions, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things" (42).

However, as Perkins notes even as Eliot's criticism had stepped ahead of the earlier romantic tradition, some elements of the romantic tradition were still evident in the writings of the modern poets like Auden, Yeats, Stevens and Eliot himself as therefore he writes**%** "[a]nd though most poets after Eliot would have become irritable at any suggestion that they themselves were not modern, their hearts still melted when they read Romantic lyrics. They hungered for the melody and cadence, imagery of nature, strong personal emotion, idealism, and mysticism of poetry in the Romantic tradition. Cummings, MacLeish, Crane, Spender, Day-Lewis, Thomas and Roethke, among many others, were modern poets of Romantic sensibility. Thus in practice the Modernist movement in poetry was much less anti-Romantic than is usually supposed" (9).

## 8.7 RECEPTION OF ELIOT

David Perkins in *A History of Modern Poetry* significantly notes thus, "[f]or twenty-five years T.S. Eliot exercised an authority in the literary world not possessed by any writer before him for more than a century" (3). Indeed,

Eliot's poetry is imbued with an intellectual appeal of its own; with an impersonal voice taking up the concerns of the modern man; revealing spiritual and mystical elements of life; being cast in the form of symbolical meaning that capture his poetical essence; and unraveling the stark truths of modern life. While noting that the critical reception of Eliot's literary contributions had "never slackened" down the decades, John Cooper in *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot* (2006) notes that Eliot's finest composition *The Wasteland* was such an extraordinary composition that in its time, had captured wide attention of the new literary critics and scholars such as I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, Helen Gardner in Britain, F. O. Mathiesson, Cleanth Brooks and others in America all of whom, as he opines had considered Eliot as "the exemplary modern poet, the poet for a new age of doubt, skepticism, and irony" (111). Cooper mentions that it was largely in the 1950s that Eliot's literary works had received a great impetus and was readily examined by the literary and cultural critics, as well as, taken up in the academic circles.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 13:** Name some of the modern critics whose attention was captured by T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*.

**Q 14:** Briefly mention some of the important highlights of the essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent".

**Q 15:** What were the two distinct aspects regarding the creative process of an ideal modern poet as noted by T. S. Eliot in his seminal essay?



## 8.8 LET US SUM UP

After having gone through the unit, you should be able to appreciate the literary contributions of the American poet T.S. Eliot to the treasures of modern English poetry. Besides presenting a very brief overview of the life

and works of the poet, this unit has also taken up the poem "Journey of the Magi" in a detailed manner, and has presented a discussion on some of the emergent themes together with a reference to the poetic style and language. By this time, you must be having a better idea of the critical reception, as well as, the critical literary perspectives of Eliot himself thereby gaining further interest in exploring Eliot's poetic works.



## 8.9 FURTHER READING


1) Andrewes, Lancelot. "Sermons of the Nativity." Project Canterbury, Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology.
2) Cooper, John Xiros. (2006). *The Cambridge Introduction to T.S. Eliot.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3) Eliot, T. S. (1982). "Tradition and the Individual Talent" *Perspecta* Vol. 19, pp. 36-42.
4) Eliot, T. S. (1929). Preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order*. London: Faber and Faber.
5) Jain, Manju. (2007). *A Critical Reading of the Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
6) Moody, A. David. (1994). *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
7) Perkins, David. (1987). *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After*. New Delhi: ABS Publishers.
8) Sen. S. (2009). *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. New Delhi: Unique Publishers.




## 8.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

**Ans to Q 1:** Thomas Stearns Eliot who had a happy childhood in St. Louis, Missouri was brought up as the youngest of six siblings by Henry Ware Eliot, Eliot's father who was a successful businessman and his

mother Charlotte Champe Stearns, a social worker who also had a gift for poetry and a love for literature.

**Ans to Q 2:** Eliot developed an interest in studying languages like Greek, Latin, French and German and even in his later years under the tutorship of Irving Babbitt, he began to explore Pali and Sanskrit languages.

**Ans to Q 3:** Some of the widely read works of Eliot are his first volume of poems titled *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), *Poems* (1919), *Poems Written in Early Youth* (posthumously in 1967), *The Sacred Wood* (1920) comprising a score of his seminal essays… …*Four Quartets* (1943) which contained four poems written over a course of seven years i.e., from 1936-1942 namely "Burnt Norton", "East Coker", "The Dry Salvages" and "Little Gidding" eventually earned him the Nobel Prize in Literature in the year 1948.

**Ans to Q 4:** Some of these positive influences on his intellectual development were his teachers the American critic, Irving Babbit and English philosopher George Santayana both of whom inspired in him a love for traditional classicism, as well as, the American novelist Conrad Aiken and English writer Percy Wyndham Lewis who were his closest friends.

**Ans to Q 5:** Eliot had also quoted the opening lines from a Christmas nativity sermon of Lancelot Andrewes, which was delivered in the presence of King James I in the year 1622 describing how the three wise men sacrificed their comforts for a larger significant cause.

**Ans to Q 6:** The three wise men were also kings namely Balthazar- King of Chaldea, Gasper- King of Garshish and Melchoir- King of Nubia.

**Ans to Q 7:** At such times, when all of them lost their enthusiasm and energy, when they felt that their endurance was being tested by God, they all experienced a sense of regret of having left the comforts that they enjoyed in life to undertake such risks.

**Ans to Q 8:** The rushing winds at night had prevented their fires from remaining lit, thereby, leaving them in complete darkness, with feelings of insecurity, uncertainty and desolation. They were mostly

disheartened to find themselves being completely avoided and unwelcomed by the people in these little hamlets, towns and cities that they came across in the course of their journey. In fact, nothing seemed to have stood in their favour which possibly made it the most difficult journey of their lives.

**Ans to Q 9:** With regard to the magi, they were divided between their old and their new faith, the feelings of death of the old life that they had lived and the new life that embraced them before they could even realize that their entire lives had undergone a transformation.

**Ans to Q 10:** Some of the striking aspects in the text of the poem "The Journey of the Magi" can be found in the elements of symbolic importance conveyed through the spiritual and religious allusions; the presence of an underlying allegorical meaning; the vivid imagery that the poet conjures with its comparing and contrasting images; crisp and concise language with a sense of poetical restraint; the employment of understatement, as well as, narration through the dramatic monologue.

**Ans to Q 11:** The Gospel of St. Matthew

**Ans to Q 12:** Refer to the subsection 8.5

**Ans to Q 14:** *The Wasteland* had captured wide attention of the new literary critics and scholars such as I.A. Richards, F.R. Leavis, Helen Gardner in Britain, F.O. Mathiesson, Cleanth Brooks and others in America

**Ans to Q 15:** In this seminal essay, he had highlighted the significant role of the literary master, the transformative process of writing, the necessity of constructive literary criticism and the emphasis on literary tradition, which in his opinion was to be acquired by the dint of hard work rather than inheritance.

**Ans to Q 16:** While he had mentioned the importance of depersonalising poetry, Eliot also held that the eclectic fusion of thoughts and ideas defined the entire creative process of an ideal modern poet.



## 8.11 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

**Q 1:** Discuss the life and literary contributions of T.S. Eliot with reference to his most important poems.

**Q 2:** Give a detailed explanation of the poem "Journey of the Magi" from your own reading of the poem. In what way, can this poem be considered a 'modern' poem?

**Q 3:** What are the major themes that are evident in the text of the poem "Journey of the Magi"?

**Q 4:** Analyse the style and language of the poem "Journey of the Magi".

**Q 5:** Give a detailed critical reception of the poetry of T.S. Eliot as well as his critical perspectives on modern literary practices, with particular emphasis on the poems that you have read.

**Q 6:** Explain the following lines with reference to context:

a) "And the night fires going out, and the lack of Shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high
Prices:
A hard time we had of it."

b) "This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen
Birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth Was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death."

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# UNIT 9: RUPERT BROOKE: “THE SOLDIER”

## UNIT STRUCTURE


9.1 Learning Objectives

9.2 Introduction

9.3 Rupert Brooke: The Poet

9.4 Reading the Poem “The Soldier”

9.5 Major Themes

9.6 Brooke’s Poetic Style

9.7 Reception of Brooke

9.8 Let Us Sum Up

9.9 Further Reading

9.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

9.11 Possible Questions


## 9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- gain some ideas on the life of the poet Rupert Brooke
- discuss the poem “The Soldier” and extract the major themes in it
- explain Brooke’s poetic style in terms of the poem prescribed
- critically examine the reception of the poet Rupert Brooke and his works
- gain an idea on war poetry in general through your reading of Rupert Brooke.

## 9.2 INTRODUCTION

The poetic trend during the early decades of the 20th century witnessed the Georgian poets who explicitly followed the Romantics in their love for Nature and countryside. The term “Georgian” first came into use by Edward Marsh whose five edited volume of anthologies was titled *Georgian Poetry.* However, the term is loosely or rather pejoratively used to include poets who made their influence felt in between the years 1900 to 1922,

more particularly representing those poets who contributed "before, during, and after the First World War". (Perkins). However, when the First World War broke out in 1914, additional concerns relating to civilization and dystopia grappled the minds of these poets. Indeed, many of those poets who were actively involved in the war were soldiers. The First World War (1914-1918) that originated in Europe was one of the deadliest wars that had changed the course of history. Approximately forty million people including military and civilians perished during the war. For convenience of reading, we can roughly divide war poetry into two levels—one during the outbreak of war to 1914, followed by the period till 1918. The first phase of war poetry will be crucial to our understanding of the war poet like Rupert Chawner Brooke, Charles Hamilton Sorley, Julian Grenfell, Robert Nichols, etc. These poets exemplified ideas that were dominated by elements of mysticism, idealism and patriotism aiming to glorify self-sacrifice for the cause of the country. This unit shall deal at length with the war poet Rupert Brooke, one of the most sensational poets of his time. Here, we shall read about his life and contribution to English literature. More particularly, this unit shall attempt at exploring the poetic techniques of Brooke by referring to one of his well-known poems, "The Soldier". Brooke drew into his poetry his short-term experiences as a soldier to illuminate the society of his time on the idea of war and more particularly to instil in the people a vision of idealism as well as patriotism. As a genre, poetry was the best medium for him to reach out to the people of his time. In the following sections, we shall consider the factors that shaped him into a war poet, his personal life and his volume of works.

## 9.3 RUPERT BROOKE: THE POET

When we refer to the war poets, Rupert Brooke's name is likely to come first in the league. One of the finest looking men, Brooke has been admired as a poet for bringing into poetry the direct experiences of war. His image as the epitome of youth reverberates among his contemporaries. Brooke attempted through his poetry to provide a new vision of reality that was stark. In the initial years of the war, numerous poems that were patriotic

in spirit and non-aesthetic in form came out of the pen of many amateur poets, mostly those who were, directly or indirectly, participants in the war. Standing apart among these poets was Rupert Brooke whose craftsmanship, together with a strong patriotic fervour, captured instant popularity and success among the literary circles. In fact, Brooke was one of the main figures behind the anthology of 'Georgian Poetry' that landed a voice to the soldier poets in the coming years.

Brooke was born in the year 1887 on 3rd of August at Rugby, Warwickshire. His father William Parker Brooke served as a teacher at Rugby school, which was one of the best schools in England credited with shaping numerous poets before Brooke like Matthew Arnold, Arthur Hugh Clough and Lewis Carroll. Regarding his mother Ruth Mary Brooke, née Cotterill, it is known that she had been very dominant. Brooke had two brothers; his elder brother Richard died when Brooke was in College, while his younger brother Alfred succumbed to the war a couple of months after Brooke's demise. They also had a sister who survived till infancy only. Brooke had received his early schooling at Hillbrow before joining Rugby. While at Hillbrow, he made friendship with James Strachey and Geoffrey Keynes (both these young men were younger brothers of more popular writers namely, Lytton Strachey and John Maynard Keynes).

As already mentioned, Brooke was an extremely handsome man and his admirers included both men and women. W. B. Yeats, a fellow poet goes on to call him the "the handsomest young man in England" and Leonard Woolf appreciated him when he noted: "That is exactly what Adonis must have looked like in the eyes of Aphrodite". Brooke was not only good in academics but also was a good athlete; these qualities, added with his physical charm, were enough for him to gain popularity among his contemporaries. He studied Literature at King's College, Cambridge where his literary circle comprised James Strachey, Lytton Strachey, Geoffrey Keynes, John Maynard Keynes and Virginia Woolf– many of them belonged to the group popularly known as the '**Bloomsbury group**'. Notably, it was his work on "John Webster and the Elizabethan Drama" that enabled him to win a scholarship to this College. While at Cambridge, Brooke was a member of the "Apostles" and pertaining to his interest in socialism, he was



**Bloomsbury Group:** A group of English writers and intellectuals whose works reflect their interest in literature and arts and had their informal discussions in Bloomsbury.

**Fabian Society:** A British organisation, which aims to establish democratic socialism through reformist way that does not involve revolution.

elected as the President of the **Fabian Society**.

Much of the complexity regarding Brooke's relationships owed to his deep and hesitant belief regarding his own sexuality. His mother who always searched for a girl in him, given the kind of beauty he had, probably affected him psychologically. His relationships did not survive as they were characterised by his troubled emotional turmoil and many sexual encounters, with both men and women. The year 1912 was one of Brooke's difficult periods in life for he struggled terribly to balance his emotional and mental breakdown after his relationship with Katherine Laird Coxhad failed. Disconnecting with the Bloomsbury group, during this period, he travelled to Germany to seek rehabilitation. He also travelled to North America and the Pacific and was there in Tahiti for some time. He was said to have a lover in Tahiti whose name was 'Mamua' and with whom he had a daughter.

Edward Marsh, secretary to Winston Churchill, was an influential figure at that time and was Brooke's patron. They were both involved in the idea of publishing an anthology on **Georgian poetry** and the first volume, as such, included poems by Brooke, Sassoon, Graves and Nichols. When the war broke out in August 1914, Brooke actively took part in it as a volunteer and eventually, with the help of Churchill and Marsh, he got a commission in the Royal Naval Division. He went to the devastating Antwerp voyage with the British Expeditionary Force in 1914 to check the progress of the Germans. He did not see much of the hostilities of the war as he succumbed to death due to an infection from a mosquito bite. He was sailing to Dardanelles and while on board, he breathed his last due to this septicaemia on April 23, 1915.



**LET US KNOW**

**Georgian Poets**: Apart from Rupert Brooke, the other Georgian poets were Wilfred Gibson, W. H. Davies, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, W. J. Turner, John Freeman, Wilfred Owen, etc. among others.

Rupert Brooke's published works includes *Poems* (1911), *1914 and Other Poems* (1915) and *Collected Poems* (1918). His work on John Webster

that won him a scholarship to King's College titled *John Webster and Elizabethan Drama* (1916) is the only critical writing of Brooke. Apart from poetry, Brooke also wrote prose titled *Letters from America* (1916). The first of the five sonnets of his *1914* collection is titled "Peace". It deals with the poet's delight at the approaching War, which he sees as an escape from the evils that existed in his time. In a way, War which is attached with loss and suffering of human lives, will challenge the morality of the people and provide them peace and spiritual bliss as well. The sonnet deals with Brooke's search for meaning in life as a whole. The second sonnet "Safety" also deals with the moral renewal that participation in War brings about in a person. The sonnet chiefly embraces the effects of war on the poet. "The Dead" is the common title shared by his third and fourth sonnet of this collection. Pointing to the selfless sacrifice of youth, Brooke's third sonnet also deals with the idea of death. Here he explores the theme of death in an idealistic way. The sonnet glorifies the young men's willingness to die for his country staking all the hopes of youth. The fourth sonnet bearing the same title deals with the impressions of death that transfers the soul's desire to attain eternal peace. The fifth sonnet, "The Soldier" also deals with a soldier's sacrifice for the sake of the much-loved country that abounds in natural beauty. Here, Brooke dramatically represents the approaching bleakness of his own probable death in the War. As this unit is on this sonnet, we shall look critically at Brooke's notions about death in the War from the sonnet's perspective. The following section shall deal solely with this poem and will provide you with a detailed explanation of the poem. You are however, required to read the poem along with the other four sonnets of the collection titled *1914* so that it becomes easier to relate the thoughts of the poet.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 1:** Who were the major poets associated with war poetry?

**Q 2:** Where did Brooke pursue his higher studies? How did he get into there?

**Q 3:** What role did Brooke play when the war broke out?

**Q 4:** State the cause of Brooke's death.

**Q 5:** Write about Georgian poetry in about 50 words.

**Q 6:** List the works penned down by Brooke.

## 9.4 READING THE POEM "THE SOLDIER"

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam;
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.
And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

Let us discuss now the poem in details taking together the idea behind its composition. The poem depicts Brooke's impression of the First World War. It was written in 1914 and was the last of the five sonnets of the collection entitled *1914*. The witness to the initial action of the war while he was in Belgium triggered Brooke in writing the sonnets. This was the time when he was serving actively as a volunteer for the war. The poem saw its first publication in 1915 in the magazine *New Members*. It was after the recitation of the poem at St. Paul's Cathedral in 1915 at Easter Sunday that his sonnets brought him immediate success by getting published in the *Times*.

In the poem, an anonymous soldier is the speaker whose heart is filled with deep reverence for his country, that is, England. The opening lines depict the speaker's sentiments attached to his country and the act of

dying in the battlefield. In "some corner of a foreign field" which implies the battlefield, the speaker tends to die holding up his love and respect for a greater cause, that is, love for his motherland– "forever England." Rather than regretting about his own death or his sacrifice, he claims that the corner where he dies will have a piece and the scent of England, more particularly, his love for the country, in it. This, in effect, points how through death there will be some kind of victory of England. The phrase "some corner" is reflective of the uncertainties associated with war. After his death, the soldier will be buried in an unnamed "corner" reflecting the obscurity of death in war. Through this poem, Brooke portrays the idealistic image of a soldier whose valour is foregrounded pushing the anguish he goes through. What makes the opening of the poem remarkable is the soldier's bravery and the eloquent revelation that his country will be able to conquer some part of an unknown, foreign land by his death.

The soldier is wholeheartedly an embodiment of England, which has nourished and shaped him, giving him the opportunity to breathe and grow up. The reference to 'richer dust' denotes the vivacity and strength that as an Englishman the soldier feels. Brooke uses the metaphor of 'dust' to convey the idea in a broader sense; any English soldier who dies in war accomplishes the same aspect, that is, they are so much shaped by England that wherever they die, that part of the land will bore their English roots, spreading the dust of the country. Thus, the first stanza establishes the patriotic flavour of the poem and ends by creating a picture of England as a blissful place on earth. The speaker evokes the power of nature that he finds in England and which somehow, he finds embraces the soldier till he is turned into 'dust'.

The second stanza develops a heightened state of the speaker's mind. England is personified; Brooke does this intentionally to capture the sense of unity and solidarity among the people. Bringing together the qualities that moulded England, the speaker highlights that England's sovereignty will continue to exist. It is by means of attributing human qualities that the speaker binds together all the people of the country for the cause of England. The speaker, thereby, pointing to all the positive reasons, lays

emphasis on the worthiness of the sacrifice the soldier makes. When a soldier dies while fighting, he will find peace as England is closer to heavenly bliss: "In hearts at peace, under an English heaven". Thus, the speaker, through this sonnet succeeds to make England emerge as a country that provides the soldiers enough strength and courage to fight against any enemy so that England becomes victorious. It is the soldier's love for his country that conquers his heart at the battlefield when death itself seems too trivial.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 7:** Write down the summary of the poem "The Soldier".

**Q 8:** What are the four other sonnets of the collection *1914 and Other Poems* apart from "The Soldier"?

## 9.5 MAJOR THEMES

In this section, we shall delve deeper into the issues that the poem is concerned with.

The title of the poem points out that it is about a soldier or soldiers in general who sacrifice their lives selflessly for the good of their country. Here, it is England that is given due importance throughout the poem. However, Brooke has touched upon other issues through the poem like death and war, patriotism/nationalism, idealism and optimism, etc. In the sonnet "The Soldier", Brooke's engagement with the idea of death is very important because it represents valour on the part of the soldier to sacrifice his life altruistically. The poem begins thus: "If I should die" and it was as if Brooke had preconceived his own end through the poem. Notably, Brooke's life ended after a few months, and this was publicly mourned so as to give him the status of a hero– an epitome of sacrifice and youthful energy. Indeed, death is a part of war and as such, the lurking danger that comes with the war is partially implied in the poem. The reference to War or warfare is narrowed down because the poem highlights more on positive issues like love for motherland. The feeling of patriotism is so strong in the poem that

it is the prime factor or the triggering force for the soldier to stand against any odds challenging/threatening his country. It must be noted that the poem also gave consolation to the ones who were out there in the battlefield by glorifying the sacrifice of their lives. Brooke was to a great extent touched by the marvels of nature and countryside. The sonnet exposes his love for Mother Nature as well as implies his mystic vision. It is his 'love' for England with all the bounties of natural sights that are worthy enough to be defended from external threats implied by War. The poet gives more importance to the Nation and its well-being, more than any kind of individual sacrifice. The sentimental touch of this poem is what made it a mouthpiece for conveying the nationalistic spirit that was the need of the hour. The poet is in full praise of the life rewarded to him by the English soil, which he must selflessly offer for the good of the nation. The "richer dust" of the soldier is situated only in its connection with England that "bore, shaped, made aware" and hence, is a part of England. Over and above, through the poem Brooke strikes an idealistic and optimistic note by eulogising a concept such as 'death', which comes with patriotic fervour. Death is not only the apt way for the soldier, it is also through this way that he can attain peace; it also points to the insignificance of human body.

## 9.6 BROOKE'S POETIC STYLE

Rupert Brooke's sonnets are graceful and lyrical in nature. All the five sonnets of his *1914* collection represent his highly intellectual and refined response to the Great War. An air of moral crisis together with the society's concerns also gets reflected through his sonnets. In the poem "The Soldier", Brooke has used the Petrarchan or the Italian sonnet form comprising an octave and a sestet. However, the rhyme scheme of the octave follows the Shakespearean pattern (ababcdcd) whereas the sestet follows the Italian rhyme scheme. The use of "I" in the poem is technically employed by Brooke for it stood for all those soldiers who are fighting for their country leaving behind their loved ones. It binds together all those who are directly or indirectly involved with the War. In the first line of the poem, "If I should die, think only this of me" the use of caesura is indicative of the stress that Brooke put on the patriotic spirit of the soldier who willingly gives away his

life and hence deserves admiration from the society as well as family.

Brooke uses metaphors/imagery, personification, etc. in the poem to highlight the meaning and importance of death set against the social and moral obligation of the soldier. He uses repetition as a tool to emphasise the patriotic spirit of the poem. Certain words in the poem like 'some corner' represents uncertainty bringing out the extent to which the soldiers risk their lives in places unknown. The graveness of the octave is shifted to a merrier note in the sestet (second stanza). Images used in the last three lines of the poem denotes Brooke's optimistic attitude to the sacrifices of the soldiers:

Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

By using personification in this line: "A pulse in the eternal mind, no less", Brooke aims to hint that the country will forever remember the soldier who died fighting for it. The dead soldier will receive his reward in the sense that England's memory or in a sense, history will forever commemorate those soldiers who have devoted their lives for the good of the nation. And, perhaps Brooke means 'peace' under an 'English heaven' in this context. It can be seen that Brooke uses "I" in connection to its collective use for it relates the soldier with the nation at large. About Brooke's poetic techniques and language, it can be concluded by mentioning his elegant use of symbolism added with the lyrical tunes, to be of mature kind and an indication of his technical accomplishment.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 9:** Analyse Brooke's idea of death as reflected in the poem.

**Q 10:** Write briefly on the poetic style of Brooke in "The Soldier".

## 9.7 RECEPTION OF BROOKE

Considering the immense influence of Rupert Brooke, it has been found that there were mixed reactions regarding his works. Undoubtedly,

when he presented himself to the readers during the initial period of the WW I, he was almost a public figure who was able to conquer the hearts of his readers. In fact, Brooke did not aim to write propaganda through his works; particularly "The Soldier" was open to the public for enlightening them on the various discourses—social as well as political. This was possible for the kind of popularity Brooke enjoyed partly due to his image as an 'ideal' young man of his generation and partly through the theme of patriotism that was highly echoed in his poems. His immense popularity that he shared during his lifetime achieved the status of a national craze with his death during the war. Politically, his sonnets were used to instil the ideals of nationalism in the masses. Awareness of the war and mass participation was sought for by intensifying Brooke's individual experiences of war as he came to be regarded as an icon.

It must be noted that rather than personal experiences of war, which Brooke did not acquire much due to his early death; his poetry is chiefly a response to channelize the patriotic spirit prevalent in the society. Therefore, very clearly, his poetry was a premeditated expression to guide the society's discernment regarding the war. As his poetry is premeditated, there is hardly any spontaneity in his verses. His poetry rather creates an ambience wherein 'death' not as has been experienced personally but death, as an idea, has been situated. However, his influence and success as a poet, during the time in which he composed poems was great. The following quoted lines reflect the popularity of Brooke's poetry:

"Brooke's first volume, *Poems* (1911), was reprinted in 1913 and then six times in 1915 and four more by August 1916. By 1932, it had sold 100,000 copies. A second selection, titled *1914 and Other Poems* went through fourteen impressions between May 1915 and September 1916. A collected edition, with Edward Marsh's memoir, appeared in 1918 and went through sixteen impressions in the next ten years." (Brooker and Widdowson 121)

It is mention-worthy that the early reception of Brooke's poetry was relatively related to his early demise and his popularity as a public figure. It is also greatly linked to the war. Prior to the war, he was not regarded as a

voice that could capture the collective imagination of the people. However, the War brought an impact upon the poet's reputation whose war poetry was deeply rooted in patriotism. Immediately, after his death, "The Soldier" acted as a medium to convey the dignity of sacrifice as well as the selfless participation in war and heroism of the poet amidst life-threatening dangers.

However, there was a major shift in the poetic sensibility, which gradually turned to the stories of the poets who were brutally facing the War and wrote about their first hand experiences. This shift was a radical one as it affected Brooke's reputation to a great extent. His romantic and mystic war poems no longer were received with the vivacity they enjoyed once because they were viewed as idealistic contemplations mainly related to martyrdom and exaltation of the idea of War. The reality that prevailed was stark and after Brooke a new generation of trench poets emerged who highly dominated the poetic scene expressing pity, anguish, bleak situation, resentment and so on.

Interestingly, we must note that Brooke was included in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935*, an anthology of poetry compiled by W. B. Yeats, one of the greatest poets of 20th century. This is an indication of how modern critics have been favourably indicating to the techniques of Brooke as well as his lyrical excellence. As a whole, Brooke's poetry has generated much idea about the society and the nation during the outbreak of the Great War.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 11:** How was Rupert Brooke received as a poet?



## 9.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have read about the war poets like Rupert Brooke who actively used poetry as a medium to raise their various concerns regarding the war and its disastrous effects. This unit familiarised you with

the war poet Rupert Brooke who is one of the major figures associated with literature of the First World War. As we have discussed, even though Brooke did not witness the major devastations caused by the war, through his sonnets, he tried to project a sense of brotherhood and unity. After going through one of his famous sonnets, "The Soldier" you have come to know the themes of the poem such as patriotism, death and war, optimistic viewpoint and so on. You are now familiar also with the techniques of Brooke as well as his use of the sonnet form.



## 9.9 FURTHER READING

1) Brooke, Rupert. (1942). *1914 and Other Poems*. Third Impression. London: Faber & Faber.

2) Brooker, Peter. & Widdowson, Peter. (1986). "A Literature for England", *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920*. ed. Robert Collsand Philip Dodd. London: Croom Helm.

3) Ervine, St. John G. (1915). "The Poetry of Rupert Brooke" in *The North American Review*, Vol. 202, No. 718, pp. 432-440.

4) Jones, Nigel. *Rupert Brooke: Life, Death and Myth*. E book.

5) Perkins, David. (1987). *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode*. New Delhi: ABS Publishers & Distributors.

**Websites and Electronic Resources:**

https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-true-story-of-rupert-brooke

http://www.warpoets.org/conflicts/great-war/rupert-brooke-1887-1915/



## 9.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

**Ans to Q 1:** Wilfred Gibson, W. H. Davies, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, W. J. Turner, John Freeman, Wilfred Owen, etc.

