PG EG S4-04 (DSE)

TWO YEAR MASTER'S DEGREE COURSE

(CBCS in Accordance with NEP 2020)

SEMESTER-IV

MODERN EUROPEAN LITERATURE

ENGLISH

Padmanath Gohainbaruah School of Humanities

KRISHNA KANTA HANDIQUI STATE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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DSE (Option A) : MODERN EUROPEAN LITERATURE

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COURSE INTRODUCTION : [Adapted from M. H. Abrams]

This course introduces us to Modern European Literature. However, we shall have to begin by first referring to the different Aesthetic Movements that influenced both art and literature towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. Initially, the chief headquarters of the Movements was in France. Opposing the dominance of scientific thinking, and in defiance of the widespread indifference or hostility of the middle-class society of their time to any art that was not useful or did not teach moral values, the French writers developed the view that a work of art is the supreme value among human products precisely because it is self-sufficient and has no use or moral aim outside its own being. The end of a work of art is simply to exist in its formal perfection; that is, to be beautiful and to be contemplated as an end in itself. A rallying cry of Aestheticism became the phrase “art for art’s sake”. However, with modernism, there also emerged varied types of revolt against the established beliefs as contained in various cultural products including literature.

M. H. Abrams has given a comprehensive view of this revolt. He states that literary historians locate the beginning of the modernist revolt as far back as the 1890s, but most agree that what is called high modernism, often marked by an unexampled range and rapidity of change, came after the World War I. The year 1922 alone was signalised by the simultaneous appearance of such monuments of modernist innovation as James Joyce’s *Ulysses,* T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land,* and Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room,* as well as many other experimental works of literature. The catastrophe of the war had shaken faith in the moral basis, coherence, and durability of Western civilization and raised doubts about the adequacy of traditional literary modes to represent the harsh and dissonant realities of the post-war world. T. S. Eliot wrote in a review of Joyce’s *Ulysses* in 1923 that the inherited mode of ordering a literary work, which assumed a relatively coherent and stable social order, could not accord with “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.” In *The Waste Land* (1922), Eliot replaced the standard syntactic flow of poetic language by fragmented utterances, and substituted for the traditional coherence of poetic structure a deliberate dislocation of parts, in which very diverse components are related by connections that are left to the reader to discover, or invent.

Major works of modernist fiction, following Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939), subvert the basic conventions of earlier prose fiction by breaking up the narrative continuity, departing from the standard ways of representing characters and violating the traditional syntax and coherence of narrative language with the help of Stream of consciousness and other innovative modes of narration. Gertrude Stein—often linked with Joyce, Pound, Eliot, and Woolf as a trail-blazing modernist—experimented with automatic writing (writing that has been freed from control by the conscious, purposive mind) and other modes that achieved their effects by violating the norms of standard English syntax and sentence structure.

Among other European and American writers who are central representatives of modernism are the novelists Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, André Gide, Franz Kafka, Dorothy Richardson, and William Faulkner; the poets Stéphane Mallarmé, William Butler Yeats, Rainier Maria Rilke, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stevens; and the dramatists August Strindberg, Luigi Pirandello, Eugene O'Neill, and Bertolt Brecht. Their new forms of literary construction and rendering had obvious parallels in the violation of representational conventions in the artistic movements of expressionism and surrealism, in the modernist paintings and sculpture of Cubism, Futurism, and Abstract Expressionism, and in the violations of standard conventions of melody, harmony, and rhythm by the modernist musical composers Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and their radical followers.

A prominent feature of modernism is the phenomenon called the **Avant Garde** (a military metaphor: "advance-guard"); that is, a small, self-conscious group of artists and authors who deliberately undertake, in Ezra Pound's phrase, to "make it new." By violating the accepted conventions and proprieties, not only of art but of social discourse, they set out to create ever-new artistic forms and styles and to introduce hitherto neglected, and sometimes forbidden, subject matter. Frequently, avant-garde artists represent themselves as "alienated" from the established order, against which they assert their own autonomy; a prominent aim is to shock the sensibilities of the conventional reader and to challenge the norms and pieties of the dominant bourgeois culture.