**Ans to Q 2:** Rupert Brooke pursued Literature at King's College, Cambridge… …his literary circle comprised many of them from the 'Bloomsbury group'. Notably, it was his work on "John Webster and the Elizabethan Drama" that enabled him to win a scholarship to this College.

**Ans to Q 3:** When the war broke out in August 1914, Brooke actively took part in it as a volunteer and eventually, with the help of Churchill and Marsh, he got a commission in the Royal Naval Division. He went to the devastating Antwerp voyage with the British Expeditionary Force in 1914 to check the progress of the Germans.

**Ans to Q 4:** Brooke succumbed to death due to an infection from a mosquito bite while sailing to Dardanelles; he breathed his last due to this septicaemia on April 23, 1915.

**Ans to Q 5:** Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Gibson, W. H. Davies, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, W. J. Turner, John Freeman, Wilfred Owen, etc… …the term "Georgian" first came into use by Edward Marsh… …the term is used to include poets who made their influence felt in between the years 1900 to 1922, more particularly representing those poets who contributed "before, during, and after the First World War".

**Ans to Q 6:** *Poems* (1911), *1914 and Other poems* (1915), *Collected Poems* (1918), *John Webster and Elizabethan Drama* (1916) and, the prose titled *Letters from America* (1916).

**Ans to Q 7:** Read section 9.4 and attempt on your own.

**Ans to Q 8:** "Peace", "Safety", "The Dead" and "The Dead".

**Ans to Q 9:** In the sonnet "The Soldier", Brooke's engagement with the idea of death… …represents valour on the part of the soldier to sacrifice his life altruistically… …Death is not only the apt way for the soldier… …he can attain peace.

**Ans to Q 10:** Brooke used the Petrarchan or the Italian sonnet form… …the rhyme scheme of the octave follows the Shakespearean pattern (ababcdcd) whereas the sestet follows the Italian rhyme scheme… …the use of caesura is indicative of the stress that Brooke put on the

patriotic spirit of the soldier who willingly gives away his life and hence deserves admiration from the society as well as family… …uses metaphors/imagery, personification, etc… …repetition as a tool to emphasise the patriotic spirit of the poem… … images used in the last three lines of the poem denotes Brooke's optimistic attitude to the sacrifices of the soldiers… …about Brooke's poetic techniques and language, it can be concluded by mentioning his elegant use of symbolism added with the lyrical tunes, to be of mature kind and an indication of his technical accomplishment.

**Ans to Q 11:** See section 9.7



## 9.11 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

**Q 1:** Write briefly on the thematic concerns of First World War poetry. Point out the major poets and highlight their contribution to war literature.

**Q 2:** Do you agree that it is with Rupert Brooke that war poetry gained popularity? Give a reasoned answer.

**Q 3:** Discuss the life and works of Rupert Brooke.

**Q 4:** Give a critical summary of the poem "The Soldier".

**Q 5:** What are the thematic concerns reflected through the poem "The Soldier"? Discuss in details.

**Q 6:** Analyse the diverse responses to Rupert Brooke's poetic output.

**Q 7:** Examine the style and techniques employed by Rupert Brooke.

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# UNIT 10: WILFRED OWEN: "FUTILITY" AND "ARMS AND THE BOY"

## UNIT STRUCTURE


10.1 Learning Objectives

10.2 Introduction

10.3 Wilfred Owen: The Poet

10.4 Reading the Poems "Futility" and "Arms and The Boy"

10.5 Major Themes

10.6 Poetic Style

10.7 Reception of Owen

10.8 Let Us Sum Up

10.9 Further Reading

10.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

10.11 Possible Questions


## 10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- describe the life of the poet Wilfred Owen
- interpret the poems "Futility" and "Arms and the Boy" by Owen
- point out the underlying themes in these two poems
- discuss the style employed by Owen in his poetry
- discuss the reception of Owen and his works.

## 10.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we have already discussed war poetry with reference to the themes of idealising the concept of war. In this unit, we shall discuss the shifting trend in war poetry with regard to the themes, the transition from an idealistic or patriotic representation to the anguish and reality that have become the dominant traits of the War. Along with Siegfried Sassoon, it was Wilfred Owen, who contributed towards bringing into poetry the realities of War that were harsh and poignant to the civilians. In fact,

Owen strived to state through his poems his close association with war experiences at the trench as well as a soldier who fought at the frontline. He tried to address the ground realities as against the propagandistic views and concept of the war. In him, we can find an imagist as well as a decadent, romantic as well as a realistic poet. His vibrant and eloquent language added by his command over the use of several technical details like personification and para-rhyme made his mark as a modern poet who has changed the course of English poetry. The horrifying and the ugly depiction of war and bloodshed is all that can be seen in his poetry, as mentioned by W. B. Yeats who did not include Owen in his anthology. However, it does not in any way minimise Owen's contribution because he is regarded as one trend setter in the world of English poetry for rejecting and challenging the old style, characterised by romantic notion of the country, and representing the stark realities in his poems wherein it surpassed issues like death, life, religion, nature, and so on. The present unit aims to introduce you to this great war poet whose contribution in the development of English poetry cannot be overlooked. Before we deal with two of his poems, "Futility" and "Arms and the Boy", as prescribed in your syllabus, it is essential to know the background of the poet for analysing his poems. Let us begin by getting to know the important facets of his life.

## 10.3 WILFRED OWEN: THE POET

Wilfred Owen was one of the prominent poets of the 20th century well known for his vibrant war poetry. The portrayal of the crudity of war in his poems was a stark contrast to earlier war poets including Rupert Brooke. Born in 1893 on March 18, Wilfred Edward Salter Owen was a mixture of English and Welsh origin. He was born near Oswestry, Shropshire to Tom Owen, who worked in the railways, and Harriet Susan and was the eldest of their four children. At the time of Wilfred's birth, the family lived a comfortable life in his (Wilfred Owen) grandfather's house. However, after his grandfather's death, the house was sold and they moved to Birkenhead. After changing many dwelling places, the family moved to Shrewsbury in 1906.

Owen received his education at the Birkenhead Institute and Shrewsbury Technical School. He came to realise his interest in poetry at a very early age of 10 or 11 during a vacation to Cheshire in the year 1903 or 1904. Undoubtedly, his interest in Literature grew and one poet who influenced him deeply was the romantic poet John Keats. He also began to develop an interest in religion. In 1911, when Owen could not secure first class in matriculation, he lost the chance to win a scholarship to London University. As such, with the hope of getting tuition and partly for the free lodging, Owen served as an assistant to the Vicar of Dunsden near Reading. He, however, could not succeed to win a scholarship to University College at Reading.

Pertaining to this failure and his disappointment with the functioning of the Church, Owen left for France where he taught English and French at Berlitz School of Languages in Bordeaux. Though initially Owen was ambiguous about the War, in 1915, he was ultimately enlisted in the Artists Rifles Officers' Training Corps. He underwent training for seven months in Essex before being commissioned as a second lieutenant on the 4$^{th}$ of June 1915 in the Manchester Regiment. Owen's perspective about the War changed completely after he fell into a shell hole and was there for three days, while leading his platoon in the famous and bloodiest Battle of Somme. It became obvious that he suffered from shell shock and had to be sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh. Owen met Sigfried Sassoon at the hospital who was by then an established poet and eventually had a great amount of influence on Owen. Sassoon's poetry was based on starkly realistic themes of War in contrast to Owen's inclination to romantic poetry; their association influenced Owen's poetic concerns to blend both the aspects.

In 1917, after being deemed fit to do lighter duties, Owen was discharged from the hospital. Through Sassoon's association, he was introduced to other literary figures of the time including Robert Graves, Robert Ross, Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells. Regarding Owen's sexual inclination, he was considered homosexual, which is again debatable. Owen returned to France in 1918 and actively engaged himself once again in the

War. By August of that year, he led the soldiers near to the village of Joncourt and fell heavy on his enemies. In recognition to his valour, he was awarded the Military Cross. However, unfortunately one week before the Armistice was signed that ended the War, Wilfred Owen was shot dead while leading the unit of the second Manchesters towards Ors. He was buried in the cemetery, situated in the north west of the village in France.

Owen saw the publication of only four of his poems, the rest were published posthumously. Within a short life span of only twenty-five years, Owen made much significance in the poetry of WW I. He experimented with various forms and the traits echoes influence of Romantic, Decadent, Georgian and Modernist trends. Some of his poems are "Spring Offensive", "The Sentry", "Dulce Et Decorum Est", "Greater Love", "Disabled", "Strange Meeting", etc. "Dulce Et Decorum Est" is one of the best remembered poems by Owen. It was composed in 1917 at Craiglockhart Hospital when he was fighting against shell shock. "Strange Meeting" is perhaps the most popular poem by Owen where he handles the concept of war in a more matured and philosophical way. The meeting is strange because the dead soldiers from opposite groups meet in Hell. "Maundy Thursday", "Insensibility", etc. are equally significant poems by Owen. One important poem where Owen's realism can be seen is "The Sentry" as well as "Dulce Et Decorum Est".



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 1:** Can you relate one incident that changed Owen's views on war?

**Q 2:** Why is the title of his poem call "Strange Meeting"?

## 10.4 READING THE POEMS "FUTILITY AND "ARMS AND THE BOY"

**"Futility"**

Move him into the sun—

Gently its touch awoke him once,

At home, whispering of fields half-sown.

Always it woke him, even in France,

Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds—
Woke once the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
—O what made **fatuous** sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

wing lack
telligence

**Explanation:**

"Futility" is one among the published poems during Owen's life time. The poem is written in the form of an elegiac lyric and it first appeared in 1918 in the *Nation.* Owen talks about the 'futility' of war that has crippled the lives of young soldiers who are succumbed by the War's force. The poem is about the fading hopes of soldiers who struggle to live.

The first stanza very poignantly describes how a deceased soldier is moved to the sun with the hope that the gentle rays of the sun will revive his consciousness. The speaker by the line "whispering of fields half-sown" suggests that the soldier whose life is curtailed by the War is young and it is eagerly wished that the sun, which is a life-giver, will once again bring the dead soldier to life because half of his life experiences are yet to be received. It was always the sun that somehow wakes him up while he was at home or in France. However, the speaker mentioned that even the sun could not bring life into him on this snowy morning. Even though the speaker tried to bring in the image of light through the sun, yet the first stanza ends in a state of despair for the soldier is dead. The soldier who has fought in the war and died there was not prepared to die; he joined the war with the hope of securing his home, his nation.

The second stanza depicts a change in tone of the speaker who takes on a questioning attitude regarding life. The sun and the soil that lead to the growth of seeds is suggestive of how despite the soldier's death, life has to go on. It signifies the paradox of life and death; while the sun and the

soil gives light and life on the one hand, it is disturbing for the speaker to acknowledge that: "what made fatuous sunbeams toil/To break earth's sleep at all?" The speaker again refers to hope that is futile; even when the soldier is buried, as the seeds in the soil, he cannot be brought back to life.

The sun is personified when it is referred to as 'kind' and 'old' signifying the age old belief on the sun as a protector of life. Owen's reference to light can be understood in terms of his religious inclination also. By light, he projects God, the life giver. Even the warmth of the sun lay futile when it falls on the dead. Thus, the title can also be seen in the light of the inability to comprehend the mysteries of life and death and how Nature is a witness to both. This poem, in a way, projects the growing religious crisis in Owen. If the sun, symbolising God has created man then why is He silently witnessing the end of mankind. Indeed, the seriousness of the poem is reflected in the last two lines in which the speaker is clueless as to the notion of life and death. Therefore, it is only silence that pervades in the ending of the poem.

**"Arms and the Boy"**

Let the boy try along this **bayonet**-blade
How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;
Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;
And thinly drawn with **famishing** for flesh.

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-leads,
Which long to **nuzzle** in the hearts of lads,
Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth
Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.
There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;
And God will grow no **talons** at his heels,
Nor **antlers** through the thickness of his curls.



**Bayonet:** A knife that can be fixed to the end of a rifle and used as a weapon.
**Famishing:** Hungry.
**Nuzzle:** Push against gently with the nose and mouth.



**Talons:** A sharp hooked claw
**Antlers:** Deciduous horn of a member of the deer family

**Explanation:**

As a poet, Owen was always keen to represent the pity of the

destruction caused by war to his fellow men. Through this poem, Owen takes his readers to witness the horrifying situation in which war destructs youths. The poem was written in 1918, few months prior to the end of the War. The poem is written in the form of three quatrains wherein the poet speaks of arms and its effects on the innocence of humanity. The poem depicts a young soldier undergoing training for the Great War the speaker in this poem asks a young boy to handle a bayonet-blade personified as a 'madman' hungry for blood and flesh having an evil and cold temper. The speaker urges the boy to stroke the bullets and hand over the cartridges that are made of fine zinc. Again, we see that the bullets are also personified as ones that long to tear apart those young hearts that will be fighting in the war. Even the cartridges symbolise "sharpness of grief and death." The first two stanzas concentrated on the 'arms' where the speaker is either arousing interest in the young mind or else training and making the young boy aware of the dangers in the War where only violence reigns. In a way, the two stanzas reveal the potential harm that weapons can cause.

The third stanza, however, reveals a contrasting figure, that is the boy is set against the deadly weapon. In comparison to the weapons that are as sharp as grief and death, the boy is fit for laughing and his teeth are not as wild as the weapons: "his teeth seem for laughing round an apple/ There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple". The last two lines: "And God will grow no talons at his heels/Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls" is suggestive of the fact that the boy is not a devil. Through this poem, Owen brings to light how men are their own enemies. It is by encouraging the young and innocent to use weapons that a section of war loving people corrupts mankind.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 3:** Give in your own words the summary of the poem "Futility".

**Q 4:** What is the irony that is reflected through the poem "Arms and the Boy"?

## 10.5 MAJOR THEMES

This section shall bring out some of the points in terms of which Owen's poems are to be read. Owen's portrayal of the war is of prime importance in the light of its representation of crude realities that he himself experienced as a soldier. His poems give us insightful exposure to the ground realities of War. You must have observed that his poems are a striking contrast to that of the poems of Rupert Brooke whom we have discussed in the previous unit. Let us explore some of the significant themes explicit in his poetry.

**Owen's representation of Soldiers:**

Both the prescribed poems deal with soldiers whom Owen has represented realistically in terms of the complex mental set up that has been instilled in them because of the continuous fights at the War. Both the poems depict the miserable condition of soldiers. In "Futility", we came across the horrifying effects of war on the psyche of the soldiers who struggle with every moment in their lives. Humanity is no more honoured as seen from deaths caused by War. The soldiers' attempt becomes futile while they hopefully tried to bring back their dead friend to live believing in God. However, as it seems, no positive force can bring about a change unless men themselves understand the value of humanity.

In "Arms and the Boy" Owen triggers the readers' sympathy for the young soldier who is turned into nothing but a killing machine devoid of emotions and common sense. Here again, by representing the innocent soldier who is young enough to laugh and enjoy his life is trapped in a brutal and cruel game of life and death. There are many other poems where Wilfred Owen depicts the pathetic situation of soldiers and exemplifies the horrors and devastation that are caused by the war. Owen's description of the war results from his first hand experiences at wartime when he was in the frontline. His close observation of the wartime situations and of the soldiers in particular, is coloured with the hue of pity. Owen was very shattered to realise that the soldiers were turned into mere guns and that the romantic ideal associated with soldiers is no more a reality. He is critical of the whole

war and he deals more maturely with the psyche of the soldiers in poems like "Insensibility" or "Strange Meeting."

**Owen's reaction to War:**

It has been noticed that Owen was extremely saddened to see that the War and its destruction on humanity. Unlike Rupert Brooke who idealised the war, Owen saw the war in a different light. He was more realistic in his representation because of his own experiences of fighting at the frontline and leading his platoons towards the destruction. Most of Owen's poetic output depicts his pity for the War. His reaction to war, as reflected in his poems, was heavily influence by his friend Siegfried Sassoon who showed him to dwell upon the realities of the war, as well as his mother who inspired him to develop a philosophy regarding the war. Representing combatant poetry, Owen was led to a moral dilemma as evident in his poems. It was a challenge for him, being the leader of his platoon, to carry out the orders and lead his 'boys' knowingly to the devious trap of the War which only provides suffering, fear, hopelessness and death. The only way that Owen can compensate was through poetry: "the anxiety, guilt or self-reproach consequent upon it was the spur to the writing of poems engaging with it". (Corcoran, 89) He felt the need to acquaint the British people of the horrible conditions faced by the soldiers by means of his poems. After all, his theme or the subject of his poetry was the 'pity of war' and as a result, he wrote in a voice that was "in no sense consolatory". (Corcoran, 92)

**Nature vs Warfare:**

Owen's poetry shows a strong implication of the cruelty that war laid upon the creation of Nature. One instance that can be cited is from the poem "Futility" where warfare overpowers Nature. In fact, critics have considered the philosophical significance brought out through the nature-war or life-death conflict in the poem. Beneath the surface of the elegiac tone of the poem lies Owen's deeply existential crisis wherein he strives to find the meaning of life. Nature has always been the light giver and the source of life yet in the face of cruelty triggered by the war; it can just be a witness to its own creation. It is a very poignant description of human crisis. Another poem of Own, namely, "Spring Offensive" also deals with this theme.

Nature also reacts to the devastation of the War as the sky is filled with the smoke emitted by the machines and ammunitions. Nature in its crudest sense is synonymous to humanity and welfare of the people rather than the promoter of inhumane war.

**Innocence vs War:**

Owen's "Arms and the Boy" is a striking example of the contrast of innocence and war. The young soldier or the soldiers in general, are not evil by nature. They are the victims of the brutal war and are shaped accordingly. Owen speaks in an ironic tone when he throws light on the fact that the war is human invoked. While it is man who teaches to be cruel and unkind in the war, it is man himself who is innocent and caring. It also speaks of a strong contrast in terms of youthful innocence when one normally is happy and playful but the occurrence of war turns the youthful vigour into a deadly weapon to be used insanely to kill enemies at the battlefield. As usual, Owen represents his public-private clash as a poet. Being the leader, it is man like him who leads the young soldiers towards the battlefield to kill and get killed, on the other hand, his individual or private experience exposes his deep crisis in humanity and the overwhelming influence of the war that encourages number of killing machines in the form of young boys.

These are some of the points under which we can classify the subject matter of Owen's poetry. However, you are suggested to explore other pertinent themes such as death, relationships, disillusionment with religion, friendship, etc. explicit in Owen's poetry and develop your own understanding of his war poetry. The philosophical overtones in his poetry exemplify his crisis as a modern poet, who was anti-war by heart and who based his poems on the realities of the war. In fact, he was a conscious poet because he developed his poetic style to convey the deadening effects of the World War I to his readers.



**LET US KNOW**

The petrified ambience and the disillusionment surrounding Britain in the War years gets a reflection in memoirs and autobiographies of writers like Vera

Britain's memoir *Testament of Youth* (1933), Robert Graves' autobiography which mainly has its base in his experiences as a soldier, namely, *Goodbye to All That* (1929). Another notable figure was Siegfried Sassoon who contributed in the exposure of the various mechanisms of the War expressing strong resentment towards it. Reflecting a soldier's point of view, his trilogy namely, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928), *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930) and *Sherston's Progress* (1936) have been projected through a fictional character 'George Sherston'.

## 10.6 POETIC STYLE

As a poet, Wilfred Owen was instrumental in depicting the realistic effects of War. As such, his poetic style appeared to be a combination of satire and anguish, but he depicted "an ampler gift in traditional and Romantic qualities of style and imagination, which unite with the realism and qualify it." (Perkins, 280) However, concentrating mainly on War, Owen did not only confine it to its realistic representation but also laid equal emphasis on the techniques of his poetry. About his style, it can be said that his association with Sassoon and his experiences during the War was instrumental in changing the course of his poetic technicalities. As one who was greatly influenced by the Romantic poets like Shelley and Keats, Owen's poetry carried in them a "great variety of treatment– parable and vision, narrative, subjective lyric, dramatic monologue, case history" (Perkins 280)

One significant aspect of Owen's style is his rhyming pattern that is exceptional in the sense that it is 'consonant rhyme'. For instance, in the poem "Arms and the Boy", the following is to be noted: 'blade-blood', 'flash-flesh' and 'leads-lads', etc. are all examples of his use of consonant rhyme where the consonant remains fixed and only the vowel is changed. Use of images has always been a dominant feature in Owen's poems that contributed in his development as a modern poet. Owen's war poems are written in a very simple, eloquent and straightforward manner in a language that is common among the soldiers. However, his use of metaphor and personification adds to the new style he has developed for treating his subject

matter. Deviating from the style of his early poems highly influenced by Romantic poets, in his war poems Owen chose a directness of style with regard to the treatment of his subject and the coarseness of its impact. Undoubtedly, Owen's poetry owes its splendour in his treatment of the grim reality of War accompanied by a sense of compassion and excellence of poetic techniques. As evident from our reading of both the poems, Owen personified the "sun" and the "weapons" respectively to emphasise on the life-emanating source of Nature while at the same time to impart the message of cruelty and violence being depicted through the outbreak of war. His use of para rhymes also serves to his purpose of creating an ambience of nastiness created by the war. For instance, sun-sown, star-stir, tall-toil–all these contribute to the disturbing effect of the poem "Futility".

With regard to the ironic allusion in Owen's poetry, Timothy O'keeffe noted that he "criticises the religious establishment through references to the Bible which project the disparity between the gentle teachings and example of Christ and the English Church's support of the war." (O' keeffe 72-73) As an instance, the poem "Arms and the Boy" can be cited for alluding to the classical poem of Virgil, that is, "Aeneid". By referring to this allusion, Owen parodies the opening remark of the classical epic, when translated into English, maintains that "Of arms and the man I sing…" (Virgil) Both these poems deals with war, but Owen is very critical about war in the sense that "innocence of the boy is caustically contrasted with the Classical allusions to harpies and (possibly) to Actaeon, who had violated with his eyes the chastity of Diana." (O'keeffe, 73) As evident, Owen used allusions in order to portray the violence of the war and bring out the deficiency of morality that his age was prone to.

In stark contrast to the war poets before him, Owen found a strong poetic voice by use of images. Rejecting the style of poetry that was practised by Brooke and others, Owen wrote about the terror and shock of war from a very close point. His poems are harsh as the war, by the use of sounds as well as visually. Owen's merit as a poet to this day lies in the terseness of his diction that represented realistically the horrors of a bygone era. Indeed, his stay at France introduced him to the Decadents, which has inculcated into his poetry a gloomy image.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 5:** Point out the major themes in Owen's poetry and describe any one in details.

**Q 6:** What is significant about the rhyming patter adopted by Owen?

## 10.7 RECEPTION OF OWEN

Regarding the poetry of Wilfred Owen, Dylan Thomas noted that his poetry has universal tone because Owen is "a poet of all times, all places, and all wars. There is only one War: that of men against men." (Bloom 26) This universal appeal in Owen inspired many later poets including Auden and his group that consisted of Spender, MacNeice, Cecil Day Lewis apart from W.H. Auden. Interestingly, it was only in 1931 that Owen came to be noticed. Earlier during his lifetime, only four poems were published. However, in 1919, Edith Sitwell posthumously published a few poems by Owen in *Wheels.* The following year Sitwell and Sassoon published a volume on Owen basing on his manuscripts, which was further revised by Blunden's edition. His poems greatly influenced Auden and his circle who were influenced by Owen's poetic style, especially his rhyming pattern. It must be noted that Owen's poetry was well received by later poets: "Leftist or Communist in sympathy at that time, they were attracted to his use of poetry for a political purpose, his idealization and celebration of common men, and his wrathful indignation against those who were exploiting them". (Perkins, 285)

With the formation of Wilfred Owen Association in 1989, public memorials were established in Shrewsbury and Oswestry, which stimulated discussions as well as presentation of any significant issue, related to the poet Wilfred Owen. His importance as a poet is also recorded in Benjamin Britten's 1961 *War Requiem.* Apart from being the subject matter of many novels as well as drama adaptations, Owen was chosen as for the BBC docudrama, namely *Wilfred Owen: A Remembrance Tale* (2007).



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 7:** How well has Owen's poetry been received?



## 10.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed Wilfred Owen and his two poems namely "Futility" and "Arms and the Boy". As you have read that Wilfred Owen was one of the trendsetters when it comes to English poetry for he changed the whole discourse in which the war was viewed. He brought into poetry a directness of style, which was used to exemplify the horrors and the miserable condition of the war. He used poetry as a medium to convey to the common masses the realities that the war has brought upon. Apart from these two poems, some of his well-known poem that you are familiar with are "Spring Offensive", "The Sentry", "Dulce Et Decorum Est", "Greater Love", "Disabled", "Strange Meeting", etc. You have also been able to get a glimpse of Owen as a war poet in this unit. Further, we have dealt with the important themes that are very common in Owen's poetry. Owen's poetic technicalities, including his use of imagery and personification, have contributed to his reference as a modern poet. Not only Owen's poetry, in fact his life also became the source of many later novels as well as musical compositions. It is recommended that at least you read another five of his poems to have a better grasp on the poetry of Owen. A reading of this unit shall help you in relating to the other works by Owen and enable you to analyse and develop your understanding of war poetry in general.



## 10.9 FURTHER READING

1) Bloom, Harold. (Ed.) (2002). *Poets of World War I: Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg.* Introduction. By Harrold Bloom. Chelsea House Publishers. E-book.

2) Corcoran, Neil. (Ed.) (2007). *The Cambridge to Twentieth-Century English Poetry*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

3) Perkins, David. (1987). *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode*. New Delhi: ABS Publishers & Distributors.

4) O'Keeffe, Timothy. *Ironic Allusion in the Poetry of Wilfred Owen*. pp. 72-81.

5) Williams, Michael. (1990). "Wilfred Owen: a poet re-institutionalised". *Critical Survey*. 2 (2), Writing and the First World war. 194-202

**Websites and Electronic Resources:**

http://users.clas.ufl.edu/snod/OwenIntroductionNB.110215.pdf

## 10.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

**Ans to Q 1:** Owen's perspective about the War changed completely after he fell into a shell hole and was there for three days, while leading his platoon in the famous and bloodiest Battle of Somme.

**Ans to Q 2:** "Strange Meeting" is perhaps the most popular poem by Owen where he handles the concept of war in a more matured and philosophical way. The meeting is strange because the dead soldiers from opposite groups meet in Hell.

**Ans to Q 3:** Refer to 10.4

**Ans to Q 4:** The boy is set against the deadly weapon. In comparison to the weapons that are as sharp as grief and death, the boy is fit for laughing and his teeth are not as wild as the weapons… …the boy is not a devil… …men are their own enemies… …encouraging the young and innocent to use weapons that a section of war loving people corrupts mankind.

**Ans to Q 5:** Refer to 10.5

**Ans to Q 6:** One significant aspect of Owen's rhyming pattern is 'consonant rhyme'. For instance, in the poem "Arms and the Boy", the following is to be noted: 'blade-blood', 'flash-flesh' and 'leads-lads', etc. are all

examples of his use of consonant rhyme where the consonant remains fixed and only the vowel is changed.

**Ans to Q 7:** Refer to 10.7



## 10.11 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

**Q 1:** Comment on War poetry with special reference to Wilfred Owen.

**Q 2:** Examine the themes that are commonly found in Wilfred Owen's poetry.

**Q 3:** Discuss in details the life and works of Wilfred Owen. What is your view on the effect of Owen's personal experiences in his poetry?

**Q 4:** Critically analyse the poems:

a) "Futility"

b) "Arms and the Boy"

**Q 5.** Consider the style and technique prevalent in Owen's poetry. In what way does it differ from the earlier war poets?

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# UNIT 11: W. H. AUDEN: "IN MEMORY OF W. B. YEATS"

## UNIT STRUCTURE


11.1 Learning Objectives

11.2 Introduction

11.3 W.H. Auden: The Poet

11.4 Reading the Poem prescribed

11.5 Major Themes

11.6 Auden's Poetic Style

11.7 Reception of Auden

11.8 Let Us Sum Up

11.9 Further Reading

11.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

11.11 Possible Questions


## 11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- identify W. H. Auden as one of the important modern poets
- get an idea about the vast dimension of Auden's works and the basic features of his poetry
- interpret the poem prescribed in terms of its different aspects
- discuss the themes, philosophy and concerns of Auden as a poet in the poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"
- appreciate the poem in its totality.

## 11.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first Unit of Block 3 and it deals Units,Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973) who is one of the most influential poets of the 20th Century. It is difficult to summarise his achievements with around four hundred poems written in a variety of styles. Besides, he is also famous for drama, essays, travel writing, and critical works. From his college days, he was recognised

as a leading poet of his generation; he was the joint editor of *Oxford Poetry* with Cecil Day Lewis (1925-1928). In the thirties, he developed leftist sympathies, and in the poetry published in that period, he wrote with a definite spirit of social commitment, along with other poets like Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis, and Louis MacNeice. He was a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War and wrote a long poem called *Spain* (1937) in support of the Republican cause. His poetry was especially marked by his deep interests in psychoanalysis. His fame often rests on his ability to exercise a vibrantly poetic idiom based on contemporary speech and observation. In his later life, Auden developed a religious commitment. This unit deals with his poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats". This elegy was written in 1939 soon after Yeats died on January 28, 1939. For Auden, the moment was historical because it marked the end of the nineteen-thirties, the decade of unrest and lost hopes. World War II began nine months later. Auden here not only pays tribute to a great poet but appeals, in a moving dirge as expressed in the third section of the poem, to poets in a time of defeat and distress. He asserts the value of poetry as a means of survival against the forces of humanity.

## 11.3 W.H. AUDEN: THE POET

Wystan Hugh Auden was born in York, England, in 1907, and was brought up in the industrial city of Birmingham by devout and well-educated Anglo-Catholic parents of clerical descent. His father was School Medical Officer and Professor of Public Health in Birmingham. The family library, which was filled with books on archaeology, psychology, the classics, and Norse saga, acquainted young Auden with scientific subjects and literature. His mother, with whom Auden maintained a powerful attachment, held a degree in French and worked as a nurse. Auden attended preparatory school at Saint Edmund's between 1915 and 1920, where he befriended Christopher Isherwood. He then went to Gresham's School, Holt, where he wrote his first poems. His first published poem appeared in *Public School Verse* in 1924.

In 1925, Auden began to study at Christ Church College, Oxford, on a scholarship in natural science, though he later switched to English. As a

young man, he was influenced by the poetry of Thomas Hardy and Robert Frost, as well as William Blake, Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Old English verse. At Oxford, he formed lifelong friendship with two fellow writers—Stephen Spender and Christopher Isherwood. In 1928, his collection *Poems* was privately printed, but it wasn't until 1930, when another collection titled *Poems* (though its contents were different) was published, that Auden established himself as the leading voice of a new generation.

After graduating from Oxford, he went for a year (1928-29) to Berlin, just before Hitler seized power. He was thrilled by the German culture, especially the plays of Bertolt Brecht, some of whose techniques he used in his verse plays. In 1930, Auden returned to Britain and published his first volume of poems. He served as a school-teacher at Larchfield Academy, Helensburgh (Scotland) and the Downs school, Colwall (near Malvern). He then worked for six months with the G.P.O. film unit, writing his poems "Night Mail" as a commentary for a film. He and Louise MacNeice visited Iceland in 1936, and on returning, they together published *Letters from Iceland,* which includes his entertaining "Letters from Byron".

In 1937, he went to Spain during the Civil War. Then in 1938, he and Isherwood decided to journey to China. For their visits to the country, they had to cross United States twice and that attracted them so much that in 1939, they immigrated to the States. However, gradually Auden ceased to be a Marxist and turned to Christianity—a change resulting in a series of reflective and religious poems. In explanation of this decision, Auden said, "The attractiveness of America to a writer is its openness and lack of tradition. You are forced to live. There is no past."



**LET US KNOW**

Auden was the most active member of the group of young English poets who, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, saw themselves bringing new techniques and attitudes to English poetry. Stephen Spender and Cecil Day Lewis were the most prominent members of the new school, which soon afterward broke apart. Like many of his generation, Auden learned

from the poetic wit and irony of T. S. Eliot, and the metrical and verbal techniques of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Wilfred Owen.

In the 1930s, he was both praised and dismissed as a progressive and accessible voice, in contrast to the politically nostalgic and poetically obscure voice of T. S. Eliot. His departure for America in 1939 was hotly debated in Britain (once even in Parliament), with some critics treating it as a betrayal, and the role of influential young poet passed to Dylan Thomas. While in America, the detached, ironic tone of Auden's regular stanzas set the style for a whole generation of poets. His manner was so pervasive in American poetry that the ecstatic style of the Beat Generation was partly a reaction against his influence. In the 1950s and 1960s, some writers (notably Philip Larkin and Randall Jarrell) lamented that Auden's work had declined from its earlier promise.

Ever since, he has been admired for his unsurpassed technical virtuosity and an ability to write poems in nearly every imaginable verse form. Besides, the incorporation of popular culture, current events, and vernacular speech in his works; and the vast range of his intellect, drawn from an extraordinary variety of literatures, art forms, social and political theories, and scientific and technical information, make Auden one of the greatest modern poets. He had a remarkable wit, and often mimicked the writing styles of other poets such as Dickinson, W. B. Yeats, and Henry James. His poetry frequently recounts, literally or metaphorically, a journey or quest, and his travels provided rich material for his verse. A prolific writer, Auden was also a noted playwright, editor, and essayist. Generally considered one of the greatest English poets of the 20$^{th}$ century, his work had a major influence on succeeding generations of poets on both sides of the Atlantic. W. H. Auden was a Chancellor of The Academy of American Poets from 1954 to 1973, and divided most of the second half of his life between residences in New York City and Austria.

He died in Vienna in 1973.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 1:** Why is W. H. Auden often considered a great modern poet?

**Q 2:** Name the famous poets who influenced Auden during his Oxford days.

**Q 3:** What is the appeal that Auden makes in his poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"?

**His Works:** [Adapted from http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/w-h-auden]

His early verse in *Poems* (1930) is characterised by terse exposition, alluring abstraction, and inventive use of language, bearing the influence of T. S. Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Laura Riding, Wilfred Owen and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Drawing on eclectic sources for the verse drama *Paid on Both Sides*, Auden merges the archaic style and blood-feud theme of Anglo-Saxon poetry with structural elements of Greek tragedy and the fragmentary modernist presentation of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Auden built upon these early experiments in the prose and verse of *The Orators*, drawing on Freudian Psychoanalysis, Marxist doctrine, and the avant-garde techniques of Eliot, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein to present a surreal vision of the revolutionary hero and a warning against the danger of fascism. *The Orators* laments and satirises the stagnation of the English society and the dubious promise of untamed modernism. Similar political and psychological concerns are echoed in Auden's collaborative verse dramas with Isherwood from this period include *The Dog Beneath the Skin, The Ascent of F6,* and *On the Frontier.*

From the second half of the 1930s, Auden's poems mark his many travels during this period of political turmoil. "Spain"—one of his most famous and widely anthologised pieces, is based on his experiences in that country during the Civil War (1936-1939). *Look, Stranger!* (1936), reprinted as *On This Island* (1937), marks Auden's entry into the leftist politics and his shift toward an increasingly formal aesthetic. His poem "Spain" composed immediately after witnessing the brutal war in that country reflects Auden's

disillusionment with political causes and the indiscriminate violence of war. "In Time of War" a sequence of sonnets, which appeared in *Journey to a War*, reveals the maturation of Auden's civic voice and liberal humanist creed.

Auden left England in 1939 and became a citizen of the United States. *Another Time,* contains some of his best-known poems, among them "September 1, 1939" and "Musee des Beaux Arts," which were inspired by a Breughel painting. The volume also contains elegies to poets A. E. Housman, Matthew Arnold, and William Butler Yeats, whose careers and aesthetic concerns had influenced the development of Auden's artistic credo. The full impact of Auden's self-imposed exile and acute spiritual crisis, which led to his reversion to Christianity, is evident in *The Double Man*. Influenced by the existentialist thinkers like Soren Kierkegaard and American theologian Rheinhold Neibuhr, Auden moved still further toward a cerebral style that sought universal harmony in a system of religious ideals. His *For the Time Being* contains poems like "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio," which is an overt Christian allegory based on the Nativity in which he employs the terminology of science and psychology to rationalise religious faith, and "The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*," an ambitious allegorical work that examines the complex relationship between life and art and the creative potential of literary interpretation.

His next major work, *The Age of Anxiety*, subtitled "a baroque eclogue," relates the inner consciousness of four disparate characters as they converse among themselves in a New York City bar during World War II. Returning to the alliterative Anglo-Saxon versification of his early poetry, Auden explores the spiritual dimensions of their ordinary lives and individual failings within a religious context. The height of Auden's mature, intellectual style is evident in *Nones*, which contains "In Praise of Limestone," "The Shield of Achilles" (1955), and "Homage to Clio" (1960), which includes "The Cave of Making" and "Tonight at Seven-Thirty." These poems display Auden's unsurpassed technical control and deep insights into the nature of human existence and experience, particularly as informed by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, medieval Christianity, history, and nature. Auden's highly

perceptive critical essays, reviews, and lectures in *The Enchafèd Flood* (1950). *The Dyer's Hand* (1962) and *Forewords and Afterwords* (1973) document his intellectual concerns and artistic principles during his American period.

In his later years, Auden wrote three major volumes: *City Without Walls and Many Other Poems, Epistle to a Godson and Other Poems,* and the posthumously published *Thank You, Fog: Last Poems.* While all these three works are noted for their lexical range and humanitarian content, Auden's later poems often received mixed and sometimes unenthusiastic reviews. Commenting on *Thank You, Fog,* Howard Moss in *New York Times Book Review* argued that the collection is "half the ghost of what it might have been. Writers, being human, are not in a position to choose their monuments. This is the summing up of a man who set his mark on an age."

Auden's relevance to literature continues with the publication of *Lectures on Shakespeare,* a collection dating from 1946, when Auden taught a course on Shakespeare at the New School for Social Research in New York City. The lectures were reconstructed from the scrupulous notes taken by Auden's students, which were then edited by Arthur Kirsch. Auden discusses Shakespeare's plays with an eye toward their historical and cultural relevance, comparing Richard III to Hitler, for example.



**LET US KNOW**

While at Oxford, Auden became familiar with modernist poetry, particularly that of T. S. Eliot. It was also at Oxford that Auden became the pivotal member of a group of writers called the "Oxford Group" or the "Auden Generation," which included Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, and Louis MacNeice. The group adhered to various Marxist and anti-fascist doctrines and addressed social, political, and economic concerns in their writings. Auden's first book of poetry *Poems,* was privately printed by Stephen Spender in 1928. Critics have noted that Auden's early verse suggests the influences of Thomas Hardy, Laura Riding, Wilfred

Owen, and Edward Thomas. Stylistically, the poems are fragmentary and terse, relying on concrete images and colloquial language to convey Auden's political and psychological concerns.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 4:** Comment briefly on Auden's poetry?

**Q 5:** What is the significance of the poem 'Spain'?

**Q 6:** Mention some of the important works Auden wrote during his stay in the States.

## 11.4 READING THE POEM PRESCRIBED

**I**

He disappeared in the dead of winter:
The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,
The snow disfigured the public statues;
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.
What instruments we have agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.
Far from his illness
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,
The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;
By mourning tongues
The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,
An afternoon of nurses and rumours;
The provinces of his body revolted,
The squares of his mind were empty,
Silence invaded the suburbs,
The current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers.
Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,

To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.
The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living.

But in the importance and noise of to-morrow
When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the Bourse,
And the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly accustomed,
And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom,
A few thousand will think of this day
As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.
What instruments we have agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

**II**

You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:
The parish of rich women, physical decay,
Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

**III**

Earth, receive an honoured guest:
William Yeats is laid to rest.
Let the Irish vessel lie
Emptied of its poetry.
[Auden later deleted the next three stanzas.]

Time that is intolerant

Of the brave and the innocent,
And indifferent in a week
To a beautiful physique,

Worships language and forgives
Everyone by whom it lives;
Pardons cowardice, conceit,
Lays its honours at their feet.

Time that with this strange excuse
Pardoned Kipling and his views,
And will pardon Paul Claudel,
Pardons him for writing well.

In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of Europe bark,
And the living nations wait,
Each sequestered in its hate;
Intellectual disgrace
Stares from every human face,
And the seas of pity lie
Locked and frozen in each eye.

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice.

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress.

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountains start,

In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

In this poem, Auden discusses Yeats as the last poet able to write about public events. When Auden wrote the poem in February 1939, Europe was on the verge of World War II. War did not actually break out until Germany invaded Poland in September, but the sense of impending catastrophe is present throughout the poem. The failure of Britain and France to resist Hitler's claims on Czechoslovakia in 1938 seemed to define the mood of Europe as Auden wrote. In spite of the sense of expectant foreboding, all the nations seemed paralyzed, incapable of action. The poet here plans to offer us three variations on a traditional elegy, all of which remember the life and work of the poet William Butler Yeats. Then, the tone of the poem shifts. Suddenly the poet is addressing Yeats himself and admiring Yeats' poetry. Finally, the poem lapses into a-traditional elegiac form.

**Lines 2-6**

*The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,*
*And snow disfigured the public statues;*
*The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.*
*hat instruments we have agree*
*The day of his death was a dark cold day.*

Winter is the perfect time to talk about death. He seems to be expressing doubts about the adequacy of human tools to measure or reflect upon the actual death of a man. And, if recording the *death* of the body is hard, imagine how much more difficult it would be to commemorate the *life* of his mind and soul in a poem.

**Lines 7-11**

*Far from his illness*
*The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,*
*The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;*
*By mourning tongues*
*The death of the poet was kept from his poems.*

A man is dead, but life goes on. Nature does all the things it is supposed to do, even when life-changing events are taking place in the human world. Auden deliberately chooses to refer to Yeats as "the poet" making him an anonymous figure rather than a specific man. Even the mourners are abstracted into "mourning tongues," not specific people. Another way to look at line 11 of the poem is that the death of the poet is being kept *out of* the poems.

**Lines 12-17**

*But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,*
*An afternoon of nurses and rumours;*
*The provinces of his body revolted,*
*The squares of his mind were empty,*
*Silence invaded the suburbs,*
*The current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers.*

Now we are back in the world of hospitals and nurses and all that other stuff that we don't tend to think about when mourning the passing of a national figure. Auden is emphasizing Yeats' humanness here: his death is just as depressing and solitary as any other death. Moreover, it's something that we can't share. As if Auden is determined to depict Yeats' death with a restraint that he himself doesn't feel. Once again, Auden turns to geographic and architectural language to describe human conditions. Referring to a person's body as his "country" or "kingdom" is a fairly traditional poetic trick, but Auden takes it a step further here. Yeats' body is described as a city at war with itself–a war it eventually loses. In line 17, the poet wants us to experience the awful strangeness and emptiness of Yeats' death as a very real and upsetting kind of loss.

**Lines 18-21**

*Now he is scattered among a hundred cities*
*And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,*
*To find his happiness in another kind of wood*
*And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.*

There is a strange tension between the assertion of Yeats' death and the imagery at work here, which seems to suggest that the poet is still alive in some ways. It is precisely that tension that Auden wants to highlight– to point out all the ways the idea that "life goes on" seems unnatural.

**Lines 22-23**

*The words of a dead man*
*Are modified in the guts of the living.*

Even Yeats' poems change. They can no longer emerge from the poet's own mouth. The poet seems to withdraw even further from Yeats' death in these lines, becoming almost philosophical as he describes "a dead man." It is no longer Yeats; it is not even a poet – it is just a dead man.

**Lines 24-27**

*But in the importance and noise of to-morrow*
*When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the Bourse,*
*And the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly accustomed,*
*And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom,*

So, the human world is going on as usual. The stockbrokers are back to their stock-broking (the Bourse is Paris's version of Wall Street), and the bums on the street are back to their bumming. The poet is not exactly thrilled about the world as it currently is. People locked in the cells of themselves. Even Yeats was not immune from this sort of isolation. His death was described as the shutting down of a self-enclosed city. Auden seems to be struggling with the difficulty of conveying how Yeats is both a man (like any other) and an absolutely unique and irreplaceable poet. However, Auden allows us to see just how difficult it is to navigate between Yeats the man and Yeats the poet.

**Lines 28-29**

*A few thousand will think of this day*
*As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.*

Therefore, the news of Yeats' death does not really outlive the evening news. It is a ripple on the water, something that makes us frown

slightly before turning. "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," tends to claim that the world will change forever after someone dies and millions of people from hundreds of countries will spend thousands of years wailing and sobbing. But, Auden's is the more realistic of the two descriptions.

**Lines 30-31**

*What instruments we have agree*
*The day of his death was a dark cold day.*

The last two lines of the first stanza become a refrain now–they're repeated as the final two lines of the first section. These lines seem to suggest that there's a certain limitation to what humans are able to express in times like this when, the day is "dark" and "cold." However, it is also much more than that. Repeating the lines at the end of this section only underscores just how few tools we have to tackle a topic as strange and unwieldy as death.

**Lines 32-34**

*You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:*
*The parish of rich women, physical decay,*
*Yourself. […]*

Then, all of a sudden, the poet directs his words towards a "you" who seems to be Yeats. The tone of the poem doesn't get any more reverent, and almost as if the poet were talking to a good friend. Instead of just showing us the honourable and good stuff, he makes sure we understand that Yeats' "gift" emerges in spite of all these complications. The Parish of rich women refers to Maud Gonne and Lady Gregory, both of them influenced Yeats considerably.

**Lines 34-36**

*[…] Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.*
*Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,*
*For poetry makes nothing happen: […]*

Yeats was deeply involved in (and occasionally critical of) the Irish Independence movement of his time. Some of his most remembered poems

(for example, "Easter 1916") emerge from his engagement with independence struggles. Yeats often got frustrated with Irish nationalists – especially the generation emerging right around the time of World War I. He cared passionately about Ireland, but his political positions were often complicated. The speaker says that Ireland has not changed one bit because of Yeats' poetry. However, that is only because poetry isn't *meant* to be a political tool. Yeats' poetry was not, at least. That is what Auden means when he asserts that poetry makes "nothing" happen. The poet isn't saying that poetry is worthless. He *is*, however, asserting that the "work" poetry can do is very different from other sorts of work. It "makes" nothing; it "does" nothing. However, it also is able to make "nothing" happen in a way that, say, politics is not able to do. Auden finds a definite value in the fact that poetry cannot be or do specific things in the way that a political speech or a conversation can.

**Lines 36 – 41**

*[…] it survives*
*In the valley of its making where executives*
*Would never want to tamper, flows on south*
*From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,*
*Raw towns that we believe and die in.*
*[…] it survives,*
*A way of happening, a mouth.*

So what is poetry, exactly? Well, according to Auden, it is something that flows...sort of like the currents of Yeats' feelings flowed earlier in the poem. If life is stagnant, caged, and isolating, then poetry is what flows between the cracks of our isolated cells. It remains untouched by all of the busy activities of the rest of the world, which, after the descriptions we've had earlier, is probably a good thing. Poetry isn't a *thing*. It's a mode of doing something, "a way of happening."

**Lines 42-43**

*Earth, receive an honoured guest:*
*William Yeats is laid to rest.*

Auden here is delving deep into tradition of the elegy. We cannot help but notice that this is the first time Yeats is referred to by name in the poem, other than the title. Explaining just who it is that you're mourning is usually one of the first things that an elegy sets out to do– something this final, formal section makes very clear.

**Lines 44-45**

*Let the Irish vessel lie*
*Emptied of its poetry.*

Each previous section has some reference to the poet's body ending and his work continuing on. But now, Yeats is referred to as an "Irish vessel," a body meant to carry *only* poetry (and not, say, the problems the speaker brought up at the beginning of Section II). It is almost as if the poem itself goes through a purifying process: as Auden recycles certain ideas about Yeats' death, he figures out new ways to approach a subject that is admittedly pretty difficult. We also can notice now that even the formal reference to William Yeats seems strangely impersonal – as it refers to the Irish vessel.

**Lines 46-49**

*In the nightmare of the dark*
*All the dogs of Europe bark,*
*And the living nations wait,*
*Each sequestered in its hate;*

Auden may be drawing on age-old traditions in the first stanza of this section, but he's not about to let his readers forget some of the specifics of Yeats death, particularly the time of his death. Yeats died in 1939, when the world was gearing up for World War II. Yeats and Auden shared the sentiments of many of their fellow artists and intellectuals, who were dismayed at the thought of another world war. They had lived through the horror of World War I, and they were not excited to plunge right back in to all that bloodshed and death. We can notice here how the poet paints the impending war as a sort of nightmarish unreality. That is a common tone in works written during this time.

**Lines 50-53**

*Intellectual disgrace*
*Stares from every human face,*
*And the seas of pity lie*
*Locked and frozen in each eye.*

As Auden states, sometimes the best way to pay homage to someone is to spend some time thinking about the world in which they lived. Yeats was deeply connected to his nation and to political and social movements. If we read Yeats' poetry, we'll see how deeply he worries about human connections. By Intellectual disgrace, it was meant that the poet is disillusioned by the inability of intellectuals to stop war.

**Lines 54-57**

*Follow, poet, follow right*
*To the bottom of the night,*
*With your unconstraining voice*
*Still persuade us to rejoice;*

The world is not a happy place and the poet seems to value Yeats' ability to accept that. He admires how Yeats combines realism (a recognition of "night") with rejoicing. The poet switches to the present tense in this stanza. He is no longer addressing us or an outside audience; he's talking to the "poet," someone who continues to exist *in the present*, even after his death.

**Lines 58-63**

*With the farming of a verse*
*Make a vineyard of the curse,*
*Sing of human unsuccess*
*In a rapture of distress;*
*In the deserts of the heart*
*Let the healing fountain start,*

Ah, now we're back to the idea of poetry itself. Poetry, which was earlier described as a thing that can creep through the stiff and frozen

world, is now channelled into a single image: that of a healing fountain. Auden holds out hope for the possibility of life and growth and, also, the future. All this wishing and hoping has led to language that tends to be a whole lot more metaphorical than Healing fountains and desert-like hearts? Not exactly the stuff of hospitals, nurses, and the minute details of death. It's an invocation of Yeats' poetic powers. The verb "let" is an imperative, or a command. The speaker is hoping that things will happen – and that takes some doing.

**Lines 64-65**

*In the prison of his days*
*Teach the free man how to praise.*

The last lines of the poem combine a downright depressing analysis of the human condition (life is a prison) with hope for the future (humans can learn how to "praise") – a hope that is built upon the possibilities that Yeats' poetry allows in the world. Sure, it's a pretty radical claim. But then again, Yeats was a radically amazing poet. Auden's final approach to this elegy is peculiar. He doesn't want Yeats to live forever. He doesn't even want his poems to be immortalised or written in gold on the top of a building. He wants the people of his time to read and think and maybe even be better people as a result of their interaction with Yeats' poems.

## 11.5 MAJOR THEMES

The following may be read as some of the major themes of the poem.

**Idea of the Poet and Poetry:**

Auden claims "poetry makes nothing happen"; instead, it is merely a "way of happening, a mouth". This subtle distinction illumines the delicate opposition between Yeats and Auden. Yeats considered poetry to be a tool, whereas Auden proclaims it is nothing in itself, but only in how its readers respond to it. Auden clarifies that poetry is not a force in itself, but is only as effective as a parable. The parable is what "survived" all of Yeats' physicality and delusion. The problem that Yeats sought to fix, the "madness" of Ireland,

still exists. Despite his misdirected effort, Yeats' poetry endures, indebted to his readers' "foreign code of conscience" that keeps the poetry alive and pertinent. Likewise, in "The Poet in the City," Auden claims that the political poet can achieve nothing more than to enlighten the "management" of the plight of the "managed".

**The Theme of Isolation:**

In one sense, the fondness for the war arose for the sense of menace, which all poets of the thirties had received, from the sense of being in an enemy country. These poets felt that they did not properly belong, that they could not assume their own place in society. The impression of isolation from the affairs of society was acute and so was the desire for reintegration. They wanted to challenge many of the society's guiding assumptions. They were torn apart by two poles of thinking: their realisation of the vast indifference of society to the creative artist, and their great desire to change the society. Auden was quite vocal to address such a dilemma and the poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" is an example of this realisation of his age.

**The theme of Death**

It is an elegy written on the death of W. B. Yeats, which is represented in two ways: a literal description of the day Yeats had actually passed away and a sense of the impending doom strung throughout the elegy. It is drawn from imageries and symbolism such as using a city at war as a metaphor for Yeats' dysfunctional body: "provinces of his body revolted, the squares of his mind were empty". This can also evoke a parallel image of the disruption of Europe present at that time, which resonates with the fear of people in that era. Another example of a negative reflection of Europe plunging into World War II is found in lines 46 to 49. However, Auden adds another dimension to the poem by incorporating political references significant during the age of oppression and turmoil of the impending war and the extent of effectiveness of poetry at any point in time.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 7:** How does Auden view poetry?

**Q 8:** What are the two ideas of death explained in the poem?

## 11.6 AUDEN'S POETIC STYLE

Auden possessed a formidable technique and an acute ear. In her book, *Auden,* Barbara Everett commented on the poet's facility:

"In his verse, Auden can argue, reflect, joke, gossip, sing, analyze, lecture, hector, and simply talk; he can sound, at will, like a psychologist on a political platform, like a theologian at a party, or like a geologist in love; he can give dignity and authority to nonsensical theories, and make newspaper headlines sound both true and melodious."

Jeremy Robson noted in *Encounter:*

"The influence of music on Auden's verse . . . has always been salient: even his worst lines often 'sound' impressive." Everett found that a musical sensibility marked Auden's work from the very beginning, and she felt that when "he turned more and more, in the latter part of his career, to the kind of literary work that demands free exercise of verbal and rhythmic talent—for instance, to the writing of libretti—[he developed] that side of his artistic nature which was from the beginning the strongest."

Auden's linguistic innovations, renowned enough to the adjective "Audenesque," were described by Karl Shapiro in *In Defense of Ignorance* as "the modernization of diction, [and] the enlarging of dictional language to permit a more contemporary-sounding speech." As his career progressed, however, Auden was more often chastised than praised for his idiosyncratic use of language. James Fenton wrote in the *New Statesman:* "For years—for over forty years—the technical experimentation started by Auden enlarged and enriched the scope of English verse. He rediscovered and invented more than any other modern poet. . . And yet there grew up . . . a number of mannerisms, such as the use of nouns as verbs, or the

employment of embarrassingly outdated slang, or the ransacking of the *OED* [Oxford English Dictionary], which became in the end a hindrance to his work."

"In Memory of W. B. Yeats" is a poem within that tradition of elegiac poetry, but it's also a poem, which extends that tradition. Poems about death tend to be concerned not just with loss, but also with what remains after a man or a woman dies. Auden was a master of form and this poem is about unrhymed hexameter. The poem begins in free verse, moving to syllabic, and culminating in flawless trochaic tetrameter. The first part is free verse in order to downplay the death of the poet. Here, the variation and haphazard line lengths invoke a sense of chaos and disorder. The second part of the poem is syllabic, which is a very unimposing meter, here mostly regular, with an odd variation in the last half. Auden confronts Yeats in the second person, and rebuffs Yeats by describing where poetry comes from and what it does not do. This part, like the first, references Yeats personally, but soon diverges into a general interrogation of poetry. Yeats wrote poetry with a view to curing his country. The third section comprises six stanzas of truncated trochaic tetrameter. Auden uses "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," to set forth his contrasting idea: that the worth of poetry is not in its author, but in its readers. Yeats' diction befits his relaxed meter, but Auden uses a strict pattern to respond to Yeats' overreaching efforts and to institute a different order.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 9:** What do you mean by the term "Audenesque"?