The term **postmodernism** is often applied to the literature and art after World War II (1939-45), when the effects on Western morale of the first war were greatly exacerbated by the experience of Nazi totalitarianism and mass extermination, the threat of total destruction by the atomic bomb, the progressive devastation of the natural environment, and the ominous fact of overpopulation. Postmodernism involves not only a continuation, sometimes carried to an extreme, of the counter traditional experiments of modernism, but also diverse attempts to break away from modernist forms which had, inevitably, become in their turn conventional, as well as to overthrow the elitism of modernist "high art" by recourse to the models of "mass culture" in film, television, newspaper cartoons, and popular music. Many of the works of postmodern literature—by Jorge Luis Borges, Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, Roland Barthes, and many others—so blend literary genres, cultural and stylistic levels, the serious and the playful, that they resist classification according to traditional literary rubrics. And these literary anomalies are paralleled in other arts by phenomena like pop art, op art, the musical compositions of John Cage, and the films of Jean-Luc Godard and other directors. An undertaking in some postmodernist writings—prominently in Samuel Beckett and other authors of the literature of the *absurd*—is to subvert the foundations of our accepted modes of thought and experience so as to reveal the meaninglessness of existence and the underlying "abyss," or "void," or "nothingness" on which any supposed security is conceived to be precariously suspended. Postmodernism in literature and the arts has parallels withthe movement known as poststructuralism in linguistic and literary theory; poststructuralists undertake to

subvert the foundations of language in order to show that its seeming meaningfulness dissipates, for a rigorous inquirer, into a play of conflicting indeterminacies, or else to show that all forms of cultural discourse are manifestations of the ideology, or of the relations and constructions of power, in contemporary society.

On the basis of the background provided above, this course shall introduce us to some landmarks of Modern European literature. All those writers have greatly contributed to the development of what can be emphatically called World Literature. As with the other prescribed texts of this MA English Programme, we need to be aware of the issues raised in the texts besides also being familiar with the different art aesthetic movements or modes of critical thinking that had a bearing on the emergence of many such works.

This course is divided into three Blocks. **Block 1** shall deal with the different Aesthetic Movements; **Block 2** shall deal with Modern European Poetry and Fiction; and **Block 3** shall deal with European Drama.

Block 1comprises four units that deal with the different aesthetic movements that influenced art and literature of the modern times. It is important that we try to understand these movements so that we can read many of the prescribed texts of this course on the basis of what is learnt from this Block.

Units 1:Impressionism, Realism, Symbolism, Naturalismshall discuss terms like Impressionism, Realism, Symbolism and Naturalism. The outbreak of World War I and II, and the unprecedented devastation that occurred challenged the foundations of many belief systems, which further led to a great deal of experiments and innovations on the part of the artists. What followed was a plethora of artistic movements finding their places in an ever-changing world—most notably Impressionism, Realism, Symbolism and Naturalism.

Unit 2: Cubism, Futurism, Vorticism, Imagism shall discuss the idea of Avant Garde and how it introduced many innovative ideas and practices in art and literature. Avant Garde is characterised by non-traditional, aesthetic innovation and initial unacceptability, and it may offer a critique of the relationship between producer and consumer. We shall in this unit also study some of the movements in art such as Cubism, Futurism, Vorticism and Imagism—characterised by their contributions to the Avant-Garde traditions in Europe and other parts of the world.

Unit 3: Expressionism, Dadaism and Surrealism, Existentialism and Absurdism shall inform that the turn of the 20thcentury was a time rife with unprecedented changes in society. The outbreak of World War I, the possibility of a second War and the devastation that ensued, challenged the foundations of the belief systems in many cultures which led to a great deal of experimentation and exploration by artists

with morality and in defining what exactly Art should be and do for a culture. What followed from this was a litany of artistic movements that strived to find their places in an ever-changing world—Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Existentialism and Absurdism.

Unit 4: Theories of Modern Drama shall discuss the theories of modern drama. Theories of modern drama emerged as a response to the changing social, political, and psychological landscapes of the late 19th and 20th centuries. Influenced by Realism, Naturalism, Expressionism, and Existentialism, modern drama broke away from classical conventions to reflect the complexities of modern life. Playwrights like Henrik Ibsen, Bertolt Brecht, and Samuel Beckett redefined dramatic structure, character development, and dialogue. Ibsen emphasized social realism, Brecht introduced epic theatre and alienation effect, while Beckett explored absurdity and existential angst. These theories collectively challenged traditional narrative forms, aiming to provoke critical reflection, highlight human struggles, and engage audiences with contemporary issues.

Block 2 comprises a total of six units that deal with European poetry and fiction.

Unit 5:Charles Baudelaire: "Correspondences" shall deal with the French poet Charles Baudelaire and his poem "Correspondences". "Correspondences", which is an important poem in *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil),* indicates a belief that there exists a relationship between the physical world and a spiritual world. From your reading of a poem, you will get to know that Baudelaire's poetry can be considered an antecedent to symbolism.

Unit 6: Federico García Lorca: "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías"shall deal with another European poet Federico Garcia Lorca with reference to his poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias". Federico Garcia Lorca is widely regarded as Spain's most distinguished twentieth-century writer. The poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias"is divided into four sections that have relevance with the four stages of human psyche.

Unit 7:Pablo Neruda: "Ars Poetica"shall introduce the learners to the poem "Ars Poetica" composed by Pablo Neruda. This poem is one of Neruda's most discussed poems that explores the experience of the torment, pain, and death and decay that the artist has to undergo while engaged in the moment of composing poetry or creating art.

Unit 8:Franz Kafka: *The Metamorphosis*shall deal with the German writer Franz Kafka and his short story "The Metamorphosis". Kafka is one of the most powerful voices of literary modernism. Although Kafka hails from Germany, his far fletched influence on the literatures of other countries is worth mentioning. This is the story of a man who, one morning, discovers that he has turned into an insect: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed

into monstrous vermin." This famous and shocking beginning indicates a total subversion of the 19th century realism in storytelling.

Unit 9 & 10: Fyodor Dostoevsky: *Crime and Punishment I*&*II*will introduce us to the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky and his novel *Crime and Punishment.* The novel is based on Raskolnikov, a poor university student who makes a plan to kill an old woman, Alyona Ivanovna—a pawnbroker. Finally, he commits the crime in order to test his own ideas about the notion of conscience, morality and human nature. Following the murder, Raskolnikov undergoes tremendous emotional turmoil, and his sense of guilt and self-doubt makes him confess and suffer the consequences.

Block 3 of this course shall comprise a total of six units that deal with European Drama, discussed in terms of three brilliant playwrights namely – Bertolt Brecht, Henrik Ibsen and Eugene Ionesco.

Units 11 & 12:Bertolt Brecht: *Mother Courage* (Part I& Part II)deal withBertolt Brecht a famous name in 20th century drama. Bertolt Brecht, a German poet, playwright, theatre director, contributed to dramaturgy and theatrical production during the post-war period. Due to his inclination towards Marxism, Brecht is often considered a 'Marxist' playwright who put 'ideology' into dramatic form. His play *Mother Courage and Her Children* which is discussed in detail in Unit 12 is a brilliant rendering of Bertolt Brecht's idea of Epic Theatre.

Units 13 & 14:Henric Ibsen: *Wild Duck* (Part I& Part II)seek to acquaint us with the works of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. As a pioneer of social plays, Henrik Ibsen introduced and dealt with problems of education, marriage, society and most specifically human relationship. In almost all his significant plays, Ibsen deals with a specific issue or problem as can be seen in some of his important plays. These units shall also help you to discuss one of his most important plays *The Wild Duck* in sufficient detail.

Units 15 & 16: Eugene Ionesco: *Chairs* (Part I& Part II)shall discuss the life and works of Eugene Ionesco, a Romanian French playwright, with reference to his play *The Chairs.* Ionesco is credited with having inspired a revolution in the post-war theatre with his first play *La Cantatrice Chauve* or *The Bald Soprano* (1948), where he introduced his innovative technique of the 'anti-play', using things or words in order to stress upon the absurdity of human existence. The play *The Chairs* is an absurdist tragic-farce, in which an old couple is seen arranging chairs in order to accommodate a supposed gathering of guests who have come to hear the Old Man's message to the world.

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: IMPRESSIONISM, REALISM, SYMBOLISM AND NATURALISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

1.1 Learning Objectives

1.2 Introduction

1.3 Impressionism

1.4 Realism

1.5 Symbolism

1.6 Naturalism

1.7 Let Us Sum up

1.8 Further Reading

1.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

1.10 Possible Questions

1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- discuss the term Impressionism and identify the important impressionist thinkers and artists
- explain the term Realism and refer to the important realists
- discuss Symbolism with reference to the important symbolists
- explore the term Naturalism and identify the works often seen as naturalistic.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of the Course Modern European Literature. In this unit, we shall discuss the terms like Impressionism, Realism, Symbolism and Naturalism. We must note that the turn of the 20th century also brought in visible changes in the way people began to perceive civilisation as a whole as well as it its overall goal. The outbreak of World War I and II, and the unprecedented devastation that occurred challenged the foundations of many belief systems, which further led to a great deal of experiments and innovations by artists while defining what exactly Art should

be, mean and do for a culture. What followed from this was a plethora of artistic movements finding their places in an ever-changing world—most notably Impressionism, Realism, Symbolism and Naturalism among others. As we finish reading this unit, we shall be able to discuss these terms with reference to its various specific aspects and important practitioners and how they influenced artistic and literary practices of the 20th century.