**Q 10:** Briefly Comment on the style used by Auden in this poem.

## 11.7 RECEPTION OF AUDEN

Auden's career has undergone much re-evaluation in recent decades. While some critics have contended that he wrote his finest work when his political sentiments were less obscured by religion and philosophy, others defend his later material as the work of a highly original and mature

intellect. Many critics echo the assessment of Auden's career by the National Book Committee, which awarded him the National Medal for Literature in 1967: "[Auden's poetry] has illuminated our lives and times with grace, wit and vitality. His work, branded by the moral and ideological fires of our age, breathes with eloquence, perception and intellectual power." Auden also received a National Book Award in Poetry for *The Shield of Achilles* in 1956. Auden's belief in various political theories is still debated. However, critics are almost sure that Auden habitually revised his writing to accommodate any shifts in faith. Hannah Arendt considered Auden's changes of heart to be a natural response to the flux of the times. Arendt wrote in the *New Yorker*: "In the Forties, there were many who turned against their old beliefs…They simply changed trains, as it were; the train of Socialism and Communism had been wrong, and they changed to the train of Capitalism or Freudianism or some refined Marxism." Auden apparently changed trains frequently. In "Spain 1937," a denouncement of fascism in the Spanish Civil War, Auden later wrote, "it would have been bad enough if I had ever held this wicked doctrine, but that I should have stated it simply because it sounded to me rhetorically effective is quite inexcusable."

Auden's poetry is particularly concerned with the pressures of his time. In him, one finds completeness and virtuosity cliquishness and obscurity, interest in people, anxiety to reform and concern over the fate of society. His sympathies and interests were wide. He was witty and inventive, and wrote with gusto and fluency. Auden had much of the exhibitionist in him and had frequently written outside his range. During 1930s, his exuberance, the free play of so energetic and curious a mind worked as a stimulus in English verse. However, the same exuberance also invited reactions from another great modern poets like T. S. Eliot famous for austere poetic example. In Auden's verse, one often finds obscurity that results from an unusual handling of language; ellipsis, oddness of construction, experiments with new forms. In his verse, obscurity is also caused by private references mainly jokes, his utter sense of carelessness and the desire to be fashionably difficult. His contemporary poet Louise Mac Neice used the epithet "telegraphic" to mean Auden's style of writing distinguished by the

omission of articles, connectives, personal demonstratives, pronouns and auxiliary verbs.

By the time of Auden's death in 1973, he had attained the status of a respected elder statesman. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* notes, "by the time of Eliot's death in 1965 ... a convincing case could be made for the assertion that Auden was indeed Eliot's successor, as Eliot had inherited sole claim to supremacy when Yeats died in 1939." With some exceptions, British critics tended to treat his early work as his best, while American critics tended to favour his middle and later work. Unlike other modern poets, his reputation did not decline after his death, and the Russian poet and essayist Joseph Brodsky wrote that his was "the greatest mind of the twentieth century." He is one of the most inventive and ingenious of modern poets with a gift for witty, memorable lines. He brought new styles of language and imagery into poetry and dealt with current political and scientific thought. According to Ernest Hilbert, "Auden coined the term Age of Anxiety (securing the Pulitzer Prize for the book of that title in 1947), and has been described as the first English poet to feel at home in the 20th century.



## 11.8 LET US SUM UP

By this time, you must have learnt that Auden having absorbed the influence of T. S. Eliot and G. M. Hopkins became the leader of a group of poets with strong Socialist leanings at the beginning of the 1930s. Auden was the first modern poet to have drawn his ideas and imagery from the material of Marxism and Psychoanalysis. He criticised the capitalist society from a Marxist point of view, but he identified the malaise of modern life as being fundamentally a psychological and spiritual one. Later he became a Christian like Eliot. Auden's poem draws on the tradition of elegiac poetry as it focuses on the immortality of a poet. This poem is an attempt at preserving Yeats the poet. However, most importantly, Auden understands this process of poetic after-life as taking place entirely within history. When Yeats' words disperse themselves after his death, they are received into a

very specific time and place: Europe, 1939. Those who may continue to remember the poet's words live in a technological world of instruments, airports, cities, stock exchanges, and most important, they live at a moment of dark forboding, as the world seems about to go to war again. For Auden, while memory deals with the past, it takes place in the present. Therefore, the only way a poet can honour the dead, is to write a poem about the present. This is what Auden seeks to assert in the poem – "In Memory of W.B. Yeats."



## 11.9 FURTHER READING


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11) Spender, Stephen. (Ed.). (1975). *W. H. Auden: A Tribute*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
12) Wright, George T. (1969). *W. H. Auden*. Boston: Twayne.

**Websites and Electronic Resources:**

http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/w-h-auden

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W._H._Auden

## 11.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

**Ans to Q 1:** Technical virtuosity… …ability to write poems in nearly every imaginable verse form… …incorporation of popular culture, current events, and vernacular speech… …resources drawn from a variety of literatures, art forms, social and political theories… …use of wit… …quest motif and so on.

**Ans to Q 2:** Thomas Hardy, Robert Frost, William Blake, Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Stephen Spender, Christopher Isherwood and so on.

**Ans to Q 3:** The year in which "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" was published, marked the the decade of unrest and lost hopes… …World War II began nine months later… …Auden not only pays tribute to a great poet but appeals to poets in a time of defeat and distress… …he asserts the value of poetry as a means of survival against the forces of humanity.

**Ans to Q 4:** Concerned with moral issues and the political, social, and psychological context… …influence of Marx and Freud… …analytical clarity, because he sought for order, for universal patterns of human existence… …Auden's poetry is considered versatile and inventive… …incorporation of a vast range of scientific knowledge.

**Ans to Q 5:** "Spain," is based on his experiences of the Spanish Civil War… …this poem reflects Auden's disillusionment with political causes and the indiscriminate violence of war.

**Ans to Q 6:** *Another Time that contains poems like* "September 1, 1939" and "Musee des Beaux Arts"… …Auden's self-imposed exile and acute spiritual crisis is evident in *The Double Man*… …*For the Time Being*…

… *The Age of Anxiety*, relates the inner consciousness of four disparate characters as they converse among themselves in a New York City bar during World War II…. …*Nones* which contains poems like "In Praise of Limestone," "The Shield of Achilles", and so on.

**Ans to Q 7:** Auden claims "poetry makes nothing happen"… …Auden opines that it is nothing in itself, but only in how its readers respond to it… … Auden views that the political poet can achieve nothing more than to enlighten the "management" of the plight of the "managed".

**Ans to Q 8:** It is an elegy on the death of W. B. Yeats which is represented in two ways: a literal description of the day Yeats had actually passed away and a sense of the impending doom strung throughout the elegy.

**Ans to Q 9:** As described by Karl Shapiro in *In Defense of Ignorance* the term Audenesque refers to "the modernization of diction, [and] the enlarging of dictional language to permit a more contemporary-sounding speech."

**Ans to Q 10:** "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" is a poem within that tradition of elegiac poetry… …the poem begins in free verse, moving to syllabic, and culminating in trochaic tetrameter… …the first part is free verse… …the second part of the poem is syllabic… …the third section comprises six stanzas of trochaic tetrameter.



## 11.11 Possible Questions

**Q 1:** Why does Auden say that 'Poetry is a mode of doing something or a way of happening?

**Q 2:** Describe what Auden means while saying that 'Poetry makes nothing happen'.

**Q 3:** Is it true that the poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" represents Yeats as a man as well as an absolutely unique and irreplaceable poet?

**Q 4:** Do you agree that Auden as a modern poet tries to reject romantic ideals completely?

**Q 5:** In what way is Auden a modern poet? Illustrate with reference to his poems?

**Q 6:** How is Auden received in the modern age? Mention some of the works that bear the mark of his excellence as a poet?

**Q 7:** In what ways, are the themes of isolation and death described by Auden while referring to W. B. Yeats?

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# UNIT 12: DYLAN THOMAS: “POEM IN OCTOBER”

## UNIT STRUCTURE


12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 Introduction

12.3 Dylan Thomas: The Poet

12.4 Reading the Poem prescribed

12.5 Major Themes

12.6 Thomas’ Poetic Style

12.7 Reception of Thomas

12.8 Let Us Sum Up

12.9 Further Reading

12.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

12.11 Possible Questions


## 12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- have a look at the life and works of the poet Dylan Thomas
- explain the main aspects of Thomas’ poetry through the poem prescribed
- interpret the poem in terms of its different important aspects
- identify the themes and different aspects of the poem “Poem in October”
- discuss the poem in its nuanced totality.

## 12.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall discuss Dylan Thomas and his poem “Poem in October”. Thomas is a unique poet because no other modern poet is so popular with the common masses as him. In this course, you have read about ‘impersonal’ poetry of a modern poet like T. S. Eliot. Other modern poets like Eliot, Auden and Yeats gave birth to a kind of intellectualism in poetry. However, in the era of impersonal and intellectual poetry of the 1940s,

Thomas was a personal poet, and he revived the spirit of lyric poetry and romanticism. Subsequently, in his poetry one can find the abundance of vital energy. "Poem in October" is a birthday poem, which was published in the collection *Death and Entrances* (1946). The poem describes in great detail his 30th birthday, which he celebrates in his hometown of Swansea, Wales, a small fishing village. He walks through the village one early morning, while other inhabitants are still asleep. He reflects on his life so far, marvelling the nature around him and taking joy in it, till the weather makes an abrupt change. In that change, he seems to relive moments of his childhood, and a great feeling of joy surges through the poet.

## 12.3 DYLAN THOMAS: THE POET

[The following account of Thomas's life is largely derived from the biography provided by Michael Huff in Great World Writers: Twentieth Century. Volume: 11, edited by Patrick M. O'Neil, New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2004, pp. 1511-1526, Walford Davies' *Dylan Thomas*, and Rod Attrill's account of the poet's life at http://www.newquay-westwales.co.uk/dylan_thomas.htm, 7 June 2009]

Dylan Thomas was born on October 21, 1914, in a middle-class suburb of Swansea, Wales. His grandfather was a guard on the Great Western Railways and lived in Johnstown, on the edge of Carmarthen. His mother, Florence Hannah Williams, came from a farming background and was warm-hearted, sociable and religious. On the other hand, Dylan's father David John (known more by his initials D. J.) Thomas was educated at Aberystwyth University where he gained a first in English after winning a scholarship in1895. Later, he became a senior English Master at Swansea Grammar School. He was strict in his duties aided by a deep and sonorous speaking voice. He wanted to be a poet, and felt that teaching was very much a waste of his talents. He was an atheist, ashamed of his working-class background, and resentful that he was only an English teacher rather than a traditional Welsh bard like his uncle, Gwilym Marles who "had been a spokesman of the common people, a poet, preacher, and political radical" (Huff in O'Neil: 1512). Apart from being a bard, Marles was also a priest,

and ministered to the Unitarian Chapel at Llwyn Rhydowen near Llandyssul from 1860. The name Dylan was taken by D. J. Thomas from the *Mabinogion*, a collection of Mediaeval Welsh stories, while his middle name Marlais was the name of a stream near the birthplace of his great uncle, the Reverend Marles Thomas.

Initially, Thomas attended a private school at 22 Mirador Crescent, in the Uplands area of Swansea where he was taught by a Mrs. Hole. From 1925-1931, he attended Swansea Grammar School where he put up a poor performance in other subjects but excelled at English and in school plays. It was here that he developed a love of language, along with a sonorous, theatrical voice. Though both of Thomas's parents spoke Welsh (D.J. Thomas even teaching Welsh in evening classes), his father made a point of not teaching it to his son, believing it to represent something less than the sophistication he craved for his family. He wanted his son to get on in the world, and for this English was the language of power, not Welsh. Nevertheless, Thomas internalised the rhythms and melodies of Welsh to go along with his talent for expression in English. At the same time, he was fascinated by his father reading Shakespeare aloud in his sonorous voice. As early as age 11 he was busy writing poetry, and his first poems and prose pieces were published in the school magazine, which he went on to edit from late 1929. Thomas had a typical Welsh boyhood, playing with friends in his Swansea neighbourhood. His summer holidays were spent at the Carmarthenshire dairy farm of his mother's sister, Ann Jones, and her husband, Jim at Llangain. The farm, Fern Hill, became famously the subject of the poem of the same name. The pleasant times Thomas experienced in his childhood went on to have a lifelong presence in his mind, and showed itself in his writings through the dominant image of the child that frequent his work.

Thomas left school early at the age of sixteen to work first as a copyboy and then as a junior reporter with the *South Wales Daily Post.* He did not like the job, and became careless, frequently failed to include critical details, dates, and names in his articles. He became more avid socialising and drinking with his friends, most of whom were similarly inclined toward

the arts. It was in the pubs and taverns in Swansea that Thomas developed his notorious love for alcohol. In December 1932, he left the paper and joined an amateur dramatic group, *Swansea's Little Theatre*, and joined a local writers' circle. Thomas began publishing his poems in literary magazines – a number of his poems were published between 1932 and 1933 in the 'Poets Corner' of the *London Sunday Referee.* His first poem to be published outside Wales however, was "And death shall have no Dominion" in the *New English Weekly.* In early 1934, he left Swansea for London (where he stayed with his sister Nancy) to meet a young woman with whom he had been corresponding, as well as to look for a literary job. While there he made influential contacts and won a poetry contest, the prize being publication of his first book, *18 Poems (1934).*

Thomas spent the next two years travelling back and forth between Wales and London, making friends with other poets and artists, scraping a living from writing literary reviews, and borrowing money and then drinking it away (Huff in O'Neil: 1517). His book *18 Poems,* meanwhile, was gathering favourable reviews from distinguished poets, critics, including Edith Sitwell and Stephen Spender.

In 1936, Thomas's second book, *25 Poems,* was published. For some time in London, he lived in a basement flat at 54 Delancey Street in London where there was a caravan at the end of the garden. Thomas liked to be alone when writing and it was here therefore that he went to seek solitude. The London caravan later led to similar places of seclusion that doubled as a writer's workshop attached to the main house, such as the 'Apple House' at Llanina Mansion near New Quay, the caravan at Southleigh, Oxfordshire and finally the writing shed near the 'Boathouse' at Laugharne. In the same year in June, Thomas visited the Surrealist Exhibition in London, and inspired by it tried to incorporate surrealist elements in his own work. When *25 Poems* came out in 1936, it also carried this influence on Thomas. While most critics considered it inferior to his previous book, Sitwell once again praised Thomas's work, especially its the lyricism and its engagement with the elemental themes of birth and death. "And Death Shall Have No Dominion", a key poem in the volume, remains one of the best-known poems in the English language.

In 1936, Thomas met the painter Augustus John and his young Irish mistress, Caitlin Macnamara, a dancer, at the Wheatsheaf pub in Charlotte Street in London. Like Thomas, Macnamara also loved drinking. They married the next year, that is in 1937, moved to Laugharne, Wales, and began a tempestuous life together. Interestingly, they had to postpone the wedding twice as they had drunk the money put aside for that purpose. At Laugharne they stayed with Dylan's parents in Bishopston, Swansea - they had moved from Cwmdonkin Drive after his Father's retirement from teaching at Swansea Grammar School to a smaller house. Later, in order to avoid the mounting pressure from various creditors in the winter of 1937 - 38, they lived with Caitlin's Mother at the family home Blashford near Ringwood in Hampshire. Their finances comprised money from publishers along with loans from friends. A son, Llewelyn Edouard, was born in January 1939, and later that year Thomas's third book of poems, *The Map of Love,* was published. In the meantime, in 1938, the Thomases had moved, first, to Eros, a small two bedroom fisherman's cottage with no bathroom and an outside toilet on Gosport Street, and later to a larger house Sea View just behind the castle at Laugharne where they lived from 1938 to 1941.

At the outbreak of World War II, Thomas was found physically unfit for military service. He began writing documentary scripts and narrating them with his powerful, emotive voice for Strand Films. His poetic production, however, slowed, but he continued to publish individual poems in literary magazines and read his poems and prose pieces frequently on BBC radio. During these years Thomas's drinking and socializing circles broadened to include the poets W. H. Auden, George Baker, Theodore Roethke (visiting from America), and Louis MacNeice (Huff in O'Neil: 1515). Thanks to influential contacts and national exposure on the airwaves, the war years added considerably to Thomas's fame. Near the war's end he wrote some of his best poetry, including "A Winter's Tale," "Fern Hill," and "In My Craft or Sullen Art."

Thomas's success, however, did not bring in financial security. To add to that, both Dylan and Caitlin were wholly artistic, impractical, and prone to extravagance. As a result they suffered penalties for neglecting

their taxes, and their debts were never over. Their financial uncertainty frequently brought impassioned conflict in their relationship. In the summer of 1940, the family had shifted to The Maltings at Marshfield in Gloucestershire, with John Davenport. In 1941, Thomas and Caitlin moved to Plas Gelli at Talsarn in Cardiganshire. At this time, Thomas also retained a studio flat in Manresa Road, London as he was intermittently working on wartime propaganda films. In the midst of this their second child, daughter Aeronwy, was born in 1943. A few years later Thomas took in his ailing parents, even though he could not afford to support his own little family, and had to resort ever more to patrons and creditors.

In 1946, Thomas published *Deaths and Entrances,* a book of poetry, which was in a way an immediate response to World War II and its manifestation in England and particularly London. It was a critical success, and Thomas received a travelling scholarship from the Society of Authors. He took his family to live in Italy for several months in 1947 and while there, he worked on poetry that reflected his troubled personal spirituality. In 1949, Thomas travelled to Prague for the inauguration of the Communist Writers' Union. That same year they had their third child, a son, Colm.

In 1951, Thomas went to the United States on the first of his four reading tours there. At that time, such a tour was new in America, and was therefore a sensation generating tremendous public interest in poetry. Dylan Thomas proved himself to be as much a dynamic performer as he was a dynamic poet. He was overwhelmed by America, yet he also enjoyed its hospitality to the full, hobnobbing with celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe and Charlie Chaplin and drinking more than ever. Between his tours, back in Wales, he worked on a radio play *Under Milk Wood* and on his *Collected Poems,* particularly on an elegy for his father, who died late in 1951. Thomas loved his father strongly, especially so in their last years together, and that love is evident not only in the unfinished elegy, but also in Thomas's most famous poem, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night."

Thomas' second trip to the United States began on 20th January 1952 with Caitlin by his side. However, they quarrelled loudly and publicly, making a spectacle of themselves; the tour itself was also lukewarm. Thomas

arrived in New York for his third tour on the 21st April, 1953 and it was in the US that the World Premiere of *Under Milk Wood*, a radio drama, took place on May 3rd, 1953, in the Fogg Museum at Harvard. Thomas' debts were increasing by this time and the Bailiffs were threatening him. His financial problems were compounded by his deteriorating health. He suffered blackouts regularly and was advised by his doctor to stop drinking. The only way out seemed to be another American lecture tour. Thomas thus embarked on a fourth trip to the United States beginning in October 1953. It was a gruelling tour, and Thomas tried to deal with the hectic pace by supplementing his drinking with drugs like morphine and cortisone, which was administered to him by doctors. He gave a last reading at City College of New York and then collapsed in the Chelsea Hotel. He was taken to Saint Vincent's Hospital where he died several days later, on November 9. Thomas' death however, was probably not only a result of the over-consumption of alcohol but also of problems with blood sugar balance. Moreover, he was known to have not eaten properly for several days prior to this death and the doctor who treated him (as mentioned earlier) injected him on two occasions with both cortisone and morphine. His body was returned to Wales, where he was buried in Laugharne.



**LET US KNOW**

Thomas, when his first volume *Eighteen Poems* got published, came to be seen as a refreshing and radical new voice that articulated not "the anxious, uncertain tones of T. S. Eliot, the more cautious Romanticism of W. B. Yeats," and the rationalism and social concerns of his colleagues like Auden and Spender, but a Romantic vigour, passion and flamboyance (Carter and McRae: 437). From his earliest poetry, Thomas gives the impression of trying to give expression to powerful feelings, making many of his poems dense in meaning. His poems are also at times seen as surreal though this has become somewhat contested now. At the same time, his poetry is also characterised by its originality in selection and combination of words, as can be seen

in his famous poem "Fern Hill". This poem also addresses themes like childhood, nostalgia for the past, and a strong pastoral presence that are featured more evocatively in his later poems. Also in "Fern Hill" is a preoccupation with the Welsh background, his aunt's farm in Carmarthenshire where he spent his summer holidays. This also finds expression in Thomas collection of short fiction *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* that is loosely based on his own life. Another theme in his poems is the recurring cycle of birth, death and rebirth, and thus an affirmation of life over death, the latter occurring at the centre of that famous villanelle of Thomas addressed to his dying father:

"Do not go gentle into that good night
Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light."



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 1:** Why is Dylan Thomas's *Deaths and Entrances* significant?

**Q 2:** How was Dylan Thomas viewed when his first volume of poems *Eighteen Poems* was published?

## 12.4 READING THE POEM PRESCRIBED

It was my thirtieth year to heaven
Woke to my hearing from harbour and neighbour wood
And the mussel pooled and the heron
Priested shore
The morning beckon
With water praying and call of seagull and rook
And the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall
Myself to set foot
That second
In the still sleeping town and set forth.

My birthday began with the water-
Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my name
Above the farms and the white horses
And I rose
In rainy autumn
And walked abroad in a shower of all my days.
High tide and the heron dived when I took the road
Over the border
And the gates
Of the town closed as the town awoke.

A springful of larks in a rolling
Cloud and the roadside bushes brimming with whistling
Blackbirds and the sun of October
Summery
On the hill's shoulder,
Here were fond climates and sweet singers suddenly
Come in the morning where I wandered and listened
To the rain wringing
Wind blow cold
In the wood faraway under me.

Pale rain over the dwindling harbour
And over the sea wet church the size of a snail
With its horns through mist and the castle
Brown as owls
But all the gardens
Of spring and summer were blooming in the tall tales
Beyond the border and under the lark full cloud.
There could I marvel
My birthday
Away but the weather turned around.

It turned away from the blithe country
And down the other air and the blue altered sky

Streamed again a wonder of summer
With apples
Pears and red currants
And I saw in the turning so clearly a child's
Forgotten mornings when he walked with his mother
Through the parables
Of sun light
And the legends of the green chapels

And the twice told fields of infancy
That his tears burned my cheeks and his heart moved in mine.
These were the woods the river and sea
Where a boy
In the listening
Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy
To the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide.
And the mystery
Sang alive
Still in the water and singing birds.

And there could I marvel my birthday
Away but the weather turned around. And the true
Joy of the long dead child sang burning
In the sun.
It was my thirtieth
Year to heaven stood there then in the summer noon
Though the town below lay leaved with October blood.
O may my heart's truth
Still be sung
On this high hill in a year's turning.

"Poem in October" (written around 1944) is one of Dylan Thomas's four birthday poems, the others being "Especially When the October Wind" (on the occasion of his 20th birthday), "Twenty-Four Years" (as the title says, on his turning twenty-four), and "Poem on his Birthday" (to commemorate

his thirty-fifth birthday). It is a mystic summoning back or a re-creation of his childhood presented in more lucid terms than in his early poems (in fact this as well an element of serenity have been two widely noted features of his later poems like "Poem in October", "Fern Hill", "Over Sir John's Hill"). This poem is also an instance of Thomas's obsession with the inter-involvement of creation and destruction, life and death, and the ritual invocation of the moment of birth at the beginning of the poem ushers in also a celebration of this continuous process and the workings of biological processes as part of the natural world that link generations of life with one another (like the adult Thomas looking at the child Thomas in the poem walking with his mother) as well as human beings with nature. This reveals his engagement with the cyclic organic processes of birth and death, and decay (or degeneration) and regeneration that are articulated through an emphasis on the "intensity and integrity of non-human organic life" (Davies: 69). This brings about some kind of humility that translates itself into the possibility of the human to shed its ego and become assimilated within such a life within nature.

The themes of bodily processes, childhood, nature, and even poetry, are all underpinned and informed by this engagement. The poet, on waking up on the morning of his 30th birthday, encounters the sounds and sights of nature that seem to celebrate the day of his birth. With this, he is made to remember his past and see himself in the familiar Welsh landscape as a boy with his mother. As the poet comes out of the town that seems to be enclosed like a womb, he is overwhelmed by the literal transformation of the rainy autumnal weather into summery sunshine and a "springful of larks". This is accompanied by the transformation of the adult self of the poet into that of the poet as a child, which is more figurative in nature. All this is accompanied by a 'sacramentalising' of nature, that is, certain Christian rituals (like baptism) being superimposed on events in nature (such as the birds – both water and land birds – crying out in the morning; the town on the edge of the sea, water being an important element in baptism; nature in terms of a "green chapel"; and the use of the phrase "heron-priested" since in Celtic folklore and mythology, birds like the heron, crane or stork are

associated with the creation of life and had similar associations in early Celtic Christianity). It also contains a sense of glory in the natural world. Since the child is seen by Thomas as being more organically related to nature and its cyclical processes, the poem centres round the child's happiness and joy in a natural environment. This becomes the base on which the poet explores the coming together of the religious, spiritual and the physical/material aspects in the child's wonder and absorption in nature that this organicity implies (for example, in expressions like "parables/ Of sunlight" that the child seemingly learns from his mother in the "green chapels").

The poem can also be seen as belonging to a long tradition of English poetry (to be found in such poems as Henry Vaughan's "Regeneration" and Wordsworth's "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality") that sets a "reflection of man's moods" in a **pastoral context** (Davies: 52). Again, the town that provides the milieu of the poem is Laugharne in Carmarthenshire, in Dylan Thomas's native Wales, and the hill referred to is probably Sir John's Hill, in the same area. The poem was therefore called by Thomas as a "Laugharne poem", the first "place poem" he had written (Goodby and Wigginton: 198). The images of the sea, water, the heron, "green chapels," and so on reinforce the pantheistic nature of the poem. At the same time, the image of the sea (central to many of Thomas's major poems) is, according to Goodby, a "non-location redolent of margins, swamping, self-loss and erasure" (Goodby and Wigginton: 200). The poem is one that is concerned with being in multiples realms that is upheld primarily the sea imagery.

The figure of the Bard in this respect becomes important, more so when one remembers that when Thomas went for his first public reading in the United States of America, he was introduced as "having come 'out of the druidical mists of Wales'" (Davies: 96). In ancient Wales (and in similar societies in Ireland, Scotland and so on) a poet was not merely a professional writer of verse, but was acknowledged to exercise extraordinary spiritual power. Moreover, the bard was not simply a respected member of the community; he was one with the people, he was their voice. He sang the people's songs, maintained their general traditions, and kept their connection

to poetry and song vital and personally meaningful. For Ackerman and many other critics in the 1980s, Thomas seemed to claim a high function for the poet as prophet in terms of the bard. Again, with the exuberance of the bardic personality, the liking for ceremony and elaborate ritual coexisted a devotion to composition and craftsmanship in Thomas, linking him yet again to the spontaneous but at the same time meticulously technical poetic practice of the bard. Another important feature of old Welsh poetry that Thomas seemed to incorporate was an awareness of the dual nature of reality, of unity in disunity, of the simultaneity of life and death, of time as an eternal continuous moment rather than divided among the past, present and future.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 3:** What is the poem "Poem in October" all about?

**Q 4:** How does the idea of the bard get reflected in the poem?

## 12.5 MAJOR THEMES

The following are the important themes in the poem.

**The Welsh Background:**

One important theme in Dylan Thomas is his Welsh background. He rooted himself in south West Wales - Carmarthenshire and Cardiganshire - now known as Ceredigion, counties to which he was drawn throughout his life. Initially seen as a Romantic and a 'provincial', the poetry of Thomas was regarded as being influenced by the Welsh language, its rhythms and the Bardic tradition. For instance, John Ackerman in his book *Welsh Dylan*: *Dylan Thomas's life, writing, and his Wales* (1980) viewed his poetry as the product of a strongly individual imagination fostered by ways of thought and feeling that were Welsh in origin and characterised by its lyrical quality, strict formal control, a romantic conception of the poet's function, and a religious attitude to experience. Ackerman identifies three ways in which this Welsh background informed his poetry. Firstly, it was through the direct and inevitable influence of a particular community with particular traditions,

for example, the bardic tradition; secondly, there was the influence of other Welshmen who were writing in English (Thomas himself did not speak Welsh) and who helped to create a national consciousness, the sense of a life that was peculiar to Wales. Through these friends, Thomas came to have an access to a community of ideas from Welsh culture. The third influence of the Welsh context in Thomas, Ackerman argues, was through the cultural tradition existing in and through the Welsh language.