1.3 IMPRESSIONISM

As a term, Impressionism is probably derived from French painter Claude Monet's work 'Impression: Soliel Leoant' (first exhibited in Paris in 1874). The Impressionists painters were particularly concerned with the transitory effects of light, and they wished to depict the fleeting impression from a subjective point of view. The French impressionists were the offspring of the realists among the painters. The great realist painter Gustave Courbet held the view that painting is an 'art of sight'. Therefore, it should confine itself to things seen or observed. He strongly opposed Romanticism and could not reconcile to the idea of making a picture out of imagination. Monet made a slight departure and said that pictures were to be 'seen' at the first glance. Because when we see a scene as a whole, the right approach is to see it as a whole before any detail has drawn our attention and made an alteration in the focus of our eye. Painters such as Monet, Sisley and Pissarro are perhaps the greatest impressionists for they sought to capture the fleeting impression of the moment by means of pure spectral colours, which were applied, to the canvass in small irregular brush strokes.

In the field of literature, the term impressionism has been loosely applied to the Symbolists and Imagist poets and to fiction writers using Stream of Consciousness technique. As we have learnt from the previous Semester, the method of the Stream of Consciousness writers such as—James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf and so on was to present through vivid peripheral details the immediate impression of experience derived from the senses without analysis or synthesis, the impression as its is seen or felt in a single fleeting moment. Thus, it has been mentioned that impressionism is the way of writing which does not deal with reality objectively but gives the impressions formed by the author. These writers

are primarily concerned with the mental life of the individual and are therefore detached from social, political or ethical problems. Though not the most remarkable impressionist, Marcel Proust is often called a pioneer of the movement. In his “In Search of Lost Time”, Proust presented a world of imagination to which ideas, observation, characters and even the author’s own character are all subordinate, because human experience has only two spheres: the sphere of recollection and the sphere of anticipation.

In the field of poetry too, impressionism played a major role. According to Alex Preminger, the impressionist poets desired to capture the fleeting impression at the very moment in which sensations are transformed into feelings. Overall, their art is non-intellectual and if carried to the extreme, defies all rational explanation. Instead of naming the thing, an impressionist is concerned with, he describes the effect that it produces. According to Preminger, “Impressionistic poetry aspires to the condition of music, but never attains it since words are in themselves symbols and have rarely direct access to the world of our senses. A poem composed of words that have an established meaning simply cannot be regarded as an abstract symphony of moods, since to regard it as such would mean to negate the very properties by which language is distinguished from other modes of expression.”



LET US KNOW

The impressionists were not interested in a precise representation; the resulting impression depended on the perception of the spectator. The terms impressionist and impressionism have crept into literary criticism, but they are vague terms, which we might well dispense with. The French Symbolist poets along with English poets like Oscar Wilde and Arthur Symons have been called impressionist. The term has also been used to describe the novelist’s technique of concentrating on the inner life of the main character rather than on external reality. Abundant examples of this technique are to be found in the works of James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: With what were the impressionist painters mostly concerned?

Q 2: What is the nature of impressionist literature?

1.4 REALISM

In literature and art, realism is the element, which is concerned with giving a truthful impression of actuality as it appears to the normal human consciousness. Thus, the purpose of a realist, as Hamlet stated, is to 'hold the mirror up to nature'. Realism is based on a theory of knowledge according to which the object revealed by sense perception, exit independently of being perceived or known. Thus, in a realist work, the author assumes an objective interpretation of action excluding his own feelings and normative judgement. Thus, in literature, realism is mostly seen as the portrayal of life with fidelity. It is thus not concerned with idealisation, with rendering things as beautiful when they are not, or in any way presenting-in any guise, as they are not. Overall, one tends to think of realism in terms of the everyday, the normal, the pragmatic.

One may suppose that most writers are concerned with reality. Most epics for example, though it is often about supermen and improbable heroic deeds; most drama, even when it is very stylised, a great deal of lyric poetry, the vast majority of fictional works and so forth are realistic in several sense. However, we can also assume that some literature are more realistic than others. For instance, most of the poetry written by George Crabbe, Kipling and Robert Frost is more realistic than most of the poetry written by Spenser, Keats and Conrad Aiken. The novels of Zola, Gissing and Theodore Dreiser are much more realistic than the works of Huysmans, Firbank and Ivy Compton-Burnett. However, the imaginative flights of bizarre invention that we find in some of Lucian's works, in *Rabelais*, in Voltaire's *Candide*, in H. G. Well's *The War of the Worlds*, in Ray Bradbury's science fiction stories, are not realistic, though they are excellent fantasy based on reality. Occasionally, a writer manages to keep a beautiful and breathtaking balance on that high wire that joins both worlds.

The realist thought that an artist should concern himself with the here and now, with everyday events, with his own environment and with the movements (political, social, etc.) of his time. The anti-Romantic movements in Germany also concentrated attention on the lot of the common man and on the need to present life with all its wants. In general, we can see clearly enough in the works of Immermann, Balzac and Dickens, for instance, what forms the realist attitude was likely to take. The realist novelists paid particular attention to exact documentation, to getting the facts right, and in many ways were continuing in a more intensive and conscientious fashion what Balzac had been doing in *La Comedie Humaine*. Balzac regarded men as a zoologist might and he expressed the intention of following Buffon's work on zoology in order to write a natural history of man. Zola and Maupassant have also been taken as exponents of realism but it is perhaps more correct to regard them as the supreme analysts of the school of Naturalism. Zola's essays in *Le Roman experimental* (1880) are one of the main statements about Naturalism. Realism began sometime in the 1830s and had gathered momentum by the 1850s. During the latter part of the 19th century, realism was a definite trend in European literature. Outside France, the effects of realism are to be seen in the works of Tolstoy, Gogol and Gorki, and, to a lesser extent, in Turgenev, and also in the work of Gissing and the American novelist William Dean Howells.

As far as drama is concerned, realism in the 19th century was a less extreme form of naturalism. Playwrights who favoured realism – Ibsen is a key figure - rejected the concept of the 'well-made play' with its mechanical artifices and its altogether too slick plotting, and rejected exaggerated theatricalism. Ibsen's influence was very great, especially on Shaw and Strindberg and subsequently on a whole generation of prominent 20th century dramatists; not to mention Stanislavsky and the various adaptations of his teachings in method acting.

In the context of Russia, what is known as Socialist Realism, involved the development of specifically Soviet theatre. Classics were to be interpreted in contemporary terms so that they became more relevant to the people. New plays should be about life lived by ordinary people.

Socialist realism suggested the committed propaganda of writers submissive to a particular political regime. Realism also occurs in another important context, namely psychological realism seen in terms of the use of the Stream of Consciousness method.



LET US KNOW

As M. H. Abrams states that Realism is applied by literary critics in two diverse ways:

(1) To identify a movement in the writing of novels during the 19th century that included Honoré de Balzac in France, George Eliot in England, and William Dean Howells in America, and

(2) To designate a recurrent mode, in various eras and literary forms, of representing human life and experience in literature.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: How is realism perceived in literature? Comment.

Q 4: Write a note on realist novels.

1.5 SYMBOLISM

In course 3 of the previous semester, we have read about Symbolism in some length. Symbolism is a loosely organised literary and artistic movement originating in French among a group of French poets in the late 19th century. Gradually, it spread to painting and the theatre, and also influenced 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 direct 20th century heirs of the Symbolists.

We should note 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 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.

The 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 becomes 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.

In prose works, the white whale of Melville's Moby Dick is a kind of symbolic creature. Much of the fiction of William Golding (especially *Lord of the Flies*, *Pincer Martin* and *The Spire*) depends upon powerful symbolism capable of more interpretations than one. To these examples should be added the novels and short stories of Kafka, and the plays of Maeterlinck, Andreyev, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Synge and O'Neill.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: How did Symbolism evolve?

Q 6: Who published the Symbolist Manifesto? State the significance of the Manifesto.

Q 7: How did the French Symbolist poets influence the 20th century literature?

1.6 NATURALISM

The term Naturalism is sometimes used loosely as a synonym for Realism and also with reference to works showing interest in, sympathy with and love for natural beauty as in case with the poetry of Wordsworth. Naturalists tend to preach a belief that everything that exists is part of nature and can be explained by natural and material causes and not by supernatural, spiritual or paranormal causes. In literature, it is believed that Naturalism developed out of Realism. The main influences that went to forming a different point of view were Darwin's biological theories, Comte's application of scientific ideas to the study of society, and Taine's application of deterministic theories to literature. Those in favour of a naturalistic approach to and interpretation of life concentrated on depicting the social environment and dwelt particularly on its deficiencies and on the shortcomings of human beings. The 'naturalist's vision of the estate of man tended to be subjective and was very often sombre.

M. H. Abrams states that Naturalism is sometimes claimed to give an even more accurate depiction of life than realism. However, it also denotes a mode of fiction writing that was developed by a school of writers in accordance with a particular philosophical thesis. Naturalism, a product of post-Darwinian biology in the 19th century, held that human being exist entirely in the order of nature and does not have a soul nor any mode of participating in a religious or spiritual world beyond the natural world; and therefore, that such a being is merely a higher-order animal whose character and behaviour are entirely determined by two kinds of forces, heredity and environment. A person inherits compulsive instincts—especially hunger, the drive to accumulate possessions, and sexuality—and is then subject to the social and economic forces in the family, the class, and the milieu into which that person is born.