**Problem of Identity against the Changes Brought by Time:**

Dylan Thomas's poetry also records the trauma associated with the World War II. "Poem in October" was published in the volume *Deaths and Entrances* (1946) and assumes significance because it contrasts with most of the other poems in the volume that provide graphic details of the bombing of London by Germany during the War. It traces the traumatic entrance of the war into the everyday, private lives of people and its implications for the poetic self. Given this, the poem seems to occupy a level of nostalgia for the past in the face of unbearable violence. In spite of the pastoral and peaceful nature of the poem, the poem has an elegiac tone that questions the happiness associated with birthdays, since they also take us closer to death. Given the preponderance of death and the general tone of mourning in the entire volume, the poem ends on a note of hope regarding the poet's role in such a situation:

"O may my heart's truth
Still be sung
On this high hill in a year's turning."

The title of the volume "Deaths and Entrances" is strongly echoed in "Poem in October" in the constant allusions to "turning" as the poet emerges from the confines of the town to climb towards the hill only to turn back towards the town again.

**Idea of Modernism:**

Thomas is also seen in relation to Modernism. The landscapes and imagery and the hallucinatory effect of the images he evokes in his poems seem to approach a surrealism that is more aligned to the imaginative and

psychological explorations of modernist writers. However, while the Surrealists brought about this effect through an arbitrary or irrational juxtaposition of images that dispensed with conscious selection and ordering, Thomas, even when he was using an inner landscape of the mind, selected, controlled and developed his images into a conscious poetic order that fulfilled an aesthetic function. However, Davies argues that Thomas has affinities with modernism in that he believed in "concreteness of presentation", "the final barrier that Modernism...had placed against any return to Victorian discursiveness or Georgian descriptiveness" (Davies in Goodby and Wigginton: 115). Secondly, Thomas displays a kind of self-consciousness in the use of language, that is another key Modernist trait: "the conscious foregrounding of language as language, language itself as theme, within poems" (Davies in Goodby and Wigginton: 115).



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 5:** Which, according to John Ackerman, are the three ways that inform Thomas's Welsh background?

**Q 6:** In what ways can Dylan Thomas be considered a modern poet?

## 12.6 THOMAS' POETIC STYLE

"Poem in October", like all other poems of Thomas, is replete with prosodic devices like **alliteration** (the interplay of consonants) and **assonance** (the interplay of vowels), seen, for example, in:

"Woke to my hearing from harbour and neighbour wood
And the mussel pooled and the heron
Priested shore"

This meticulous attention to alliteration and assonance is aimed at achieving not only a visual and mental effect but a physical, kinaesthetic (combination of senses) effect in as the reader reads the words and articulates the sounds and listens to them. Thomas's poems lend themselves to public performance, conveying powerful emotions driven by lyricism, and

rhythms and melodies that have a hypnotic effect. As you can see in the poem, it uses a range of vivid imagery drawn from nature. It can thus be read as a celebration of the natural creations of God, or God manifest in the natural world ("green chapels"), but a God who comes across as a combination of pagan pre-Christian elements (indication nature worship) and Christian elements.

As mentioned earlier, there is also noticeable in Thomas's poetry some affinity with modernism, seen in his preoccupation with concreteness of images and poetic presentation with language. Many of his poems also demonstrate this with their irregular syntax, unusual coinages, and imagery that is apparently irrationally organised. Thomas uses an incremental and dialectical method of creating imagery that he recounted in one of his:

"I let, perhaps, an image be 'made' emotionally in me and then apply to it what intellectual and critical force I possess – let it breed another, let that image contradict the first, make, of the third image bred out of the other two together, a fourth contradictory image, and let them all, within my imposed formal limits, conflict." (Goodby and Wigginton: 54)

"Poem in October", by splitting up the poet's persona into the adult and the child, and then fusing them back together, recreates the process described above that also can be read as a recreation of the process of organic assimilation. The immediate experience of the natural world brings unto itself "the truth of [the child's] joy", so that "his [i.e., the child's] tears burned my [i.e., the adult poet's] cheeks and his heart moved in mine", and "the mystery/ Sang alive/ Still in the water and singing birds". The run-on lines have a fluid, expansive effect that reinforces this imagery. Paradoxically, however, they are sustained within a fixed stanza shape and syllabic pattern (the number of syllables per line in each verse being constant: 9-12-9-3-5-12-12-5-3-9) (Davies: 52). The poem is populated by several repeated words and phrases, the repetition conjuring up a trance-like quality – something that lends itself very well to a reminiscence of long-lost childhood that surfaces again for a moment. The refrain "the weather turned around" registers the constant shifts of the poem as the poet undertakes a journey again in a renewed search for his self on his 30th birthday.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 7:** What are the stylistic devices used by Dylan Thomas?

## 12.7 RECEPTION OF THOMAS

Dylan Thomas was one of the most popular English language poets of the 20th century. Though he was a meticulous craftsman who would endlessly revise his poems, it is the emotional force of his poetry that first surfaces in an initial reading. The lyricism and dynamic romanticism of Thomas effectively countered the dry, erudite tendencies of modernism as well as the mainstream socially committed English poetry of Auden and Spender and anticipated a generation of confessional, beat, and magical-realist verse. In spite of his huge literary talent however, Dylan Thomas was better known for his engaging, sociability.

Thomas was a highly influential major poet as well as a popular one, whose books were always in demand, and whose public readings were hugely attended. A dominant critical position regarding Thomas was that he brought energy and feeling back to poetry that had been under the monopoly of decades of the extremely intellectualised, erudite and elitist modernist poetry. He thus seemed to represent a return to romanticism and "made possible an era of confessional, beat, and magical-realist poets, after which the pendulum swung back again to less emotive, more intellectually oriented realist poetry such as that that dominated the 1980s and 1990s" (Huff in O'Neil: 1518). His critical reputation was at its highest till the 1980s but then it began to recede as a more realist brand of poetry became more preferred. One of the more general critical opinions of Thomas especially during the 1970s and 80s was the perceived unevenness of his poetry with some critics arguing that "while Thomas was capable of genuinely great poetry, he wrote only a few great poems" (Huff in O'Neil: 1518). They also argued that undoubtedly "he had exceptional talent and remarkable vision but that his gift for word craft too often made it easy for him to neglect the construction of sturdy, sound, solid, formally defensible poems, poem

after poem after poem" (Huff in O'Neil: 1518).

While this influence is no doubt there, it has been reread by later critics such as Walford Davies, James A. Davies and John Goodby who see Thomas as a poet of two worlds and cultures – the Welsh and the English (Thomas's formal education, in fact, was in English throughout at his father's behest). For them, he exploits his liminal presence (as an English-speaking Welsh speaking to an Anglo-American audience) to use English subversively against the hegemonic poetic norms of the 1930s and 40s, as well as the early 1950s (chiefly Auden and his group and, later, the Movement) with their emphasis on ratiocination and rationality. This is reinforced by the performative aspect of his poetry that Thomas derived from his Welsh background, and more particularly from the figure of the bard discussed earlier.

Walford Davies' book on Thomas, appearing in the 1980s provided a counter to the dominant trend in the criticism of Thomas' poetry that tended to see him as a provincial poet or as a psychologically troubled person in order to explain the liberties he took with the English language and its structures. Davies however took into account his national, social and linguistic contexts and saw this use as a kind of subversiveness in terms of a potential alternative model that did not derive literally from the Welsh language itself and "direct knowledge of the intricate rules of the prosody and internal rhyming patterns of the Welsh poetic tradition" (Davies in Goodby and Wigginton: 108). Rather, it owes itself to "a certain sense of externality to the English language, a refusal to leave it alone, to take it for granted" that Thomas possessed, being Welsh and not English (Davies in Goodby and Wigginton: 110). It implies that Thomas felt "a strong sense of provincial, cultural, even religious 'otherness'" as far as Britain and the English language was concerned and his use of the language therefore demonstrated an act of getting back at the "imperial, standardising norms of the English language itself" (Davies in Goodby and Wigginton: 110). Thus, for Davies, Thomas's poetry occupies a "no man's land between two languages" – Welsh and English. Given this poetry itself, trying to mediate between the two and trying to come up with a new kind of language and

identity was becoming difficult to write, as a result of which, the poet turned more towards "oral performance of poems already accomplished than on the production of new ones" (Davies in Goodby and Wigginton: 110). It also explains, for Davies, the turn back to an "idealised childhood" and even to "pre-childhood states" since a "poetry of adulthood...was peculiarly difficult since, culturally, it could not be a Welsh adulthood" (Davies in Goodby and Wigginton: 110). This is relevant because Thomas, as a Welsh, seems to "draw on the differences that help him gain visibility and identity in an essentially centralised Britain" (Davies in Goodby and Wigginton: 111).



## 12.8 LET US SUM UP

By this time, you must have noted that the English poet Thomas has been acknowledged as one of the most important original, rhythmic and ingenious poet. His position as one of the great modern poets has been much discussed, though this has not tarnished his popularity amongst the general public, who found his work easily accessible. As David Daiches writes, Thomas's reputation remains as a thoughtful and cerebral poet who sought to put new drive and passion into the language of English poetry. During his brief span of life, he has left a handful of poems that will be read and remembered outside the classroom and the critic's study.



## 12.9 FURTHER READING

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## 12.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

**Ans to Q 1:** *Deaths and Entrances was* a response to World War II… …Thomas received a travelling scholarship from the Society of Authors.

**Ans to Q 2:** Thomas came to be viewed as a refreshing and radical new voice… …he gave the impression that he was trying to give expression to powerful feelings, making many of his poems dense in meaning… …his poetry was characterised by its originality in selection and combination of words.

**Ans to Q 3:** "Poem in October" is a birthday poem… …its a re-creation of his childhood … …it marks Thomas's obsession with creation and

destruction, life and death, and the ritual invocation of the moment of birth… …since the child is seen by Thomas as being more organically related to nature and its cyclical processes, the poem centres round the child's happiness and joy in a natural environment.

**Ans to Q 4:** The bard was not simply a respected member of the community; he was one with the people, he was their voice. He sang the people's songs, maintained their general traditions, and kept their connection to poetry and song vital and personally meaningful. Thomas seemed to claim a high function for the poet as prophet in terms of the bard.

**Ans to Q 5:** Firstly, it was through the direct and inevitable influence of a particular community with particular traditions… …secondly, there was the influence of other Welshmen who were writing in English… …the third influence was through the cultural tradition existing in and through the Welsh language.

**Ans to Q 6:** The landscapes and imagery look surrealistic and are aligned to the imaginative and psychological explorations of modernist writers… …Thomas consciously applied a poetic order that fulfilled an aesthetic function…. …Davies argues that Thomas has affinities with modernism in that he believed in "concreteness of presentation"… … self-consciousness use of language.

**Ans to Q 7:** Alliteration and assonance… …melodies that have a hypnotic effect… …concreteness of images… …poetic presentation with language.



## 12.11 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

**Q 1:** Give a critical account of the modernist elements in Dylan Thomas' poetry.

**Q 2:** How does Dylan Thomas use the pastoral motif and place the child in it? Discuss with reference to his later poems like "Poem in October".

**Q 3:** In what way, did Dylan Thomas return to nature in his poem "Poem in October"?

**Q 4:** Critically examine the treatment of childhood in the poems of Dylan Thomas.

**Q 5:** Dylan Thomas brought energy and feeling back to poetry that had been under the monopoly of decades of the extremely intellectualised, erudite and elitist modernist poetry. Discuss.

**Q 6:** What is the significance of Thomas' Welsh background?

*** ***** ***

# UNIT 13: TED HUGHES: “PIKE”, “THRUSHES”

## UNIT STRUCTURE


13.1 Learning Objectives

13.2 Introduction

13.3 Ted Hughes: The Poet

13.4 Reading the Poems prescribed

13.5 Major Themes

13.6 Hughes’ Poetic Style

13.7 Reception of Hughes

13.8 Let Us Sum Up

13.9 Further Reading

13.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

13.11 Possible Questions


## 13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- gain ideas on the life and works of the poet Ted Hughes
- explain the main aspects of Hughes’ poetry through the poems prescribed
- interpret the poem in terms of its different important aspects
- identify the themes that consist in the concerns of Hughes as a poet
- discuss the poems in its nuanced totality.

## 13.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit is based on two poems “Pike” and “Thrushes” written by Ted Hughes who was a famous and important English poet and children’s writer of the 20th century. Hughes’ earlier poetic works are rooted in nature and, in particular, the innocent savagery of animals. You will soon see that he wrote frequently of the blend of beauty and violence in the natural world. For Hughes, animals serve as a metaphor for his view on life: animals live out a struggle for the survival of the fittest in the same way that humans

strive for ascendancy and success. But, there is a difference. The poems "Pike" and "Thrushes" are from Hughes' second collection of poetry *Lupercal*, which came out in 1960. "Pike" is based on his childhood. As a child he often visited the lake (presumably with his father) in which there lived a huge pike in the deep part of the pond. It is the memory of such a place that acts as a foundation on which this poem is based. The second poem "Thrushes" paints a picture of birds as efficient, instinctive killing machines. The poet is observing some thrushes on his lawn, the experience of which leads him to contrast them to human beings, such as himself, whose best acts seem produced by the suppression of such energies as the birds display.

## 13.3 TED HUGHES: THE POET

[Adapted from Edward Hadley "Ted Hughes OM (1930-1998)"]

**His Life:**

Ted Hughes (Edward James Hughes) was born on 17 August 1930 at Mytholmroyd, West Yorkshire, and lived, as a child, with his father, William, his mother, Edith Farrar, and his elder siblings Gerald and Olwyn. Hughes drew upon his family in much of his poetry, such as his father's military experiences during the First World War; his mother's in *Remains of Elmet* (1979); his brothers Gerald and Olwynin many other poems. The landscape of his native Yorkshire also provides a natural backdrop to his poetry, as well as his encounters with animals as a child there.

Hughes had his higher education at Pembroke College, Cambridge, in English literature and subsequently at Cambridge University, where he studied anthropology and archaeology, graduating in 1954. Hughes did a number of jobs after graduating, but kept a regular contact with Cambridge where a number of his friends still resided. Together, they published a short-lived single volume journal named *St Botolph's Review*, featuring poems by Hughes and his contemporaries. It was at the launch party for their journal that Hughes first encountered Sylvia Plath, the famous American poet who was in Cambridge on a Fulbright scholarship. This led to a romantic attachment between them, leading to their marriage in 1956. They settled in America where both briefly held teaching posts. Plath entered the

manuscript of Hughes' *The Hawk in the Rain* for a poetry competition judged by Marianne Moore, W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender. It won the competition and in 1957 the first collection of Hughes' poetry. This and the succeeding volume *Lupercal* (1960) established Hughes as a strong emerging English poet. Plath and Hughes relocated to Devon, in August 1961 after the birth of their first child, Frieda Rebecca in 1960. The couple had a second child Nicholas Farrar in 1962. By this time, however, their marriage was becoming increasingly troubled. Hughes had an affair with a woman named Assia Wevill and left Plath, who returned to London with the children. On 11 February 1963, Plath committed suicide by gassing herself.

The death of Plath greatly affected Hughes, whose poetic output registered a decline at this point of time. However, his third collection, *Wodwo* (1967), suggested a resurgence of his poetry, also one that was slightly changed in nature from his two earlier collections. Now it was less formal than earlier and with the inclusion of short stories and a play seemed to indicate at experimentation and innovation. On the personal front, however, Assia Wevill also committed suicide in 1969, in a repetition of the earlier tragedy. The following year in 1970, Hughes married Carol Orchard, with whom he remained until his death.

Hughes' poems of the 1970s mostly address issue of the revival of myth in verse, as can be seen in *Crow* (1970), *Cave Birds* (1976) and *Gaudete* (1977).However, by the 1980s, Hughes comes back to rural Britain (in such collections as *Moortown Diary* and *Remains of Elmet*) which is addressed in a manner devoid of overt mythologising. Hughes also demonstrates an environmental consciousness verging on activism in *River* (1983) where he pictures rivers in the rural poems and takes the view that the life that depends on them is less terse and more spiritually orientated. In 1984 Hughes became the Poet Laureate of Great Britain with his Laureate verse collected in *Rain-Charm for the Duchy* in 1992. A year later, in 1993, Hughes published his prose work, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1993).

Towards the final years of his life, Hughes largely wrote translations of classical poetry and drama, the most well known among them being

*Tales from Ovid* (1997) which won the Whitbread Book of the Year prize. In early 1998, *The Times* newspaper started to publish poems from Hughes' last collection of poems, *Birthday Letters* (addressing and exploring Hughes' relationship with and marriage to Sylvia Plath), which again won the Whitbread Book of the Year prize. In the same year, Hughes was named a member of the Order of Merit by Queen Elizabeth II. Towards the end of the year, however, Hughes succumbed to cancer and died at his home on 28 October 1998.

**His Works:**

Hughes' poetry treats nature as violent and pitiless, focussing in many of his poems both animals traditionally regarded as violent and those usually seen as benign but who always vigorously pursue their lives with a single-minded strength and power. He shows the influence of Dylan Thomas and D. H. Lawrence among the 20th century poets who are part of the tradition of nature poetry in English literature. His poetry combines "memory, closely observed detail, and sensation through nature" (Carter and McRae: 444). Hughes approaches animals and the natural world without sentimentality, as can be seen in poems like "Hawk in the Rain", "Hawk Roosting" "Pike", "Thrushes", "Jaguar" and "The Otter". In these poems, from the first two volumes of his poetry "Hawk in the Rain" and "Lupercal", animals in different settings are presented with implications of humans being outside the immediate and instinctive lives they lead. In the first four poems, the shifting perspectives privilege the animals' view of the world. The human is seen as alienating itself from an immediate living and access to the tremendous forces of nature by distancing itself through an overconfident reliance on rationality and culture. As a result, the human feels threatened by an uncanny proximity with them. In "Hawk in the Rain" the human struggles against the mud and the wind and his eye is transfixed on the hawk that seems to effortlessly defy the elements. However, the poem concludes with the hawk and the human occupying the same level as the hawk also meets a fate similar to the human as it is brought down by the winds, dead, at the end of the poem. What makes the abilities of the two seem different here is the rational, mediating gaze of the human for whom the 'eye' of the hawk is the

'other' seemingly threatening the human with annihilation. Hughes' "Hawk Roosting" ventures further into this area by being a monologue spoken entirely by a hawk who claims utmost superiority over the universe. While critics tended to read authoritarianism into Hughes' depiction of the hawk, he on the other hand asserted that through the bird, he was trying to voice Nature. This ecologically conscious voice of the poet also informs "Jaguar" and the "Otter" as the two animals are represented as falling prey in different ways to the rapacity and cruelty of humans who desire to overpower and exploit nature.

In his later work, however, Hughes displays a greater preoccupation with myths and legends, and the figure of the shaman (who mediates between the human and supernatural worlds) being foregrounded. The poet according to Hughes performs a similar function. In *Crow,* Hughes retells the story of creation from the point of view of the crow, which emerges as a "violent, anarchic consciousness", "a kind of anti-Christ" (Carter and McRae: 442). Along with the later volume, *Gaudete*, *Crow* enacts "sparse dramas in which traditional metrical patterning and realistic presentation are abandoned" (Carter and McRae: 442). Hughes also admired the surreal work of East European poets as Vasko Popa and Miroslav Holub, and like them "explored a post-Holocaust awareness of what it felt like to live in the spiritual chasm at the end of the twentieth century" (Carter and McRae: 443). Two of the most acclaimed during the later years of Hughes were *Birthday Letters* and *Tales from Ovid*. In the first, Hughes explored the intricacies of his relationship with his late wife the American poet Sylvia Plath, who had committed suicide in 1963. The second revisits as the title points to, Ovid, but rendered anew by Hughes.



**LET US KNOW**

The Following are Important Poetry Collections by Ted Hughes:

1957: *The Hawk in the Rain*

1960: *Lupercal*

1967: *Wodwo*

| | |
|---|---|
| 1970: | *Crow: From the Life and the Songs of the Crow* |
| 1972: | *Selected Poems 1957–1967* |
| 1975: | *Cave Birds* |
| 1977: | *Gaudete* |
| 1979: | *Remains of Elmet* (with photographs by Fay Godwin) |
| 1979: | *Moortown* |
| 1983: | *River* |
| 1986: | *Flowers and Insects* |
| 1989: | *Wolf watching* |
| 1992: | *Rain-charm for the Duchy* |
| 1994: | *New Selected Poems 1957–1994* |
| 1997: | *Tales from Ovid* |
| 1998: | *Birthday Letters* |
| 2003: | *Collected Poems* |



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 1:** How does Ted Hughes portray nature in his poems?

**Q 2:** Name the two English poets who influenced Ted Hughes.

**Q 3:** How does Ted Hughes view the humans in his poetry?

## 13.4 READING THE POEMS PRESCRIBED

The following subsections will guide you to read the poem in terms of its different aspects.

**"Pike"**

Pike, three inches long, perfect
Pike in all parts, green tigering the gold.
Killers from the egg: the malevolent aged grin.
They dance on the surface among the flies.

Or move, stunned by their own grandeur,
Over a bed of emerald, silhouette
Of submarine delicacy and horror.

A hundred feet long in their world.

In ponds, under the heat-struck lily pads-
Gloom of their stillness:
Logged on last year's black leaves, watching upwards.
Or hung in an amber cavern of weeds

The jaws' hooked clamp and fangs
Not to be changed at this date:
A life subdued to its instrument;
The gills kneading quietly, and the pectorals.

Three we kept behind glass,
Jungled in weed: three inches, four,
And four and a half: red fry to them-
Suddenly there were two. Finally one

With a sag belly and the grin it was born with.
And indeed they spare nobody.
Two, six pounds each, over two feet long
High and dry and dead in the willow-herb-

One jammed past its gills down the other's gullet:
The outside eye stared: as a vice locks-
The same iron in this eye
Though its film shrank in death.

A pond I fished, fifty yards across,
Whose lilies and muscular tench
Had outlasted every visible stone
Of the monastery that planted them-

Stilled legendary depth:
It was as deep as England. It held
Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old
That past nightfall I dared not cast

But silently cast and fished
With the hair frozen on my head
For what might move, for what eye might move.
The still splashes on the dark pond,

Owls hushing the floating woods
Frail on my ear against the dream
Darkness beneath night’s darkness had freed,
That rose slowly toward me, watching.

**“Thrushes”**

Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn,
More coiled steel than living - a poised
Dark deadly eye, those delicate legs
Triggered to stirrings beyond sense - with a start, a bounce,
a stab
Overtake the instant and drag out some writhing thing.
No indolent procrastinations and no yawning states,
No sighs or head-scratchings. Nothing but bounce and stab
And a ravening second.

Is it their single-mind-sized skulls, or a trained
Body, or genius, or a nestful of brats
Gives their days this bullet and automatic
Purpose? Mozart’s brain had it, and the shark’s mouth
That hungers down the blood-smell even to a leak of its own
Side and devouring of itself: efficiency which
Strikes too streamlined for any doubt to pluck at it
Or obstruction deflect.

With a man it is otherwise. Heroisms on horseback,
Outstripping his desk-diary at a broad desk,
Carving at a tiny ivory ornament
For years: his act worships itself - while for him,

Though he bends to be blent in the prayer, how loud and
above what
Furious spaces of fire do the distracting devils
Orgy and hosannah, under what wilderness
Of black silent waters weep.

The poems "Pike" and "Thrushes" are from Hughes' second collection of poetry *Lupercal*, which came out in 1960. The title refers to the ancient Roman festival of Lupercalia that used to be held every year on February 15. The purpose of this festival was "to secure fertility for the field, the flocks, and the people" (Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*. Ed. Paul Keegan, New York: Farrar, Straux and Giroux, 2003, p.1243). In both the poems, Hughes registers a decentred vision that takes cognizance of the inherent value of non-human species within nature. It is not merely sympathy for these two animals that emerges in the poems but a sense of awe that is partly the result of displacing the anthropocentrism or anthropomorphism involved in our usual dealings with nature and animals. At the same time the animals in Hughes' poetry, like the pike and the thrush here; also operate on an imaginative as well as a symbolic level apart from functioning as real animals. Hughes emphasises the lives of animals, and by those aspects of human nature which link it to them but which seldom surface in the conscious life of humans. In a way, the animals in his poetry can also be seen as reflecting the inner turbulence or conflicts of the modern human being especially after the meaningless destruction during and consequent disillusionment after the World War II. It also takes into account the perceived decline, both political and cultural, of post war England.

A good example of the symbolic aspect of animal imagery in Hughes is his own comment on the writing of "Pike":

"Here, in this next poem, is one my prize catches. I used to be a very keen angler for pike, as I still am when I get the chance, and I did most of my early fishing in a quite small lake, really a large pond. This pond went down to a great depth in one place. Sometimes on hot days, we would see something like a railway sleeper lying near the surface, and there certainly

were huge pike in that pond. I suppose they are even bigger by now. Recently I felt like doing some pike fishing, but in circumstances where there was no chance of it, and over the days, as I remembered the extreme pleasures of that sport, bits of the following poem began to arrive. You will see by looking at the place in my memory very hard and very carefully, and by using the words that grew naturally out of the pictures and feelings. I captured not just a pike; I captured the whole pond, including the monsters I never hooked." [Accessed from http://www. poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/single Poem.do? poemId =7079]

As in the poem, here again we can see how the pike carries with it not only its immediate presence as an animal but through it the poet can go back to the landscape of his native Yorkshire as well as to other regions (especially Devonshire) of England where he can explore his cultural roots. This is reflected again in the description of the pond at the monastery where the poet goes fishing in "Pike"

"A pond I fished, fifty yards across,
Whose lilies and muscular tench
Had outlasted every visible stone
Of the monastery that planted them-

Stilled legendary depth:
It was as deep as England. It held
Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old
That past nightfall I dared not cast."

The pike that rises up from the depths of this pond thus becomes more of a creature from the psychic past of England, one that threatens the matter-of-fact everyday realities in the present. It also implies the poet's unconscious associations with this past, as well as his recognition of the unknown but overwhelming forces of nature that for a brief but startling moment, is compressed in the pike.

Again, look at these lines from "Thrushes":

"Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn,

More coiled steel than living - a poised
Dark deadly eye, those delicate legs
Triggered to stirrings beyond sense."

The thrushes here are again aligned with something that goes beyond the boundaries of human sensory experience "stirrings beyond sense" and the immediacy with which their faculties work to hunt their prey, is something that the ordinary rational human mind (barring geniuses) can never approach.

Animals for Hughes thus work as "elemental symbols", which compress within themselves the "enraged energy" of the Universe (Ted Hughes in Dyson, 102-3). Hughes attempts to examine the possibility of a balance between the social consciousness of human beings and their primordial side, which has gradually succumbed to the process of civilization and industrialisation. For this purpose, he does not resort to didacticism, but creates representative animal figures that exist between the real and the symbolic.

This does not mean, however, that Hughes keeps these animals on the level of the abstract. Instead, his poems are populated by concrete images and accurate and detailed descriptions of their habitat, appearance and behaviour. The pike, for example, is a fish common in England, and popular both for the sport of angling and as food. It likes to hunt by ambushing its prey, keeping itself immobile till the careless prey comes near enough for it to pounce (the term for this is 'ambush predator'). It also displays the trait of cannibalism which is might be more due to their territorial nature than for food, though the latter also may play a role. Again, the thrush is a common garden bird in England and is known for clearly identifiable trademark song. It is feeds on primarily insects, earthworms and snails. In the two poems on these two species, Hughes carefully foregrounds the precise way of their hunting so as to emphasise their roles as predators to be reckoned with in their own habitat. This will be made clear when you look at pictures of the two:

The two pictures (especially of the bird) capture their subjects in

their own habitat, but the point of view is obviously that of the human eye looking through the camera. Given this, the pike and the thrush do not come across as ferocious beasts but animals, which are harmless to humans. As has been mentioned earlier, from the point of view of humans, they would be in intermediate positions in the food chain, becoming the prey of larger predators as well as humans (who eat the pike). However, do we find the same attitude in Hughes' poems? Even though the pike and the thrush are described in terms that spring from human culture—

"silhouette
Of submarine delicacy and horror
The jaws' hooked clamp
A life subdued to its instrument
The outside eye stared: as a vice locks-
The same iron in this eye
Though its film shrank in death."

**("Pike")**

"Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn,
More coiled steel than living
Gives their days this bullet and automatic"

**("Thrushes")**

The greater effect is that of an environment where each of the two is at the top of the food chain, and therefore possesses a unique power. This is reinforced by the frequent shift of perspective from the human to that of the fish and the bird, pushing, at times, the human eye/perspective to the periphery. It is this decentred vision that accommodates both the human and the non-human in the framework of nature. This is a key aspect of the post-pastoral in play in the poetry of Hughes that is discussed later in this section. As a commentator on Hughes argues

His poems about animals, birds, and insects owe their weight and solidity to the fact that he can survey, without flinching, the most grotesque forms of life, revering them no matter what their nature may be, however repulsive they are, however alien to our human modes of existence. He

feels for them an intuitive sympathy, which enables him to convey the inner quality of their being, without any trace of sentimental anthropomorphic glibness. (Press: 188)



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 4:** From which collection, are the poems "Pike" and "Thrushes" taken? What do animals signify in Ted Hughes' poetry?

**Q 5:** What are Ted Hughes' own views about the animal aspects in human beings?

## 13.5 MAJOR THEMES

The following are some of the dominant themes in the poem.

**Violence and Energy:**

Ted Hughes distinguishes between two kinds of violence. There is one that is all too visible in contemporary society and becomes a spectacle on TV and in pulp fiction, a "perpetual massacre" that "leaks up with its characteristic whiff of emptiness and meaninglessness, that smell of psychosis which is very easy to detect", one is sociological in nature (Ted Hughes in Dyson, Ed.: 101). For Hughes, however, there is a greater kind of violence that is manifest in the great works of literature, especially poetry. For Hughes, poetry is the record "just how the forces of the Universe try to redress some balance disturbed by human error" (Ted Hughes in Dyson, Ed.: 101). Thus, poetry becomes a medium through which this balance can be arrived at. Hughes visualises poetry taking the place of old rituals and dogma that bring about a heightened awareness of the energy of the Universe to us through our embeddedness in nature. Violence in this framework, as we have seen, is vitally linked to energy and power. Violence, for Hughes, therefore, as A. E. Dyson argues in his essay "Power Thought Absolutely", "is the occasion not for reflection, but for *being*; it is a guarantee of energy, of life, and most so, paradoxically, when it knows itself in moments of captivity, pain or death" (Dyson (Ed): 116). This energy for Hughes is directly accessible to the animal world (represented here by the pike and

the thrush) since their existence within the Universe is unmediated by reason that inevitably encumbers human responses to their immediate environment and determines human actions:

> "With a man it is otherwise. Heroisms on horseback,
> Outstripping his desk-diary at a broad desk,
> Carving at a tiny ivory ornament
> For years: his act worships itself - while for him,
> Though he bends to be blent in the prayer, how loud and
> above what
> Furious spaces of fire do the distracting devils
> Orgy and hosannah, under what wilderness
> Of black silent waters weep."
>
> **("Thrushes")**

The representation of the pike and the thrush as violent predators is part of this framework in that their violence is part of a natural cycle of birth death and regeneration that manifests itself in every living being. The reason their activities seem brutal is because we, the human observers, have ceased to relate to this process through our instinct, and instead interpret it through the obscuring veil of reason and rationalism that is part more of our social moorings. The 'eye' in both the poems (of the pike in the one and the thrush in the other) is an eye that stares at us from "the depths of the cultural and individual unconscious and slowly begins to confront and to make insecure the conscious life" (West: 23).

**The Post-pastoral:**

Terry Gifford coins the term post-pastoral to refer to "literature that is aware of the anti-pastoral and of the conventional illusions upon which Arcadia is premised, but which finds a language to outflank those dangers with a vision of accommodated humans, at home in the very world they thought themselves alienated from by their possession of language" (Gifford: 149). Gifford identifies six features of this literature.

Firstly, it expresses "an awe in attention to the natural world" that derives not merely from an intimate knowledge of nature of the kind that a

naturalist possesses or a knowledge of "the dynamics of relationships" that is the concern of an ecologist, but from "a deep sense of the immanence of all things" (Gifford: 152). This "positioning of the self towards nature leads inevitably to a humbling that is a necessary requirement of the shift from the anthropocentric position of the pastoral to the ecocentric view of the post-pastoral" (Gifford: 152). As referred to earlier, the shifting perspectives in "Pike" and "Thrushes" approach this ecocentric vision that acknowledges the inherent value of all living beings regardless of their being human or non-human. Such a vision attempts to correct the hypocrisy that is usually involved in human responses to the natural world.

The second feature of the post-pastoral is "the recognition of a creative-destructive equally in balance in a continuous momentum of birth and death, death and rebirth, growth and decay, ecstasy and dissolution. Often this requires the recognition of the death process, as it does for Coleridge's Ancient Mariner who had not learned humility before the huge presence of the Albatross and had committed the hubris of causing the arbitrary death of not just the only fellow creature in the ice and fog, but one welcomed 'As if it had been a Christian soul'" (Gifford: 155). This takes into account nature as a dynamic process that inevitably has some negatives and positives. This, again, has some resonances in the two poems of Hughes in that the emphasis on hunting and killing prey are what make these two otherwise harmless animals (to us!) so intimidating. At the same time it is also emphasised that their hunting is for the purpose of preservation of their species (food, securing of territory, survival) and thus, they are different from us in that human violence in contemporary times is most often not for survival and in a way diverges from the natural cycles.

Thirdly, the post-pastoral recognises that "the inner is also the workings of the outer, that our inner human nature can be understood in relation to external nature" (Gifford: 156). This suggests that we can, through our humility towards other species in the natural world can regain our integral place in that framework rather than remaining alienated from it, and thereby regain the "sensorial dimension of experience" that enables us to retrieve "the living landscape" in which we are bodily or physically placed (Gifford:

156). This implies that the cycles of this living landscape outside of us but in which we ourselves are embedded reflect the same cycles (say, of birth and death, and so on) that are constantly in process within us, and manifest themselves in our moods, our emotions, our intuition, in other words, our psychological landscape itself. We can locate this Hughes' poems through his use of images that bring out the impact of the environment or atmosphere on the poet's psyche. It is most noticeable in the fear of the irrational, dark depths of his unconscious that threaten the poet as he angles for a giant pike in the legendary depths of a pond dating back to medieval England:

> "A pond I fished, fifty yards across,
> Whose lilies and muscular tench
> Had outlasted every visible stone
> Of the monastery that planted them-
> Stilled legendary depth:
> It was as deep as England. It held
> Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old
> That past nightfall I dared not cast
>
> But silently cast and fished
> With the hair frozen on my head
> For what might move, for what eye might move.
> The still splashes on the dark pond,
>
> Owls hushing the floating woods
> Frail on my ear against the dream
> Darkness beneath night's darkness had freed,
> That rose slowly toward me, watching."
>
> ("Pike")

Following this, the post-pastoral demonstrates, as its fourth feature, that the terms 'culture' and 'nature' become frequently interchangeable since, as Gifford argues (using the American poet Gary Snyder, himself a key figure in environmental ethics), culture becomes nature in that "our art is our natural way of thinking ourselves back into our natural world from which

much of our previous culture has alienated us" (Gifford: 161). Conversely, nature can also become culture in that our responses to nature are always culturally conditioned and reflected in aspects of conservation as well (for example in India where in many places snakes are worshipped and so are not killed; or the conservation of lions in Gir that was prompted by the royal sport of hunting lions which required an adequate population of lions to exist). Again, when we have to describe our direct, immediate or intuitive experience of nature, we are inevitably forced to use language that is socially constructed and therefore bears the mark of culture.

However, post-pastoral literature attempts to express this symbiotic relationship between nature and culture. This can be demonstrated with the passage just quoted from "Pike", where it is implied that the fear of the poet is culturally conditioned, like the fear of snakes described in D. H. Lawrence's poem "Snake". This fear is the fear of the unknown, of the irrational, a fear that manifests only because as humans we are used to a rational way of thinking and experiencing the external world and therefore suppress our intuitions regarding it. In this case, rationalism, that is characteristic of human culture, becomes a natural way of looking at things. On the other hand, the poet's familiarity with the animal world and the workings of nature turns this rationalism on its head by making the pike (as well as the thrush) a denizen of both culture (through the mythologising tendency of the poet) and nature (as an efficient hunter that has an immediate relation to nature and the tremendous power it contains). This ecological consciousness leads to a conscientious responsibility towards nature and the various species (apart from humans) living within it (Gifford: 163). Post-pastoral literature (such as Lawrence's or Hughes') thus articulates this conscience that is part of one's humility towards other species. This aspect is however more noticeable in some other poems of Hughes like "An Otter", or "Hawk in the Rain".

Finally, post-pastoral writing connects the exploitation of nature with the exploitation of women and minorities and thereby addresses both environmental and social exploitation at the same time (Gifford: 165). For Gifford, one of the best illustrations of post-pastoral writing is Ted Hughes'

*Cave Birds* (1978) (Gifford: 169-171).

**The Idea of England**:

In his poetry and other writings, Ted Hughes criticises the materialism and rationalism that characterises England or Britain in the modern era. For him, it is primarily the outcome of Britain's leaning towards Protestantism since the Reformation. To counter the stagnation brought about due to this, Hughes uses nature as a medium through which he can access the more vital life of an older England "made up of Anglo-Saxon, Nordic and Celtic influences, brought together under the sign of a feminine religion that spans paganism and medieval Catholicism" (Ingelbien: 629). In a seminal essay titled "Englands of the Mind" (included in *Preoccupations*) the poet Seamus Heaney argues that English poets like Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill and Philip Larkin "return to an origin" and imply a continuity of contemporary England with another, older England that combined together constitute for each of them the real England (Heaney: 150). At the same time, this England is informed by the region to which each of them belongs, articulating a "defensive love of their territory", something that was "once shared by those poets we might call colonial–Yeats, MacDiarmid, Carlos Williams. They are aware of their Englishness as deposits in the descending storeys of the literary and historical past" (Heaney: 150-151).



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 6:** What views of Violence and Energy can be derived from Ted Hughes' poetry?

**Q 7:** How do poems like "Pike" and "Thrushes" present Hughes' eco-centric vision?

**Q 8:** How does Ted Hughes view England in his poems?

## 13.6 HUGHES' POETIC STYLE

The most obvious feature of Hughes' poetic style, especially in his early verse, is the remarkable vehemence of the language replete with verbs, adjectives, and nouns expressing powerful physical activity or fierce

reactions. For example, look at the terms that describe the pike.

> "Pike, three inches long, perfect
> Pike in all parts, green tigering the gold.
> and the thrushes
> Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn,
> More coiled steel than living - a poised
> Dark deadly eye, those delicate legs."

Triggered to stirrings beyond sense in their respective poems. The concrete imagery that accompanies the animals at once aligns them with a real palpable world but at the same time endow them with a mythic power. Again, as stated earlier, the favouring of consonant sounds and of alliteration also manifests the obsession of language in Hughes with a primordial power. The violence that coils itself in the pike and the thrush is represented through an economy of words. The images refuse to sentimentalise the animals and instead set them up as representatives harbouring the formidable forces of nature.

The language of Hughes, argues Heaney, is a combination of "pagan Anglo-Saxon and Nordic elements" that draw their effect from "a related constellation of primitive myths and world views" (Heaney: 151). The literary heritage that emerges from this is the Middle English alliterative tradition with its "stark outline and vitality" that "went underground to sustain the folk poetry, ballads, and the ebullience of Shakespeare and the Elizabethans" (Heaney: 151). Hughes' "England of the mind" is correspondingly "a primeval landscape where stones cry out and horizons endure, where the elements inhabit the mind with a religious force,...England as King Lear's heath which now becomes a Yorkshire moor where sheep and foxes and hawks persuade 'unaccommodated man' that he is a poor bare forked thing, kinned not in a chain but on a plane of being with the animals themselves" (Heaney: 151-152). Because of such derivations of his poetry, Hughes verse leans heavily on consonants and alliteration that instils a particular robustness in his poems. The idea of the poet angling for pikes in an ancient pond "as deep as England" seems to substantiate this idea. In fact, the choice of the pike

and the thrush in the two poems itself is an indication of Hughes attraction for English landscapes and fauna.

## 13.7 RECEPTION OF HUGHES

Ted Hughes possesses certain qualities which very few English poets possess—a sense of nature, a sense of that other England which the London based writers of his time seemed to have forgotten. Although he cannot be straightway termed as an animal poet, his animal poetry, like we find in case of the poem "Pike", is an excellent example of poetry. He brings to animal subjects and sometimes to natural landscape, a feeling for their stark impingement far beyond the range of any of his contemporaries.

The poetry of Hughes has had a wide range of reception from the initial criticism during the 1950s and 60s of what was seen as his fascist sympathy (with reference to poems such as "Hawk Roosting") to an acknowledgement of the power of his poetic language. There was also the negative perceptions expressed by the 'Movement' poets like Philip Larkin who ridiculed the "myth-kitty" that had become empty now, a snide remark at the perceived irrelevance of the mythopoeic stance that poets like Hughes adopted. Critics like A. E. Dyson and Graham Hough were, however, appreciative of the "penetrating and transformative" (Hough) and the "exploratory, meditative" (Dyson) qualities of his poetry (Gifford 2009: 102). However, criticism towards the later decades of the 20th century and till the present has also concentrated on issues of nationhood, gender, and ecological consciousness in Hughes (as can be seen in Heaney, Gifford, and Ingelbien).



## 13.8 LET US SUM UP

From your reading of this unit, you must have noted that two experiences seem to have determined Hughes' frame of poetic reference: the myth of World War I and an awareness of nature. Anthropology was yet another determinant affecting his early poems. Hughes is a traditionalist

but his poetry is often deemed as 'New Poetry' of the 60s. This is mainly because, he reacted against the suburban generality of the Movement Poets of the previous generation of poets. His is a move away from sobriety and tidiness towards a kind of innovations often sought to be associated with modernism, with energetic poems that consider the violence and cruelty of life and also the recesses of the human mind. Unlike the 'Movement Poets' with their use of post war austerity that sought to give order to poetry, the 'New Poetry' of Ted Hughes and others were written in the shadow of nuclear weapons, and gave voice to a sense of disintegration and darkness that often characterises the post modern period. This tendency has been made explicit in his poem "Thrushes" where the observation of some thrushes in his own lawn lead him to contrast them to human beings whose best acts seem produced by the suppression of such energies as the birds display. The manner in which the bird(s) behave prompts the poet to reflect on human motivation and creativity. It can be seen as a poem, which is a philosophical attempt to differentiate between human and animal behaviour. While the poem "Pike" explains how the natural world provokes the realization of how human beings have been wrongly imposing their will and interpretation to the world of animals where nothing of 'human' perspective and understanding can apply.



## 13.9 FURTHER READING

1) Carter, Ronald, and John McRae. (2001). *The Routledge History of Literature in English: Britain and Ireland*, Second Edition. London and New York: Routledge.

2) Dyson, A. E. (Ed). (1990). *Three Contemporary Poets: Thom Gunn, Ted Hughes and R. S. Thomas*. Casebook Series. London: Macmillan.

3) Gifford, Terry. (1999). *Pastoral*. London and New York: Routledge.

4) Heaney, Seamus. (1980). *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978.* London: Faber and Faber.

5) Ingelbien, Raphael. (1999). "Mapping the Misreadings: Ted Hughes,

Seamus Heaney, and Nationhood". Contemporary Literature, Vol. 40, No.4. pp. 627-658.

6) O'Neil, Patrick M. (Ed.). (2004). *Great World Writers: Twentieth Century*. Vol.11. New York: Marshall Cavendish.

7) Press, John. (1963). *Rule and Energy: Trends in British Poetry since the Second World War*. London: Oxford UP.

8) Sagar, Keith. (2000). *The Laughter of Foxes: A Study of Ted Hughes*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

9) West, Thomas. (1985). *Ted Hughes*. London: Methuen and Company Ltd.

**Websites and Electronic Resources:**

http://www.thetedhughessociety.org/life.htm

http://www. poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/single Poem.do? poemId =7079.



## 13.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

**Ans to Q 1:** Hughes' poetry treats nature as violent and pitiless… …many poems deal with animals traditionally regarded as violent and those usually seen as benign but which always vigorously pursue their lives with a single-minded strength and power… …Hughes approaches animals and the natural world without sentimentality.

**Ans to Q 2:** Dylan Thomas and D. H. Lawrence who are part of the tradition of nature poetry in English literature.

**Ans to Q 3:** The humans are seen as alienating themselves from an immediate living and access to the tremendous forces of nature by distancing itself through an overconfident reliance on rationality and culture. As a result, they feel threatened by an uncanny proximity with them.

**Ans to Q 4:** The poems "Pike" and "Thrushes" are taken from *Lupercal* (1960)… …In both poems Hughes registers a decentred vision that

takes cognizance of the inherent value of non-human species within nature… …the poet does not sympathise with the animals but provides a critique of our usual dealings with nature and animals… …animals also operate on an imaginative as well as a symbolic level.

**Ans to Q 5:** Animals are the "elemental symbols" which compress within themselves the "enraged energy" of the Universe… …Hughes attempts to examine the possibility of a balance between the social consciousness of human beings and their primordial side, which has gradually succumbed to the process of civilization and industrialisation… …thus he creates representative animal figures that exist between the real and the symbolic.

**Ans to Q 6:** Hughes distinguishes between two kinds of violence: one visible on TV and in pulp fiction, and the other manifest in poetry… …For Hughes, poetry is the record "just how the forces of the Universe try to redress some balance disturbed by human error"… … Poetry becomes a medium through which this balance can be arrived at.

**Ans to Q 7:** The shifting perspectives in "Pike" and "Thrushes" approach this ecocentric vision that acknowledges the inherent value of all living beings regardless of their being human or non-human. Such a vision attempts to correct the hypocrisy that is usually involved in human responses to the natural world.

**Ans to Q 8:** Hughes criticises the materialism and rationalism that characterises England or Britain in the modern era… …use of nature as a medium through which he can access the more vital life of an older England… …in the essay "Englands of the Mind" (included in *Preoccupations*) the poet Seamus Heaney argues that English poets like Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill and Philip Larkin "return to an origin" and imply a continuity of contemporary England with another, older England.



## 13.11 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

**Q 1:** Hughes has frequently been described as a poet of violence. Substantiate this argument with relevant examples from his poetry.

**Q 2:** What is the idea of England that emerges from a reading of Hughes' poetry? Critically discuss with suitable examples from his poems.

**Q 3:** Analyse the relationship between humans and nature as explored by Hughes in his poems.

**Q 4:** Animals in Hughes' poetry operate on an imaginative as well as a symbolic level. Discuss with reference to "Pike" and "Thrushes".

**Q 5:** Discuss the important aspects of Ted Hughes' poetry that also expresses his ecocentric vision.

**Q 6:** How did the 'New Poetry' of the Ted Hughes, react against the Suburban generality of the "Movement" poets? Elaborate with examples.

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# UNIT 14: PHILIP LARKIN: "NEXT PLEASE" AND "AMBULANCES"

## UNIT STRUCTURE


14.1 Learning Objectives

14.2 Introduction

14.3 Philip Larkin: The Poet

14.4 Reading the Poems Prescribed

14.5 Major Themes

14.6 Larkin's Poetic Style

14.7 Reception of Larkin

14.8 Let Us Sum Up

14.9 Further Reading

14.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

14.11 Possible Questions


## 14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- gain some ideas on the life and works of the English poet Philip Larkin
- make a detailed summary of the poems "Next Please" and "Ambulances"
- discuss the major themes evident in both the poems
- analyse Larkin's poetical style and language employed in the prescribed poems.
- provide a critical reception of the poems and further explore the poetry and writings of Philip Larkin.

## 14.2 INTRODUCTION

The present unit takes up two interesting poems titled "Next Please" and "Ambulances" by Philip Larkin who wrote during the second half of the 20th century. Both these poems reflect the poet's compelling thoughts on

the fleeting nature of life and the inevitability of death itself. Although, the poems contain a sense of gloom in capturing our common sense of fear and insecurity with regard to death, yet they also confront death as a natural process of life in itself. Larkin who assumed the pseudonym of 'Brunette Coleman' was also considered one of the leading 'Movement Poets', greatly admired by this prominent literary circle of leading English poets and writers such as D.J. Enright, Donald Davie, Elizabeth Jennings, John Holloway, John Wain, Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest among a few others. The term 'movement' with reference to this close intellectual group was coined by J. D. Scott, the editor of the *Spectator* magazine, and thus with time, it came to define this little spark of a literary movement, which gradually developed through the literary, creative, and intellectual exchanges among its members. Philip Larkin was considered one of the most promising poets of England who was widely read and admired for his poetry that created new insights into the realities of modern life, as well as, the otherwise taken-for-granted or mundane aspects of everyday life that found a new expression through his poetry. Together with these prescribed poems, learners can also explore some of the other widely anthologised poems of Larkin namely, "Church Going", "Aubade", "Days", "High Windows", "Night Music" and "The Whitsun Weddings" among others. Before we explore the textual content and meaning of the prescribed poems, let us briefly familiarise ourselves to the life and works of Larkin.

## 14.3 PHILIP LARKIN: THE POET

Philip Larkin (1922–1985) was born in Warwickshire, England to Sydney Larkin and Eva Larkin and was raised along with his elder sister Catherine Larkin. He began his formal education at King Henry VIII School where he spent his formative years from 1930-1940 following which he studied English Literature at St. John's College, Oxford till 1943. Larkin not only excelled at his studies in College but also developed an interest in writing that could be traced to his school years when he wrote for his school magazine *The Coventrian*, an interest that he continued to pursue through his Oxford years where he wrote for *Cherwell* and *Oxford Poetry*, the popular

college magazines. During his studies at Oxford, he had also developed a close friendship with Kingsley Amis and Bruce Elinton Montgomery who eventually became his fellow poets or writers. While Amis became a prominent English poet, critic and writer, who as mentioned earlier, was also a member of the Movement Poets; Montgomery went on to become a well-known American author, painter and performer of musical-theatre.

Larkin was considerably influenced by Thomas Hardy whose writings inspired him to take up common themes or subjects from everyday life, and capture the same through an effective and lasting poetical expression. In addition, he was also greatly influenced by the poetical style of W.H. Auden. His first major volume of poetry was titled *The North Ship* (1945) followed by his other significant anthologies such as *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974). While Larkin's second volume *The Less Deceived* is the source of the poem "Next Please", the poem "Ambulances belongs to his third volume *The Whitsun Weddings*. While the second volume contains significant poems such as "Absences", ""Age", "Born Yesterday", "Coming", "Deceptions", "I Remember, I Remember" among others; the third volume contains poems such as "A Study of Reading Habits", "An Arundel Tomb", "Ignorance", "Self's the Man", "Sunny Prestatyn", "The Whitsun Weddings" and "Toads Revisited" to mention a few.

Besides his four major volumes of poetry, through the course of his long literary career Larkin wrote a fragment of his autobiography titled "Ante Meridian" containing anecdotes from his childhood; an incomplete novel titled *Michaelmas Term at St. Brides* centered on school life; a series of early poems compiled as *Sugar and Spice: A Sheaf of Poems*; an essay titled "What Are We Waiting For?"; together with his *Selected Letters* (1992). He spent much time in the company of books and manuscripts while working as a chief librarian at the University of Hull. Larkin was much reserved and withdrawn in terms of his personality, shy of all recognitions that were bestowed on him which in fact saw him decline the offer to teach as a professor of poetry at Oxford in 1972 or even the honour of Poet Laureate in the year 1984. However, Larkin in the course of his lifetime had received

great honour and he was widely admired by his fellow poets, his readers, as well as, the literary circles for his remarkable contributions as one of the most prominent English poets.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 1:** What was the pseudonym under which Philip Larkin wrote?

**Q 2:** Name some of the major poets and writers that comprised the Movement Poets.

**Q 3:** Who coined the term "Movement" with regard to the "Movement Poets"?

**Q 4:** Write a few words on the origins and early life of the poet Philip Larkin.

**Q 5:** Mention the names of the four major volumes of Philip Larkin's poetry.

**Q 6:** What are the sources of the poems "Next Please" and "Ambulances"?

## 14.4 READING THE POEMS PRESCRIBED

In the following subsection, the summary of the poems "Next Please" and "Ambulances" has been provided with a supplemented glossary for both the poems.

**Next Please**

Always too eager for the future, we
Pick up bad habits of expectancy.
Something is always approaching; every day
Till then we say,
    Watching from a bluff the tiny, clear
Sparkling armada of promises draw near.
How slow they are! And how much time they waste,
Refusing to make haste!
Yet still they leave us holding wretched stalks

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Of disappointment, for, though nothing balks
Each big approach, leaning with brasswork printed,
Each rope distinct,
Flagged, and the figurehead with golden tits
Arching our way, it never anchors; it's
No sooner present than it turns to past.
Right to the last
We think each one will heave to and unload
All good into our lives, all we are owed
For waiting so devoutly and so long.
But we are wrong:
Only one ship is seeking us, a black-
Sailed unfamiliar, owing at her back
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake
No waters breed or break.



**Balks:** hesitate to accept an idea, thwart or hinder
**Figurehead:** carved bust at the prow of the ship
**Heave:** lift or drag with effort; movement
**Devoutly:** very sincerely or seriously

In the opening lines of the first verse, the poet directly addresses the central concerns of the poem by taking up the ways in which human life pivots around hopes and expectations. We are all caught up in the web of life, whereby we find ourselves constantly busy moving ahead towards the future with enthusiasm, brimming with bright hopes and perfect plans, no matter how challenging the present may seem. However, the poet expresses the opinion that too much of optimism with regard to the immediate future also tends to end up in futility as the future is always shrouded in mystery and more often than not, our plans can take unexpected turns where things do not necessarily turn up the way we expect them to and even worse, leading to the final turn of our lives i.e., 'death' for some of us, whereby even the slightest possibilities of our fulfilled hopes and expectations, plans and desires, dreams and wishes are rudely cut short once and for all. Perhaps, this is why the wise and the elderly always remind us that the key to a fulfilling life is living in the present and focusing on our blessings rather than continuously harping on the unknown future.

In the third line of the poem, the use of the word "something", therefore refers to 'death', and the poet notes that death is constantly gaining

on us with every passing moment through the days, months and years, as we flip through the calendars oblivious of the fact that death has the ultimate power to stop us short at any given moment. Regardless of this, it is only too natural a human tendency to wait for all the good things to fill our lives, in the hope of which we invest all our plans and efforts. We eagerly await the arrival of our long cherished hopes and dreams that many-a-times seem to elude us without ever taking the shape of reality. At other times, when such moments do actualise, we find it difficult to hold onto them, as they easily escape us like sand slipping through our hands. Thus, the poem conjures an image of the armada or fleet of warships that symbolically defines the promises, as well as, the challenges of our near future, which we eagerly await but which seems to delay its arrival by taking its own sweet time. The learner will perhaps agree that often in our wait for better things to come our way, we forget the beauty of living in the present and cherishing the here and now.

Thus, as the symbolic representation of the poet suggests, when the fleet of warships are almost near, so much so, that the fluttering sails and supporting ropes, as well as, its shining brass-work and the figurehead is clearly visible, the entire fleet suddenly and ironically is seen to change its course of direction in an instant. Instead of reaching land and dropping anchor, the ships are seen to move away without as much as stopping by for even for a short while. Similarly, our dreams and desires tend to elude us as well by often changing their usual course and thereby leaving us disheartened, disappointed and with several set-backs in life. Besides, even as the best of moments of which we dream and patiently work towards actualises or turns into our desired reality in the immediate 'present', such moments also melt away too easily before we are able to soak and relish in them completely. These then turning into immediate moments of the past% that is how swiftly time passes by where before we even realise, every single moment in the present is continuously transforming into a moment of the past. Thus, we all continue to live in a constant disillusionment whereby all our dreams and desires prove to be nothing but 'vanity' and 'death',

which holds great power over our lives, proves to be the ultimate truth.

These lines of the poem reveal the irony of our lives where regardless of our desires, none of us stand exception to the uncertainty of life and where no form of life on earth can ever escape the unpredictability, as well as, inevitability of death. Thus, the poet describes a lone ship (in contrast to the fleet of ships) that is sure to land and drop its anchor. This silent ship with a black sail symbolically representing 'death' is slowly yet surely headed towards our lives, to take us away with some excuse or the other, at any moment without the slightest hint. There is no saying when, where and how death will make its final claim on us but that it we will also be visited is also certain. Perhaps, then the poet desires to convey his thoughts that even as we wait "devoutly" and with optimism towards gaining on life's best, it is best to realise that in the certainty of death there is nothing more important, necessary and blissful than living in the present, cherishing every single moment of our lives and celebrating life in every way possible before we arrive to the final turn of our lives.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 7:** Mention the central concerns that are addressed in the opening lines of the poem "Next Please".