The French novelist Émile Zola, beginning in the 1870s, did much to develop this theory in what he called "le roman expérimental" (that is, the novel organised in the mode of a scientific experiment on the behaviour of the characters it depicts). Zola and later naturalistic writers, such as the

Americans—Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser, tried to present their subjects with scientific objectivity and with elaborate documentation, sometimes including an almost medical frankness about activities and bodily functions usually unmentioned in earlier literature. They chose characters who exhibit strong animal drives such as greed and sexual desire, and who are helpless victims both of glandular secretions within and of sociological pressures without. The end of the naturalistic novel is usually "tragic," but not, as in classical and Elizabethan *tragedy,* because of a heroic but losing struggle of the individual mind and will against gods, enemies, and circumstances. Instead, the protagonist of the naturalistic plot, a pawn to multiple compulsions, usually disintegrates, or is wiped out.



LET US KNOW

Zola's influence has been very considerable and is discernible in many plays and novels of the last hundred years. It is particularly noticeable in the work of Maupassant and Huysmans, of George Moore and George Gissing. However, he made his greatest impact in Germany, where Naturalism as a movement was concentrated in one literary school in Berlin and another in Munich. Outside France and Germany, it was apparent in the works of Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Gorki, and across the Atlantic in the novels of Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris and Stephen Crane.

Aspects of the naturalistic selection and management of subject matter and its austere or harsh manner of rendering its materials are apparent in many other modern novels and dramas, such as Hardy's *Jude the Obscure,* 1895 (although Hardy largely substituted a cosmic determinism for biological and environmental determinism), various plays by Eugene O'Neill in the 1920s, and Norman Mailer's novel of World War II, *The Naked and the Dead.* Movements, which opposed to both 19th century realism and naturalism (though some modern works, such as Joyce's *Ulysses,* 1922, combine aspects of all these novelistic modes), are *expressionism* and *symbolism.*



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: How does Naturalism view human beings?

Q 9: What do the naturalistic writers try to present?



1.7 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, we have learnt about the terms Impressionism, Realism, Symbolism and Naturalism. We have learnt that Impressionist painters are particularly concerned with the transitory effects of light, and they wished to depict the fleeting impression from a subjective point of view. The Impressionist writers are therefore primarily concerned with the mental life of the individual and are therefore detached from social, political or ethical problems. While Realism is the element in literature and art, which is concerned with giving a truthful impression of actuality as it appears to the normal human consciousness. 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. Naturalism however tends to preach a belief that everything that exists is part of nature and can be explained by natural and material causes and not by supernatural, spiritual or paranormal causes. In the field of literature, it is believed that Naturalism developed out of Realism. While interpreting many of the European literary works in general and those prescribed for your study in particular, a proper understanding of the terms discussed in this unit shall surely help.



1.8 FURTHER READING

Abrams, M. H. (1999). *A Glossary of Literary Terms.* (7th Edn). Thomson Learning.

Cuddon, J. A. (1998). *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory.* Penguin Books.

Web Resources:

https://www.britannica.com/list/10-modernist-art-movements

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



1.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: They were particularly concerned with the transitory effects of light… …depiction of the fleeting impression from a subjective point of view… …painters such as Monet, Sisley and Pissarro sought to capture the fleeting impression of the moment by means of pure spectral colours which were applied to the canvass in small irregular brush strokes.

Ans to Q 2: Impressionist literature refers to a way of writing which does not deal with reality objectively but gives the impressions formed by the author… …the writers are primarily concerned with the mental life of the individual and are therefore detached from social, political or ethical problems.

Ans to Q 3: In literature, realism is mostly seen as the portrayal of life with fidelity… …the author assumes an objective interpretation of action… …opposes idealisation or rendering things as beautiful when they are not… …realism means the depiction of everyday, the normal, the pragmatic.

Ans to Q 4: The realist novelists paid particular attention to exact documentation, to getting the facts right… …French Zola and Maupassant have also been taken as exponents of realism… …in Russia, the effects of realism are to be seen in the works of Tolstoy, Gogol, Gorki, and Turgenev… …in the American novelist William Dean Howells.

Ans to Q 5: 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 6: 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 7: 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 8: Naturalism held that human being exist entirely in the order of nature… …a human being is merely a higher-order animal whose character and behaviour are entirely determined by heredity and environment… …a person inherits compulsive instincts—especially hunger, anger, possessiveness and sexuality etc. form the family and milieu into which that person is born.

Ans to Q 9: The naturalistic writers present their subjects with scientific objectivity and with elaborate documentation… …They choose characters who exhibit strong animal drives such as greed and sexual desire… …the end of the naturalistic novel is usually tragic.



1.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What does the term Impressionism signify? Discuss with reference to some of the impressionist works of art and literature.

Q 2: The turn of the 20th century brought certain visible changes in the way people perceive civilisation as a whole. Justify your view with reference to the various art movements in the 20th century.

Q 3: Write a note on the meaning of term Realism. How do the realist writers oppose all sorts of idealisation? Discuss.

Q 4: Symbolism is a loosely organised literary and artistic movement originating in French among a group of French poets in the late 19th century. Discuss.

Q 5: Naturalists tend to preach a belief that everything that exists is a part of nature and can be explained by natural and material causes. Give a reasoned answer.

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UNIT 2: CUBISM, FUTURISM, VORTICISM, IMAGISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

2.1 Learning Objectives

2.2 Introduction

2.3 Idea of Avant Garde

2.4 Some Art Movements of the 20th Century

- 2.4.1 Cubism
- 2.4.2 Futurism
- 2.4.3 Vorticism
- 2.4.4 Imagism

2.5 Let us Sum up

2.6 Further Reading

2.7 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

2.8 Possible Questions

2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- discuss the idea of Avant Garde and how it influenced art and literature in the 20th century
- explain the major premises of some 20th century Art Movements namely—Cubism, Futurism, Vorticism and Imagism and assess their contribution to the Avant Garde
- identify the important artists and thinkers associated with the different art movements of the 20th century such as Cubism, Futurism, Vorticism and Imagism.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, our main purpose is to discuss the idea of Avant Garde and how it introduced many innovative ideas and practises in art and literature. The French term Avant Garde or "advance guard" refers to people or works that are experimental, radical, or unorthodox with respect

to art, culture, or society. It may be characterised by non-traditional, aesthetic innovation and initial unacceptability, and it may offer a critique of the relationship between producer and consumer. We shall in this unit also study some of the movements in art such as Cubism, Futurism, Vorticism and Imagism—characterised by their contributions to the Avant-Garde traditions in Europe and other parts of the world. While discussing the art movements we shall adapt from J. A. Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary* Theory, M. H. Abram's *A Glossary of Literary Terms* and *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*.

2.3 IDEA OF AVANT GARDE [Adapted from Wikipedia]

From the introduction of this unit, we have learnt that Avant Garde is a prominent feature of modernism. It relates to a military metaphor: "advance-guard". The term refers to a small, self-conscious group of artists and authors who deliberately undertook, as stated by the modernist poet Ezra Pound, to "make it new." By violating the accepted conventions and proprieties, not only of art but of all types of social discourses, they sought to create innovative and experimental artistic forms and styles and introduce hitherto neglected, and sometimes forbidden, subject matter. Frequently, the avant-garde artists represent themselves as "alienated" from the established order, against which they assert their own autonomy; a prominent aim is to shock the sensibilities of the conventional reader and to challenge the norms and pieties of the dominant bourgeois culture. Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1968) and Peter Burger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984) are neo-Marxist analysis both of modernism and of its distinctive cultural formation, the avant-garde.

The avant-garde artists, writers, composers and thinkers were opposed to mainstream cultural values. Many writers, critics and theorists made assertions about the vanguard culture during the formative years of modernism, although the initial definitive statement on the avant-garde was by a New York based art critic Clement Greenberg in the essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939). Greenberg argued that vanguard culture has historically been opposed to "high" or "mainstream" culture, and that it has also rejected

the artificially synthesised mass culture that has been produced by industrialisation. Each of these media is a direct product of Capitalism and as such, they are driven by the same profit motives of other sectors of manufacturing, not the ideals of true art. For Greenberg, these forms were therefore kitsch: phony, faked or mechanical culture, which often pretended to be more than they were by using formal devices stolen from vanguard culture. For instance, during the 1930s, the advertising industry was quick to take visual mannerisms from surrealism, but this does not mean that 1930s advertising photographs are truly surreal.

The members of the Frankfurt School propounded similar views—Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their essay *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass-Deception* (1944), and also Walter Benjamin in his highly influential "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935, rev. 1939). Where Greenberg used the German word *kitsch* to describe the antithesis of avant-garde culture, members of the Frankfurt School coined the term "mass culture" to indicate that this bogus culture is constantly being manufactured by a newly emerged culture industry (comprising commercial publishing houses, the movie industry, the record industry, and the electronic media). They also pointed out that the rise of this industry meant that artistic excellence was displaced by sales figures as a measure of worth: a novel, for example, was judged meritorious solely on whether it became a best-seller, music succumbed to ratings charts and to the blunt commercial logic of the Gold disc. In this way, the autonomous artistic merit so dear to the vanguardist was abandoned and sales increasingly became the measure, and justification, of everything. Consumer culture now ruled.