**Q 8:** What is the poet's opinion with regard to holding too much of optimism where the immediate future is concerned?

**Q 9:** What is considered the key to living a fulfilling life as described in the poem "Next Please"?

**Q 10:** Briefly define the irony of human lives as described in the poem "Next Please".



**Confessionals:** an enclosed stall in a church in which a person confesses his or her sins

**Glossy:** smooth and shiny surface

**Plaque:** an ornamental tablet fixed to a wall to commemorate a person or event

**Kerb:** a stone edging to a pavement

**Ambulances**

Closed like confessionals, they thread
Loud noons of cities, giving back
None of the glances they absorb.
Light glossy grey, arms on a plaque,



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They come to rest at any kerb:
All streets in time are visited.
Then children strewn on steps or road,
Or women coming from the shops
Past smells of different dinners, see
A wild white face that overtops
Red stretcher-blankets momently
As it is carried in and stowed,
And sense the solving emptiness
That lies just under all we do,
And for a second get it whole,
So permanent and blank and true.
The fastened doors recede. Poor soul,
They whisper at their own distress
For borne away in deadened air
May go the sudden shut of loss
Round something nearly at the end,
And what cohered in it across
The years, the unique random blend
Of families and fashions, there
At last begin to loosen. Far
From the exchange of love to lie
Unreachable inside a room
He traffic parts to let go by
Brings closer what is left to come,
And dulls to distance all we are.

Ambulances are commonly referred to medical-vans providing medical services, first aid and rushing the ailing or the suffering, victims of accidents, victims of natural calamities and medical patients in critical conditions to hospitals for timely medical assistance. In the poem, such ambulances are compared to enclosed spaces of 'confessionals' that are usually found in Roman Catholic churches, where believers or even the

penitents who desire to make a confession are free to do so without the slightest hesitation and thereby ease the burden of their hearts, shed their worries, rid themselves of guilt, renew themselves, as well as, their faith in God. During such a confession, a 'priest' who remains hidden, patiently listens to the confessions made by the 'penitent' who may or may not be visible to the entire congregation (depending on the provision or design of the confessional box) and the priest acts as the intercessor or mediator between the penitent and God. Similarly, the ambulances become closed spaces where the suffering or even the dying also tends to make their final confessions before they pass away.

This also brings into relevance the religious practice of the Extreme Unction, which is another Christian rite of the Roman Catholic Church whereby a priest administers the final rites of confession and prayers to the sick and the ailing or even the dying in their final moments. Thus, in the opening lines of the poem itself, we receive the images of the penitent, the sick and the dying which brings to our mind the magnitude or degree of suffering that such tormented souls do undergo. It portrays how ambulances rush through the cities, capturing the attention of people in the traffic or on the sidewalk with their loud sirens, making their way through the traffic and crowds on their emergency duties. The poet observes that sooner or later, ambulances arrive at each and every door and 'Death' arrives unannounced to claim someone or the other every now and then, leaving only as much as a gravestone and an inscription to the name and memory of the departed souls.

Again, it is only through rare miracles that at times even those who are almost fated to die find their lives spared, receiving a new lease of life yet again. Otherwise, 'Death' is defined as being merciless in its random choices and stands as 'the greatest leveler' as the bard William Shakespeare had famously noted, which in all its fairness reduces every single living being to dust at the tail end of life without exception. Another vivid image that the poet presents is that of a white faced figure (whose gender is not mentioned) who could well personify 'Death' itself or as the messenger of 'Death', shown to be too busy in stowing away stretcher-blankets and noticed

by 'children' who spend nights on steps or by the roadsides and even by 'women' while returning from their grocery shopping as part of their everyday work. Thus, while the poor kids are caught up with their own share of mundane realities in life and the women are preoccupied with their own mundane work, 'Death' too continues its own share of dull routine work.

Death is thus defined as a 'solving emptiness' which pervades ever bit of our lives which we often take for granted or ignore in every possible way for our own peace of mind. Perhaps, even as we live in denial, inside our own sweet bubble without realising that it could burst at any given moment without the slightest warning, it is the only way we can live more freely and sensibly, making sense of our existence and purpose in life. After all, it is pointless and unnecessary to live in the fear of death every single moment of our lives even as death may stare hard at us. The learner may certainly agree that instead of living in continuous dread that 'Death' is never too far from claiming us with finality, it is best to free our conscious minds from an such fear and to focus on the beautiful treasures that life has to offer. Perhaps, then ignorance is also blissful in so many ways, where being unmindful of death or preventing the fear of death from preoccupying our minds also enables us to live life to the fullest with freedom and fortitude.

In its closing lines, the poem describes how the deceased or the departed souls leave behind a sense of emptiness, in the lives of their families and friends, a void that can never ever be filled even with the passing of time. Thus, 'Death' arrives from door-to-door, family-to-family, person-to-person, being completely indifferent to 'Life' and the promises it holds for us all. Through the long formative years of our lives, building relationships, nurturing families and shaping every single phase of our lives, we are all fated to rest in eternal sleep. Eventually, this is how everything topples down in our lives like a house of cards, where all our accomplishments and acquisitions are reduced to nothing. However, even as our lives are inseparably tied to death, it should not prevent us from celebrating every moment of our lives, cherishing all our little joys with our loved ones and living like it were the last day of our lives, as one of the days will soon be our last.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 11:** What are ambulances compared to in Larkin's poem with the same title?

**Q 12:** Briefly describe how a confession takes place in the Church with reference to Larkin's poem.

**Q 13:** What is described in the final lines of the poem?

## 14.5 MAJOR THEMES

The present subsection takes up the central themes found in the prescribed poems to which the learner may also add other such thematic concerns from his or her own reading as well.

**Death:**

Even as we forget this unwavering truth of life as mere mortals on earth, every day we are only that much closer towards our death. We naturally tend to forget or feel our own heart beats in the chaotic and busy lives that we all lead; forgetting that there is a beautiful rhythm of life in itself which can alter the ways in which we live and patterning our lives in accordance to the rush and chaos of the modern day in which we live. Despite the ticking of the clocks and 'time' that passes by in a flurry, the never-say-die spirit seated deep within us and the spring of beauty in the form of our lived moments, must define our sense of self-worth and the value of our experiences in life. In addition, just as the poet Robert Frost had noted, "The woods are lonely dark and deep, but I have miles to go before I sleep, miles to go before I sleep". With time, ageing and growing old, turning weak and suffering health is only a natural part of our lives and just as we are born, we are all destined to die as well. However, irrespective of our age, health conditions or any other concerns, we must live life to the hilt without ever giving up or surrendering to Death all too easily. Life is after all a gift from God.

Somehow, you all will agree that a sense of dread and gloom always pervades even the mention of death, which is one of the ultimate truths of

our lives and also one of the most unpleasant ones. No matter how much we live in denial, death is inevitable and in fact, the entire natural world is subject to the cycle of life and death. Death certainly arrives with the force of finality when it decides to claim lives, without the slightest mercy or the slightest consideration. Although, there is no saying when death chooses to arrive, yet sooner or later, it claims everyone, our loved ones, our acquaintances, us and every living being on this earth. Death overshadows everything as it takes away both our life-breath and the meanings that we pour into our lives reducing everything to nothingness.

Therefore, the only choice we have in our hands is to stir magic into our lives by living life in the right spirit, as well as, leaving our imprints in the world by doing something extraordinary and worthwhile for which we will be always remembered, as living in the hearts and memories of the living is the only way we can live on forever even after we are no more. Thus, as the titles of the poems suggests, Larkin takes up the central theme of 'death' where his intention is not to create a fear psychosis in the minds of his readers with regard to death, but rather to provide a scope of reflection, confronting it directly by highlighting the consciousness of human mortality together with the precious moments of life that is in our hands.

**Living in the Present and the Beauty of Everyday Life:**

Perhaps, in the hope of fulfilling our desires and accomplishing our dreams, we often forget that there is abundant beauty in and around us. Thus, if we are just a little more mindful of ourselves and our surroundings, even our 'everyday lives' which we often take for granted will also begin to feel fresh, lively and filled with positive energy– such is the precious gift of life. The wisdom with which we look into our inner selves and the lens with which we look at the world outside should always enrich and enlighten us. Life will never be a dull experience for anyone so long as he or she believes that we live once and once is good enough if we live in the right spirit. After all, it truly depends on our minds and our perspectives, which shape both our lives and personalities.

However, as Larkin notes in his reflective poems, people constantly live in the desire of acquiring and attaining more and more, so much so,

that they forget to count their blessings and relish the little joys of life. As a result, the immediate 'present', as well as, the beauty of everyday life loses importance to those who are continuously chasing the 'future' and its rewards. Many of us hardly seem to have any time to even experience the beauty of life as we become so focused on chasing their future dreams and desires rather than acknowledging and celebrating what we already have. While it is certainly important to have long term goals, to shape our desires, to work harder and be far-sighted, it is even more important to celebrate one's little joys and achievements, to enjoy hard labour and count all the blessings of life and thereby never lose sight of the immediate 'present'% the here and now, so that when death arrives to claim us, we do not have to look back at our lives in regret but rather a sense of fulfillment of having lived each moment to the fullest. Therefore, in essence, both the poems note that the key to a fulfilling life is living in the present and cherishing the beauty of the life force that sustains us all.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 14:** Write a few lines on the theme of death in Larkin's poems.

**Q 15:** What is the only choice that we have in our hands before death comes to claim us?

**Q 16:** What happens if we are a little mindful of ourselves and our everyday lives?

**Q 17:** Why do many people hardly seem to have time to experience the beauty of life?

## 14.6 LARKIN'S POETIC STYLE

The poetry of Larkin broadly delves on various aspects of human life and more specifically on the elements of 'everyday life' with a depth of thought that often leaves the reader hooked to his poetry long after having read his verses. While reading his poetical works, one finds the scope of self-reflection and also experiences moments of self-confrontation given Larkin's philosophical reflections and the compelling force of his poetical

expressions on the profound truths of life and death. The poems "Next Please" and "Ambulances" are both similar in terms of their thematic concerns on the finality of 'death' much like some of Larkin's other poems on the same aspect such as "Aubade" and "Nothing to be Said" among a few others. Although, both these poems may seem gloomy given the seriousness of Larkin's chosen theme, yet they also bear an alternate approach towards life where despite being subject to the imminence, as well as, the inevitability of death, we may also be inspired to transcend our limitations and celebrate all our living moments in the right spirit. Thus, life is presented as not just a continuous approach to death but also as one good opportunity to live it to the best of our abilities.

In the economy of words, Larkin beautifully captures his reflections on these serious aspects of death and decadence with a sense of restraint and also a sense of revelation at the same time, which are often too easily brushed aside in our consciousness. Both these poems tend to tug and pull our emotions given the sensitivity of the aspects discussed and as we read into these verses many different thoughts concerning our lives trickle into our consciousness due to the fact that we can easily relate to what the poet tries to communicate. Before extracting the poet's message from these verses, the reader is met with the challenge of deciphering or figuring out the symbolical meanings evident in both the poems. Thus, Larkin in his characteristic style employs symbolical representations and rhetorical devices to capture and convey at the same time the core message of his poems to the reader.

For an instance, in the poem "Next Please", Larkin symbolically represents our hopes and expectations by the fleet of ships or the 'Sparkling Armada' or in another instance the lone ship symbolically refers to approaching 'death' which is again metaphorically described as "A huge and birdless silence." Similarly, in the poem "Ambulances", Larkin likens ambulances to confessional booths, which also holds countless stories and many such cases of death almost every day on a regular basis. The opening lines of the poems also indicate how the poet moves straight to the core of his subject in a matter-of-fact manner for an instance "Next Please" opens

with the lines "Always too eager for the future", that makes way for an important issue at hand that the poet desires to take up and delve into. Nowhere in these poems does Larkin mention the word 'death' and yet, in his brilliant style and poetical expression, as well as, the powerful restraint of his chosen words, Larkin portrays the serious aspects of life and death by casting them into symbolical representations, almost like codes to be deciphered. In fact, Larkin tactfully and at the same time poetically defines death as "a black –sailed unfamiliar", "so permanent and black and true" and as "something approaching quickly" without romanticising it and making his statement in a realistic manner.

Finally, with regard to his overall poetical style and language, the critical work titled *Philip Larkin: Poetry That Builds Bridges* (2006) by Sisir Chatterjee captures the credibility of Larkin as a poet and his distinct literary practices thus, "Nor is Larkin's poetry thoroughly romantic or staunchly classicist, but a bridge between these two major trends of poetry. The economy that characterises his use of language, the art of restraint that marks his articulation, the critical impetus that informs much of his poetry dealing with the public themes of contemporary concern, the insistence on the necessity of building poems on a rational structure, the formal framework of his verse built on the principle of tight stanzaic patterns, the regularity of the metrical form (which is predominantly iambic), and the ease of the natural, spontaneous rhymes which lend a rare neatness and evenness to the individual poems- all these are classical features that may be easily traced in Larkin's poetry" (349).

## 14.7 RECEPTION OF LARKIN

Larkin was a 'Movement' poet, and as mentioned in the introduction of the unit, the university educated English poets and writers who were known together as the 'Movement Poets' of the 1950s. Together they broke down the artistic and literary conventions of poetry in their time with their unique blend of literary practices that was further defined by the two major anthologies titled *Poets of the 1950s* (1955) and *New Lines* (1956). The 'Movement Poets' considerably differed from the literary practices of the

prominent modernist poets such as T.S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound and moved away from merely capturing and projecting the complexities of modern world like them. However, the 'Movement Poets' were modern in their literary approach and essentially anti-romantic in their literary ideals, pitching their central concerns on reviving the charm of the rich literary tradition of English Poetry. It must be noted that in doing so, some elements of the romantic certainly seeped into the works of the Movement Poets even as they practiced restraint in terms of literary style, thematic expression and poetical expression.

In fact, Larkin who shared a similarity with poets like William Wordsworth, Thomas Hardy, Edward Thomas, A.E. Houseman and W. H. Auden was considered to have blended elements of both classicism and romanticism in his poetry. Larkin who wrote in the decades after the Second World War was well-versed with the pressing concerns of the times in which he lived and thus the bulk of his poetry contain aspects of life in the modern times. However, what is discernible or distinct in his works is maintaining the continuity of English Poetry with its traditional appeal, as well as, the presence of a universal appeal in his thematic concerns. His poetry is much realistic in nature with sufficient space or scope of contemplation, with a sense of seriousness and sincerity with regard to confrontation of truth instead of escaping it endlessly.

Larkin was also considered the most prominent poet among the Movement poets with his own distinct style of writing that has come to be referred to as the 'Lankinesque' style in English literature, characterising his serious and compact style of writing. While delving on the common themes of life, loss and regrets in post-war England (as was commonly taken up by his fellow poets), Larkin also added his own set of philosophical reflections, as well as, symbolical interpretations in his works. In fact, one can receive a glimpse of his deepest philosophical contemplations, as well as, his metaphysical speculations in the treasures of his poetry. Larkin's closest friend Kingsley Amis thus wrote, "I have never known him [Larkin] say anything he did not mean; you can be quite sure he does feel it- a priceless asset to a poet, and a poet of sensation at that. The same quality

ensures that when he has nothing to say he says nothing, which helps him not to write any bad poems." (see Chatterjee 353).



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 18:** Write a few lines on Larkin's style and language employed in his poetry.

**Q 19:** Write a short note on the practices on the Movement Poets of the 1950s.

**Q 20:** What was the distinct characteristic of Larkin's poetic style?



## 14.8 LET US SUM UP

After going through the present unit, you have gained an insight into the life and works of Philip Larkin while also having important ideas on the substance and the thematic concerns of his poems, "Next Please" and "Ambulances". Also, the discussions on the poetic style and language together with the critical reception of Larkin's poetry will provide the learner with a comprehensive idea on the literary practices of the 1950s and Larkin's own literary characteristics. After a detailed reading of the prescribed poems, the learner is also encouraged to further explore and enjoy the poetry and writings of Philip Larkin on your own.



## 14.9 FURTHER READING

1) Chartterjee, Sisir Kumar. (2006). *Philip Larkin: Poetry That Builds Bridges.* New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.

2) Lerner, Lawrence. (2010). *Philip Larkin Paperback*/. Northcote House.

3) Sarker, Sunil Kumar. (2009). *A Companion to Philip Larkin.* Atlantic Publisher.

4) Tandon, B. G. & Kalpana Rajaram. (Eds.). (2018). Philip Larkin A Critical Review of Selected Poems. Spectrum Books Pvt. Ltd.

## 14.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

**Ans to Q 1:** Larkin assumed the pseudonym of 'Brunette Coleman.'

**Ans to Q 2:** Some of the major poets and English writers were D. J. Enright, Donald Davie, Elizabeth Jennings, John Holloway, John Wain, Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest among a few others.

**Ans to Q 3:** The term 'movement' with reference to this close intellectual circle was coined by J.D. Scott who was also the editor of the *Spectator* magazine.

**Ans to Q 4:** Philip Larkin was born in the year 1922 at Warwickshire, England and raised by Sydney Larkin and Eva Larkin together with his elder sibling Catherine Larkin. He began his formal education at King Henry VIII School where he spent his formative years from 1930-1940 following which he studied English Literature at St. John's College, Oxford till 1943.

**Ans to Q 5:** Larkin's four major volumes of poetry were namely *The North Ship* (1945), *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974).

**Ans to Q 6:** Larkin's poem "Next Please" is taken from the second volume *The Less Deceived* and "Ambulances" is taken from his third volume *The Whitsun Weddings*.

**Ans to Q 7:** In the opening lines, the poet directly addresses the central concerns of the poem by taking up the ways in which human life pivots around our hopes and expectations.

**Ans to Q 8:** The poet expresses the opinion that too much of optimism with regard to the immediate future also tends to end up in futility… …the future is always shrouded in mystery… …our plans can take unexpected turns where things do not necessarily turn up the way we expect them.

**Ans to Q 9:** The key to a fulfilling life is living in the present and focusing on

our blessings rather than continuously harping on the unknown future.

**Ans to Q 10:** These lines reveal the irony of our lives… …regardless of our desires, none of us stands as an exception to the uncertainty of life… …none can ever escape the inevitability, as well as, the unpredictability of death.

**Ans to Q 11:** Ambulances are compared to enclosed spaces of 'confessionals' that are usually found in Roman Catholic churches… …believers or penitents desiring to make confessions are free to do so without the slightest hesitation… …thus, they can ease the burden of their hearts, shed their worries, rid themselves of guilt, renew themselves and their faith in God.

**Ans to Q 12:** During such a confession, a 'priest' who remains hidden patiently listens to the confessions made by the 'penitent'… …the priest acts as the intercessor or mediator between the penitent and God… …similarly, the ambulances become closed spaces where the suffering or even the dying also tend to make their final confessions.

**Ans to Q 13:** In its closing lines, the poem describes how the deceased or the departed souls leave behind a sense of emptiness in the lives of their families and friends, a void that perhaps can never be filled even with the passing of time. Thus, 'Death' arrives from door-to-door, family-to-family, person-to-person, being completely indifferent to 'Life' and its promises.

**Ans to Q 14:** Refer to 14.5

**Ans to Q 15:** Death overshadows everything as it takes away both our life breath and the meaning of life… …the only choice we have in our hands is to stir magic into our lives and to live it in the right spirit… …leave our imprint forever by doing something extra ordinary and worthwhile.

**Ans to Q 16:** If we are just a little more mindful of ourselves and our surroundings, even our 'everyday lives' also begin to feel fresh and lively… …the wisdom with which we look into our inner selves and the lens with which we look at the world outside should always enrich and enlighten us… …life will never be a dull experience for anyone

so long as he or she believes that we live once and once is good enough if we live in the right spirit.

**Ans to Q 17:** Many people hardly seem to have any time to even experience the beauty of life as they become focused on chasing their future dreams and desires rather than acknowledging and celebrating what they already have.

**Ans to Q 18:** Refer to section 14.6 of this unit.

**Ans to Q 19:** The Movement Poets of the 1950s broke down the artistic and literary conventions of poetry… …they considerably differed from the literary practices of the prominent modernist poets such as T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound… …they moved away from capturing and projecting the complexities of modern world… …the Movement Poets were modern in their literary approach and essentially anti-romantic in their literary ideals, pitching their central concerns on reviving the charm of English poetry.

**Ans to Q 20:** While delving on the common themes of life, loss and regrets in post-war England, Larkin added his own philosophical reflections, as well as, symbolical interpretations in his works… …he also blended classicism and romanticism in his poetical works to a great extent.



## 14.11 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

**Q 1.** Discuss the life and literary contributions of the English poet Philip Larkin.

**Q 2.** Give a detailed explanation of the poems "Next Please" and "Ambulances" from your own reading of the poems.

**Q 3.** What are some of the major themes that emerge from the text of the poems "Next Please" and "Ambulances"?

**Q 4.** Describe the poetic style and language employed in the prescribed poems by Philip Larkin.

**Q 5.** Explain with reference to context:

a) "Always too eager for the future, we

Pick up bad habits of expectancy.
Something is always approaching; every day."

b) "Closed like confessionals, they thread
Loud noons of cities, giving back
None of the glances they absorb.
Light glossy grey, arms on a plaque,
They come to rest at any kerb:
All streets in time are visited."

c) "And sense the solving emptiness
That lies just under all we do,
And for a second get it whole,
So permanent and blank and true."

**Q 6.** Write short notes on the following:

a) The Movement Poets

b) Philip Larkin as a Movement poet

c) Idea of 'Death' in the poems "Next Please" and "Ambulances" by Larkin.

**Q 7.** Provide a critical reception of Philip Larkin's poetry.

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# UNIT 15: SEAMUS HEANEY: "AFTER A KILLING"

## UNIT STRUCTURE


15.1 Learning Objectives

15.2 Introduction

15.3 Seamus Heaney: The Poet

15.4 Reading the Poems prescribed1

15.5 Major Themes

15.6 Heaney's Poetic Style

15.7 Reception of Heaney

15.8 Let Us Sum Up

15.9 Further Reading

15.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

15.11 Possible Questions


## 15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of the Irish poet Seamus Heaney
- explain the main aspects of modern poetry in terms of Heaney's poetry
- interpret the poem "After a Killing" in terms of its different aspects
- identify the themes that consist in the concerns of Heaney as a poet
- discuss the poem in its nuanced totality.

## 15.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the last unit of the course on modern poetry. In this unit, you will read about Seamus Heaney, and one of his most important poems "After a Killing". The intensity of the Irish experience is portrayed in most of the works of Heaney, who was born on April 13, 1939 on a family farm in Northern Ireland, about thirty miles northwest of Belfast. The Catholic family into which he was born was also part of the majority that lived in the local area in relative harmony with their Protestant neighbours. Yet since an early

age, Heaney felt the tension between these protestant groups and himself because of their divergent views on politics and religion, and their different languages and literary traditions. The present poem is the first of a three-poem series "Triptych", and refers to the killing of the British Ambassador Christopher Ewart-Biggs in July 1976 by the Provisional Irish Republican Army. A bomb was placed under his car, and Ewart-Biggs and his secretary Judith Cook were killed in the attack. This was one of the many acts of violence taking place in Ireland (both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland) perpetrated by both Catholics and Protestant groups on each other since the 1960s. However, by the time you finish writing this unit, you will find that besides telling the story of a murder, this poem also beautifully exemplifies Heaney's art of poetic writing.

## 15.3 SEAMUS HEANEY: THE POET

In the following subsections, you will get to read briefly about some aspects of Heaney's life and works.

[The following biography of Heaney is derived largely from Andrew Haggerty's account of the poet's life in *Great World Writers: Twentieth Century. Volume: 4*, ed. Patrick M. O'Neil, New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2004, pp. 559-574, and from another such account at http://www.gale.cengage.com/free_resources/poets/bio/heaney_s.htm, and for the more recent events in the poet's life, from a biography of the poet at http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/211]

**His Life:**

Seamus (pronounced *Shay*-mus) Justin Heaney (*Hee*-nee) was born on April 13, 1939, near Ulster, Northern Ireland, to Patrick and Margaret Heaney, at the 50-acre farm called Mossbawn that they owned. He was the oldest of nine children. Apart from being a farmer, Heaney's father was also a successful cattle trader. The family belonged to the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. He attended St. Columb's College, a boarding school in the city of Derry, in 1951, and in 1957 entered Queen's University of Belfast, graduating in 1961 with first-class honours in English literature. This

education gave him access to the English, Irish, and American letters, giving him a firm grounding in Latin, Anglo-Saxon, and Irish Gaelic. This is what enabled him to skilfully translate Old English, Irish, and Greek classics to English. Heaney earned his teacher's certificate in English in 1962 from St. Josephs College of Education, Belfast, after which he taught at the secondary level for a year and returned to St. Joseph's as a lecturer in English. In 1966, however, Heaney joined Queens University.

While at Belfast, Heaney became acquainted with writers like Derek Mahon and Michael Longley, who, like Heaney himself, would later emerge as major Irish poets. During this period, Heaney's first volume of poetry, *Eleven Poems*, appeared in 1965. In 1966, he published *Death of a Naturalist*, which made him visible to an international audience, winning among other prizes the E. C. Gregory Award in 1967. In the meantime, in 1965, Heaney married Marie Devlin, and their sons Michael and Christopher were born in 1966 and 1968, while their daughter Catherine was born in 1973.

Partly because of the Troubles erupting in Northern Ireland (discussed later in this unit), in 1972, Heaney, resigned from his job at Queen's University and moved from Belfast to the Southern part of The Republic of Ireland (Glanmore in County Wicklow). Another reason that he cited for this move was the desire to test himself as a poet without resorting to the security of an academic job. An encouraging factor for this was his experience as a visiting lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1970 and 1971, and also the success of his third volume of poetry, *Door into the Dark* (1969).

While living at Glanmore, Heaney made his living through freelance writing and invitations to read and lecture both at home and in the United States of America. In 1975, he once again returned to teaching at Carysfort College in Dublin, where he was made the head of the English department the next year. At this time, he also shifted from Glanmore to Dublin. However, Heaney continued to voice his concerns in his poetry regarding the situation of his homeland, i.e. Northern Ireland. In *North* (1975), Heaney addressed the Troubles directly, attracting controversy and criticism but also praise

and admiration. *North* won several awards, including the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize. His next work, *Field Work*, appearing in 1979, also addressed the roots of political and sectarian violence in the Northern Ireland.

Heaney was awarded an honorary doctorate in 1982 by Queens University as a sign of a more general recognition as an important modern poet. He left Carysfort in 1981 to Harvard University as a visiting professor. In 1985 at Harvard, he was appointed the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory. In 1989, Oxford University made him the professor of poetry for five-year tenure, and in 1995, Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. Apart from *Field Work* and the earlier collections, his major works include *Station Island* (1984), *The Haw Lantern* (1987), *Seeing Things* (1991), *The Spirit Level* (1996) and *Electric Light* (2001). He also published collections of essays and miscellaneous writings like *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978* (1980), and *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose, 1971–2001* (2002), as well as a rendering of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, entitled *The Cure at Troy*, produced by the Field Day theatre group (founded by the Northern Irish playwright Brian Friel and the well-known actor Stephen Rea) in 1990.

In the 2000s, and after Heaney wrote two more collections of poetry, namely—*District and Circle* (2006), and *Human Chain* (2010). Very recently in June 2012, Heaney has received the Lifetime Recognition Award from the Griffin Trust for Excellence.



**LET US KNOW**

Bernard O'donoghue in his introduction to *Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* writes:

"When Seamus Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, the citation famously paid tribute to his combination of 'lyrical beauty and ethical depth which exalt everyday miracles and the living past'. This captures with remarkable economy not only Heaney's pre-eminent strengths, but also the two imperatives between which his own commentary and the criticism of him have fluctuated. In the Preface to *Finders Keepers: Selected*

*Prose 1971– 2001* Heaney described the choice between the ethical and the aesthetic again, quoting from his Foreword to the prose collection *Preoccupations* in 1980: 'How should a poet properly live and write? What is his relationship to be to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world?' By quoting the earlier Foreword verbatim, Heaney was making it clear that his abiding concerns have remained unchanged."

**His Works:**

Heaney is a poet who deliberately adopts a clear personal voice to articulate extremely political themes, primary among them the troubled Northern Ireland and the violence that it experienced in the peak of the Troubles (discussed later in this unit) and that still has not been fully resolved till date. At the same time, rural Ireland, and particularly his own experience at his family's farm, is prominent in his poems, especially those that were written early in his career. In one of his most famous poems "Digging", Heaney introduces a metaphor that frequents his poetry:

"Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it."

Digging here relates to digging into his own memory, into his family lineage, into his and Ireland's past, and into the "deeper levels of legend and myth which shape the character of the people of his country." (Carter and McRae: 446). This is a strategy for exploring solutions to troubles in Ireland, but it also implies the poet being a witness to the capacity of violence of humans that almost approaches the 'primitive' (not necessarily negative in this case but incorporating the sense of being deep-rooted and belonging to a pre-colonial, pre-modern way of life).

Even before he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, Heaney was regarded as one of the finest poets writing in English. It was his volume *North* that established Heaney's early reputation. There, he goes back to the Nordic and Celtic roots of Ireland in order to account for the imperial conquest of this culture through the English language. In *Field Work*, Heaney

presents his impressions of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and uses the theme of the pastoral in order to reinforce the severity in which violence enters into people's private lives and transform the home itself into a locus of terror and death. The mythical and the religious also collaborate with the pastoral, as aptly demonstrated in "Triptych", from which the present poem is derived. By this time, Heaney was also incorporating matters relating to the finding of bog bodies in Northern Europe (as well as P. V. Glob's book on them titled *The Bog People* that came out in the 1969) and in Britain into his 'bog poems', most notable among them being "The Tollund Man". The bog bodies, claimed to be killed as ritual sacrifices by Glob, were of people belonging to ancient cultures, and for Heaney, became apt metaphors of the present-day victims of the Troubles in Ireland.

In his essays and other prose writings (in such collections as *Preoccupations*) and lectures, including "Crediting Poetry", his Nobel Prize lecture, Heaney is perceptive though at times tending to be polemical. Key themes in these writings are the role of a poet and the purpose of poetry, the dynamics between the community and the individual, the working of memory in shaping one's ideas of place and nationhood, the language used to evoke their setting, and so on. Two of Heaney's most well known essays, "Englands of the Mind" and "The Redress of Poetry" that address these issues are discussed later in the unit. In all this, there is the crucial assertion of Irishness that is characteristic of most modern writing in Ireland, Whether in the North or in the Republic.

Heaney's first volume after winning the Nobel Prize was *The Spirit Level*, which brought together the spiritual and pragmatic sides of the poet. Here, Heaney illustrates "how, growing up a Catholic in a divided province, then becoming an emblematic exile in England and America, has given him the capacity to voice images of universal healing rather than division, to find 'personal solutions to a shared crisis, momentary stays against confusion'" (Carter and McRae: 447). The volume *Opened Ground* (1998) collects his poems written between 1966to 1996. His translation of *Beowulf* was also well-received, as was the subsequent volume of poems, *Electric Light*.



## LET US KNOW

**Following is a List of Key Works of Heaney**

**Poetry:**

1965 *Eleven Poems*

1966 *Death of a Naturalist*

1969 *Door into the Dark*

1972 *Wintering Out*

1975 *North*

1979 *Field Work*

1980 *Poems, 1965-1975*

1984 *Station Island*

1987 *The Haw Island*

1990 *New Selected Poems, 1966-1987*

1991 *Seeing Things*

1966 *The Spirit level*

1999 *Open Ground: Selected Poems, 1966-1996*

2001 *Electric Light*

2006 *Distance and Circle*

2010 *Human Chain*

**Essays and Criticism:**

1975 The Fire i' the Flint: Reflections on the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins

1980 Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978

1988 The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings

1995 The Redress of Poetry

1995 Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture

2002 Finders Keepers: Selected Prose, 1971-2001



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 1:** What is the most important political theme that runs as an undercurrent in Heaney's poetry? What is the meaning of 'Digging'?

**Q 2:** What is the significance of Heaney's prose writings as reflected through his *Preoccupations?*

## 15.4 READING THE POEMS PRESCRIBED

**"After a Killing"**

There they were, as if our memory hatched them,
As if the unquiet founders walked again:
Two young men with rifles on the hill,
Profane and bracing as instruments.

Who's sorry for our trouble?
Who dreamt that we might dwell among ourselves
In rain and scoured light and wind-dried stones?
Basalt, blood, water, headstones, leeches.

In that neuter original loneliness
From Brandon to Dunseverick
I think of small-eyed survivor flowers,
The pined-for, unmolested orchid.

I see a stone house by a pier.
Elbow room. Broad window light.
The heart lifts. You walk twenty yards
To the boats and buy mackerel.
And today the girl walks in home to us
Carrying a basket full of new potatoes,
Three tight green cabbages, and carrots
With the tops and mould still fresh on them.

You have read that this poem tells about Ewart-Biggs who was killed in an attack. This was one of the many acts of violence taking place in Ireland (both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland) perpetrated by both Catholics and Protestant groups on each other from the 1960s. Inspired by the American civil rights movement over the course of the 1960s, Catholics, who were a minority in Northern Ireland, began to demonstrate against the unequal treatment they received from the Protestant Unionist government. These protests grew in intensity, and in 1969, the British troops were called in to impose order. The ensuing conflict became known as "the Troubles" which also saw the emergence of the terror outfit the Provisional IRA. The Troubles were characterised by guerrilla violence on the one hand, and extreme counterproductive security measures by the Unionist forces on the other. The Irish nationalists believed that there should be no British presence on the island of Ireland while the Unionists, who were largely though not exclusively Protestant, believed that Northern Ireland should remain part of the United Kingdom. While Heaney himself is Catholic and has expressed some cautious sympathy for Irish nationalism (and thereby aligning himself in a way with Yeats and the Irish struggle for independence in the early decades of the 20$^{th}$ century), he is extremely conscious of the all-pervasive nature of the violence which knows no sides.

Heaney suggests that the victims of the Troubles are much like the ancient victims of pagan sacrifices (referring to the bog bodies that were recovered in Ireland and Northern Europe during the 1960s). In both societies, violence has become normalised in that the victims are seen as ritual sacrifices or martyrs for the cause. However, Heaney finds this normalisation disturbing since in celebrating their deaths as martyrs they become part of a pattern and, lose their value as individuals. Heaney's poetry (like the present poem) explores the dilemmas of public mourning and remembrance through the use of the elegiac voice which is at the same time self-questioning:

"Who's sorry for our trouble?
Who dreamt that we might dwell among ourselves
In rain and scoured light and wind-dried stones?"

The two young men brandishing their rifles are seen in terms of the killers of Ewart-Biggs, but also bring back to memory the violence of the struggle for independence; but now the violence is too immediate and too real to be idealised.

Heaney's comments on Hughes and the other poets discussed in his essay "Englands of the Mind" (in *Preoccupations*) can be seen as applicable to himself too. When he talks about the continuity of an older England unique to each of the three poets with the present England, it can be by extension applied to Heaney's own imagining of Ireland as well. When Heaney looks at Ireland in "After a Killing" it is not merely Northern Ireland that he visualises but many different Irelands, chief among them the Ireland that was united in the pre-independence era as well as a mythic Ireland that evokes a sense of origin and rootedness:

> "In that neuter original loneliness
> From Brandon to Dunseverick
> I think of small-eyed survivor flowers,
> The pined-for, unmolested orchid."

*Dunseverick* is a place near the Giant's Causeway in County Antrim, Northern Ireland, and Brandon is a village on the northern coast of the Dingle Peninsula in County Kerry, a county in the south-west region of Ireland (i.e. the Republic of Ireland). Thus, it becomes evident that the 'Ireland of the mind' visualised by Heaney is one that does away with political boundaries that split the initial nation as thought of by early Irish nationalists. This imagined Ireland is one, which is both resilient but at the same time ideal and exotic, implying the unreachability and untenability of such an ideal in the long run. At the same time, such a figuration allows Heaney to establish connections between the past and present and between places and the emotional connection people have with them.

Another aspect of Heaney's vision of Ireland is the importance he lays on place names and their ability to evoke the past and connect one's personal memories of a place with the cultural memory attached to it. Here the place names Brandon and Dunseverick accomplish this, as can be

seen from the above reading. This refers predominantly to one's instinctive sense of connection with a place that cannot be explained through clear rational terms. However, more than the latter, this intuitive relation goes far deeper in one's psychic and emotional experience of a place than a more superficial rational relationship. However, the two may not be in conflict with each other at all times, though there remains a little tension between the two. The rational experience of a place fixes it within the ambit of the local, the immediately palpable, and the present, while an intuitive experience or sense of connection brings with it aspects of the mythic and the legendary. In this sense, the two are complementary, as can be seen in the superimposition of a primitive, original Ireland on the now-split territory of Ireland and Northern Ireland in the present poem. Heaney discusses at length this aspect in his essay "The Sense of Place" (also in *Preoccupations*):

> I think there are two ways in which place is known and cherished, two ways in which may be complementary but which are just as likely to be antipathetic. One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other learned, literate and conscious. In the literary sensibility, both are likely to co-exist in a conscious and unconscious tension... (Heaney: 131)

Again, Ireland in Heaney comes across as a feminine entity (as critics like Patricia Coughlan and Raphael Ingelbien have pointed out). In "After a Killing", this can be seen in the pastoral scene that closes the poem with a hope for peace and a return to one's organic relatedness to nature. This scene foregrounds the young woman carrying fresh produce, making her a figure approaching the classical image of Ceres as well as a mythical projection of Ireland.

From Heaney's perspective, the poet has a certain role to play in a society torn apart by violence, like that of Northern Ireland. This is a tricky role since Heaney believes that while poetry and poets should remain outside of the actively and aggressively political, they cannot and should not do away with an awareness or the consciousness of the political. While the poet is unable to offer political solutions, nevertheless s/he can explore the historical, mythical and psychic roots of a crisis in order to investigate its hidden causes. Poetry becomes a space where such an introspection can

take place, where critical issues can be examined. In this, Heaney visualises the nature of poetry as being socially responsible but at the same time, creatively free. This idea is explored in such an essay as "The Redress of Poetry":

"Poetry...is arbitrary and marks time in every possible sense of that phrase. It does not say to the accusing crowd or to the helpless accused, 'Now a solution will take place'; it does not propose to be instrumental or effective. Instead, in the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we wish to happen, poetry holds a attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves." (Heaney in Andrews (Ed.): 119).

Something of this can be seen in the poet's question as to who would take responsibility for their troubles (in "After a Killing"). Taken in association with the second section it not a question directed at an outsider but is directed at oneself, and at one's own community. This demands a self-examination, which will be the only way out of the seemingly irretrievable solution.

For Heaney, in spite of all political burdens contemporary poets like him carry, "poetry cannot afford to lose its fundamentally self-delighting inventiveness, its joy in being a process of language as well as a representation of things in the world" (Heaney in Andrews (Ed.): 119). The purpose of the poet in times of violence such as can be seen in Northern Ireland is to remain somewhat apart so that s/he can interpret the hidden roots of the violence s/he observes. There is a tremendous responsibility in this that is not to be avoided, which is why Heaney is critical of the intelligent and educated middle-class who try to gloss over the sheer violence of the Troubles by either turning a blind eye to them or by veiling it with blasé talk (see for example this aspect in the Sybil's comments in the second section of "Triptych"). Everyday language undergoes a failure in such a case since it lacks the ability to adequately explain such violence and therefore, it is the poet's task to arrive at such a language, so that through it the necessary conditions for peace and reconciliation as well as negotiation can be articulated.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 3:** Do you think that the poem "After a Killing" was inspired by a real act of killing?

**Q 4:** What are Heaney's views on deaths and violence?

**Q 5:** Do you feel that Heaney is distinctively conscious of his sense of place?

## 15.5 MAJOR THEMES

The following are some of the dominant themes in the poem about which you are reading in this unit.

**The Past:**

Heaney frequently explores the manner in which the past can haunt the present. In "After a Killing" the present killings and the picture of the two young men with rifles immediately conjures in the poet's mind the similarly violent past of Ireland during its struggle for freedom from British rule. This is not necessarily negative; in fact, the retrieval of the past is at times seen as a strategy through which one can explore the identity of the Irish nation that is at the centre of the Troubles. It also suggests the coming together of the personal and the communal (in the sense of belonging to the community). In this context, "digging" and the bog become dominant tropes of the retrieval of different layers of the past. There is no single or homogenous past but a repository of different cultural practices at different points of time, and the poet, in unearthing that history, is like an archaeologist who digs up from within the bog layers and layers of artefacts belonging to different cultures at different periods but buried and preserved within single place. This digging into the past is in order to disinter truths about the present, about one's family and community, and about nature. Heaney's attempt at constructing the Troubles as ancient and tribal in origin (refer to that extract from the poem) can thus be placed into this context. At the same time, Heaney maintains an attitude of reverence to the past as well.



**LET US KNOW**

Heaney read in 1969 *The Bog People* by P. V. Glob, a study of perfectly preserved bodies belonging to the Iron Age in the peat bogs at Jutland in Northern Europe. Glob's book carried photographs of the dead people, who were thought to be victims of ritual sacrifice. The first of Heaney's poems to reflect on these images was "The Tollund Man" in *Wintering Out*, in which he imagines visiting Aarhus where the bodies are kept. Heaney however felt uncertain about uncritically equating these bodies with the victims of the Troubles, echoing the common dilemma for the Northern Irish writer – "if they wrote about the violence, they were accused of exploiting suffering for their artistic purposes; if they ignored it, they were guilty of ivory-tower indifference".

**Nature in Heaney's Poetry:**

For Heaney nature is wild and unexplainable and may sometimes appear beautiful or comforting, but it can also be grotesque and alien. Terry Gifford argues that Heaney uses natural imagery "not only as subject matter but as his medium for thinking" (Gifford: 101). The poetic process that creates tensions through poetic devices like sounds and metaphors (see Heaney's Nobel lecture entitled "Crediting Poetry" available at the Nobel Prize website) embody these life-sustaining energies within nature itself. Gifford argues that it is this tension and access to nature that create "the warmth and compassion of poems of love and grief that emerges from Heaney's retreat to what his wife calls the 'wilderness' of Glanmore" that is "the pastoral source of poems that are to be read in the context of the killings and bigotry of contemporary Ireland" (Gifford: 101). This pastoral is significantly qualified by Heaney. Finally, Heaney's nature imagery can be read as representing "organic processes of dissolution", i.e., death as a natural process and part of a cycle, and therefore it is through natural imagery that a demand is made to "confront corruption ('the melt of shells', the internment camp, the tank, the interrogator, the killer, that all appear in *Station Island*)" (Gifford: 102).

**The Pastoral:**

A related theme in Heaney is the presence of the pastoral in his poetry. A number of Heaney's poems focus on farm chores and labour, such as "Digging". Through these descriptions of rural workers and their tasks and through the contemplation of natural phenomena Heaney "[celebrates] the life force through earthly things" (Haggerty in O'Neil Ed.: 569). However, Heaney's description of the pastoral does not emphasise its benign nature; rather, he shows how nature can be repellent and disillusioning:

> "Who dreamt that we might dwell among ourselves
> In rain and scoured light and wind-dried stones?"

However, this has a therapeutic effect on the poet since through this the speaker attains greater knowledge of himself and of the world around him. The pastoral at one level seems to guarantee a safe return to that mythical "original neuter loneliness" without the presence of violence and at the same time assures a peaceful present and another return to the organic life of a rural agricultural environment in the last two stanzas of "After a Killing". However, this return is not all that it seems – this is the significant qualification of the pastoral's retreat to older values and an older, more organic and peaceful way of life in Heaney's poetry. The apparent peacefulness of these two stanzas is qualified by the presence of the two gunmen in this part of "Triptych" that is immediately followed by diverse expressions disillusionment with regard to society, politics and religion articulated in the second and third part of the series. Thus in this poem, it is the anti-pastoral that dominates, undercutting the pastoral images and the conventions that they seem to evoke.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 6:** How, according to Heaney, does the sense of a past influence a poet?

**Q 7:** Explain Heaney's views on nature.

## 15.6 HEANEY'S POETIC STYLE

Heaney adopts a deliberately casual style in his poetry, especially in his early poems, which is fore grounded by the 'I' (i.e. a first-person speaker) narrating an experience or event in a rural background in Northern Ireland. This gives a minimalist aspect to the manner in which serious issues like the Troubles and violence in Northern Ireland are approached. By adopting such a technique, Heaney is able to convey the pervasive effect of politics, violence, history, and the past on everyday lives; the general or the public becomes more and more enmeshed with the particular and the personal. Due to this, Heaney's poetry remains highly personal, as he regards the poet's role as someone who necessarily needs to negotiate between the public and the private, the political and the personal, myth and everyday realities, and so on. This is all the more necessary in the particular context of violence in Northern Ireland, which erupted primarily due to political reasons, making it imperative for the poet to retain his political consciousness even in a seemingly apolitical poetic style.

Many of Heaney's poems are elegiac in nature and commemorates people and places known to the poet as well as those who have been the faces of the Troubles by becoming victims or sites of acts of terror (such as can be seen in his volume *Field Work*). As a poet who emphasises the role of memory and the act of remembering (both private and public) this is a significant feature of Heaney's poetry. At the same time, Heaney is very careful in the design of a poem as well, and revisits traditional forms like the sonnet. Moreover, Heaney demonstrates an astute use of sounds and rhythms through his use of poetic devices rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and so on. Heaney also self-consciously brings in a regionalism in his poetry by using the landscape and imagery from not only his native Northern Ireland but the entire island comprising it as well as the Republic of Ireland. The use of Catholic imagery as well as classical imagery is also significant in Heaney as is the rural landscape that is constantly foregrounded in his poetry. With the last can be associated the element of the pastoral, which, however in more addressed in terms of theme than of form, since the form

has now become more or less defunct in our present times (see Terry Gifford's *Pastoral* in the Routledge New Critical Idiom Series).

## 15.7 RECEPTION OF HEANEY [Adapted from O'Donoghue's "Introduction" in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*]

*Death of a Naturalist* (1965) immediately established Heaney as a major new poet, writing with brilliant linguistic power and evocativeness. He was also seen as a regional poet, talking mostly about his country upbringing in County Derry. In his *New Statesman* review of *Death of a Naturalist*, Christopher Ricks said: "the power and precision of his best poems are a delight, and as a first collection Death of a Naturalist is outstanding." Again, C. B. Cox in the *Spectator* stated that the poems exuded "the soil-reek of Ireland." The next book, *Door into the Dark* (1969), confirmed this reputation still further. In The *Times Literary Supplement*, Douglas Dunn said of this volume, "the poems were 'loud with the slap of the spade and sour with the stink of turned earth." Ricks however, cautioned Heaney that he "would 'have to reconcile himself to the fact that *Door into the Dark* will consolidate him as the poet of muddy-booted blackberry-picking", i.e., a poet primarily concentrating on rural landscapes and themes. His *Wintering Out* (1972) also met with the raised expectations of critics – for example, the Irish critic Neil Corcoran called it "the seminal single volume of the post-1970 period of English poetry", but by now, Heaney's strengths were mostly seen as the same: "exactness of description and evocation." However, this volume also emphasised place names in the many poems that centred on specific places in Ireland (see Heaney's essay "The Sense of Place" in this regard). Again, a significant perspective emerged in this volume which was a striking departure from the previous volumes–it was a keener sense of a political context that underscored the troubling times the poet was writing in. In the words of Seamus Deane, "although 'political echoes are audible in *Death of a Naturalist* and in *Door into the Dark*, there is no consciousness of politics as such, and certainly no political consciousness until *Wintering Out* and *North*'".

The critical reception of Heaney (after *North*, 1972) became less unanimous and effusive, and many critics, like Seamus Deane and Terence Brown, saw guilt as a major element in the poet's "self-characterisation". For example, Ciaran Carson in his review of *North* in the *Honest Ulsterman*, said that "Heaney had laid himself open to the charge (in fact Carson did not literally level it himself) of being 'the laureate of violence – a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing…the world of megalithic doorways and charming noble barbarity'". However, Anthony Thwaite in *The Times Literary Supplement* saw it as "a superior continuation of the linguistic and descriptive virtues in the earlier books, with 'all the sensuousness of Mr. Heaney's earlier work, but refined and cut back to the bone'". Robert Lowell, in the *London Observer*, saw the volume bringing out "'a new kind of political poetry by the best Irish poet since W. B. Yeats'". The controversy regarding *North* was primarily what has been seen as "'the aestheticisation of violence', a charge most famously made in Irish poetry against the conclusion of Yeats' 'Easter 1916', that, in the bloody fighting in Dublin, 'a terrible beauty is born'".

By the late 1970s, when his new volume *Field Work* came out, Heaney was attempting a different kind of style and subject. This book was seen as a delayed response to the Bloody Sunday massacre of 1972, and an explanation for Heaney's shifting from Belfast to Glanmore in the Irish Republic, seen as an act of escapism by many. But by 1979, he wanted to start anew, as he told his interviewer James Randall: "'in the new book Field Work, I very deliberately set out to lengthen the line again because the narrow line was becoming habit…I wanted to turn out, to go out, and I wanted to pitch the voice out … a return to an opener voice and to a more – I don't want to say public – but a more social voice.'" The antithesis here was "not so much between public and private as between two kinds of public position: the political and what he calls the social". From this point onwards, Heaney's writing became increasingly linked to this kind of self-commentary. Heaney's next books, *Station Island* (1984) and *Sweeney Astray* (1983), are again deeply concerned with" issues of public answerability and guilt".

By this time, criticism of Heaney became more wide-ranging. On the one hand, Heaney's work was seen in more general terms as a continuation of "the Yeatsian conflict between artistic freedom and public responsibility." On the other, though the critic Declan Kiberd argued that "a virtuous political standpoint is not simply a matter of claiming to be in doubt". Neil Corcoran also published an essay on this aspect of Heaney. *Sweeney Astray* dealt with issues of poetic vocation, religious duty, and public responsibility. In 1988 Heaney's *The Government of the Tongue*, his most concentrated critical book, explored yet again the rights and obligations of the writer, whether in the East or the West. It also brought to mind the critical debate "about Heaney's place as poet: whether he ought to take a more or less committed stance towards Irish politics". In *Seeing Things* (1991), Heaney took a decisive position regarding artistic freedom, privileging the marvellous over the ordinary. Again, the principle of balance was the central concern of his Oxford lectures, delivered as Professor of Poetry between 1989 and 1994, and published as *The Redress of Poetry*, the title essay of which has been discussed earlier. From the next book *The Spirit Level* (1996) onwards, Heaney became increasingly pessimistic, especially in relation to politics both local and global. His *Electric Light* in 2001 is "dominated by the pastoral genre; but it is pastoral seen as a grim politics". It is also "dominated by tragedy", and comprises "eclogues (a forum for political debate as well as the bucolic) and elegies".

At this time, Heaney was also translating *Beowulf*, which came out in 1999, and was one of his most acclaimed successes. *District and Circle*, which was published, was seen as reinforcing "the death-shadowed theme, with much of the book taking place in the Underground or afterlife". Heaney's poems have also been the subject of feminist criticism, with critics like Patricia Coughlan taking issue with Heaney's projection of Ireland in terms of a passive woman.



## 15.8 LET US SUM UP

As you finish reading this unit, you must have understood that the intensity of the Irish experience is best portrayed in the poem "After a Killing" which help in recounting the tension between the Catholics and Protestants that resulted in many acts of violence both in Northern Ireland, and in the Republic of Ireland. You have read about the life and work of Seamus Heaney and must be now aware of how to place a poem like "After a Killing" in the larger contexts of Heaney's experiences in Northern Ireland. This poem also beautifully exemplifies Heaney's art of poetic writing in which the general or the public becomes more and more enmeshed with the particular and the personal. Regarding the major themes of the poem, you have learnt that Heaney frequently explores the manner in which the past can haunt the present. Besides, the political underpinning in the poem, the use of the idea of nature as 'wild' and the use of the pastoral, are some other important aspects of this poem. As is so explicit in the poem "After a Killing", the role of memory and the act of remembering (both private and public) are significant features of Heaney's poetry.



## 15.9 FURTHER READING

1) Andrews, Elmer. (Ed.). (1998). *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*. New York: Columbia University Press.

2) Carter, Ronald, and John McRae. (2001). *The Routledge History of Literature in English: Britain and Ireland*, Second Edition. London and New York: Routledge.

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5) Heaney, Seamus. (1980). *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978*. London: Faber and Faber

6) Ingelbien, Raphael. (1999). "Mapping the Misreadings: Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney, and Nationhood". *Contemporary Literature*. Vol. 40, No.4, pp. 627-658.

7) O'Donoghue, Bernard. (Ed.). (2004). *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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## 15.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

**Ans to Q 1:** Heaney clearly articulates his views regarding the troubled Northern Ireland and the violence that it experienced… …"Digging", is used as a metaphor that frequents his poetry… …it relates to digging into his own memory, into his family lineage, into his and Ireland's past, and into the deeper levels of legend and myth which shape the character of the people of his country.

**Ans to Q 2:** It is in these prose works that Heaney reflects on the role of a poet and the purpose of poetry, the dynamics between the community and the individual, the working of memory in shaping one's ideas of place and nationhood, the language used to evoke their setting, and so on. Two of Heaney's most well-known essays, "Englands of the Mind" and "The Redress of Poetry" address these issues in detail.

**Ans to Q 3:** Yes… …the poem was inspired by the killing of Ewart-Biggs during the violence between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland perpetrated by both Catholics and Protestant groups… …the Catholics (like Heaney) were a minority in Northern Ireland, began to demonstrate against the unequal treatment they received from the Protestant Unionist Government… …in 1969, British troops were

called in to impose order… …the troubles were characterised by guerrilla violence on the one hand and extreme counterproductive security measures by the Unionist forces on the other.

**Ans to Q 4:** Heaney suggests that the victims of the Troubles are much like the ancient victims of pagan sacrifices… …in both societies violence has become normalised in that the victims are seen as ritual sacrifices or martyrs for the cause… …Heaney finds this normalisation disturbing since in celebrating their deaths as martyrs they become part of a pattern and, lose their value as individuals…. … "After a Killing" explores the dilemmas of public mourning and remembrance through the use of the elegiac voice which is at the same time self-questioning:

**Ans to Q 5:** Yes… …Heaney's lays stress on place names and their ability to evoke the past… …Place names like Brandon and Dunseverick accomplish this… …in case of Heaney this relation goes far deeper in one's psychic and emotional experience of a place than a more superficial rational relationship…. …the rational experience of a place fixes it within the ambit of the local, while an intuitive experience or sense of connection brings with it aspects of the mythic and the legendary.

**Ans to Q 6:** Heaney frequently explores the manner in which the past can haunt the present… … "After a Killing" present the picture of the two young men with rifles… …this immediately conjures in the poet's mind the similarly violent past of Ireland during its struggle for freedom from British rule… …the past also suggests the coming together of the personal and the communal… …digging into the past is a way to disinter truths about the present, about one's family and community, and about nature.

**Ans to Q 7:** For Heaney, nature is wild and beautiful, but also alien and unexplainable… … Terry Gifford states that Heaney uses natural imagery "not only as subject matter but as his medium for thinking"… … "Crediting Poetry" embodies the life-sustaining energies within nature itself… …use of the pastoral is significantly qualified by Heaney.



## 15.11 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

**Q 1:** Comment critically on Heaney's use of the pastoral in his poetry in the context of the violent troubles in Northern Ireland that he witnesses.

**Q 2:** Analyse the use of memory and the past in the poetry of Heaney.

**Q 3:** How does Heaney approach the idea of Irishness in his poetry? Give a critical account with relevant examples from his poems.

**Q 4:** What is the meaning of 'digging' in the context of Heaney's poetry?

**Q 5:** Heaney is a poet deliberately adopts a clear personal voice to articulate extremely political themes. Discuss.

*** ***** ***



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