LET US KNOW

Avant Garde is an important and much used term in the history of art and literature. It clearly has a military origin ('advance guard') and, as applied to art and literature, denotes exploration, path finding, something new something advanced (ahead of its time) and revolutionary. In 1845, Gabriel-Desire Laverdant

published a work called *De la mission de l'art et du role des artistes*. Here, he wrote: "Art, the expression of society, manifests, in its highest soaring, the most advanced social tendencies: it is the fore runner and the revealer. Therefore, to know whether art worthily fulfils its proper mission as initiator, whether the artist is truly of the avant-garde, one must know where Humanity is going, what the destiny of the human race is…" During the last quarter of the 19th century, the term and concept appear in both cultural and political contexts. Gradually, the cultural-artistic meaning displaced the socio-political meaning. For a long time, it has been commonplace to refer to avant-garde art and literature. Nowadays, we are accustomed to think of the symbolist poets Verlaine, Rimbaud and Mallarme as the first members of the avant-garde; likewise the playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd and novelists like Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor and Nathalie Sarraute.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What does the term Avant Garde refer to?

Q 2: How did the Frankfurt school react to the idea of 'mass culture'?

2.4 SOME ART MOVEMENTS OF THE 20TH CENTURY

In the following, we shall discuss some of the important art movements of the 20th century.

2.4.1 Cubism

One of the best-known art movements of the Modernist era, Cubism has come to be associated with one name in particular, Pablo Picasso. However, it should be duly noted that Georges Braque was also a leader of the movement and that he and Picasso worked so well off of one another that, at the height of Cubism's reign, their paintings are practically indistinguishable from one another. It's often noted that Cubism was ushered in a definitive movement with the revelation of Picasso's *Les Demoiselles*

d'Avignon (1907), which shows nude women in a fractured perspective and which demonstrates a significant African influence.

However, the movement did not receive its name until 1908, when, art critic Louis Vauxcelles depicted Braque's *House at L'Estaque* as being fashioned from cubes. The central aims of the Cubists were to discard the conventions of the past to merely mimic nature and to start in a new vein to highlight the flat dimensionality of the canvas. This effect was achieved through the use of various conflicting vantage points. They painted pictures of common objects such as musical instruments, pitchers, bottles, and the human figure. As they progressed in their work, Braque and Picasso adopted the use of a monochromatic scale to emphasise their focus on the inherent structure of their works. Though commonly associated with painting, Cubism had lasting effects on many sculptors and architects of the time.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: What are the central aims of the Cubists?

2.4.2 Futurism

Futurism is perhaps one of the most controversial movements of the Modernist era. Initially, it was a literary movement originating in Italy at the beginning of the 20th century. Its long-term influences were to be seen in other arts, particularly painting and music. At a cursory glance, it liked humans to machines and vice versa in order to embrace change, speed, and innovation in society while discarding artistic and cultural forms and traditions of the past. However, at the centre of the Futurist platform was an endorsement of war and misogyny. The term Futurism was coined in a 1909 manifesto by Filippo Marinetti (1876-1944). Marinetti, who founded the periodical Poesia in 1905. The first and major manifesto of futurism was drawn up by him and published in *Le Figaro* in Paris in

1909. Subsequently, several other manifestos followed. They advocated a complete break with tradition and aimed at new forms, new subjects and new styles in keeping with the advent of a mechanistic age. They extolled dynamism, the machine (and machinery in general), speed (there was a speed cult) and the splendour of war and patriotism.

It was however not limited to just one art form, but in fact was embraced by sculptors, architects, painters, and writers. Paintings were typically of automobiles, trains, animals, dancers, and large crowds; and painters borrowed the fragmented and intersecting planes from Cubism in combination with the vibrant and expressive colours of Fauvism in order to glorify the virtues of speed and dynamic movement. Writers focused on ridding their poetry of what they saw as unnecessary elements such as adjectives and adverbs so that the emphasis could rest on the action of infinitive verbs. This technique in conjunction with the integration of mathematical symbols allowed them to make more declarative statements with a great sense of audacity. Although originally ardent in their affirmation of the virtues of war, the Futurists lost steam as the devastation of WW I became realised.

The movement became politically fascistic and also had some indirect effect on Dadaism, Expressionism and Surrealism. It seems not to have had all that much influence on literature except in Russia, where it provoked vociferous activity from 1910 under the leadership of Viktor Khlebnikov (1885-1922). The Russian Futurists were against symbolism, mysticism and the cult of 'pure' beauty. They set out to shock people. The manifesto of 1912 was titled "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" and was intended as a literary and cultural purge. Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy et al. were to be chucked 'overboard'. After the October Revolution, many Futurists had official positions in control of literature but the Party did not care for their avant-garde policies. The movement died out in the 1920s.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Who coined the term Futurism? How did the Futurists view human beings?

Q 5: How is the form of Futurist painting?

2.4.3 Vorticism

It was a specifically English artistic movement, since its mouthpiece was the famous London-based magazine *Blast: The Review of the Great English Vortex* (1914 and 1915). Vorticism followed in the same vein as Futurism in that it relished in the innovative advances of the machine age and embraced the possible virtues of dynamic change that were to follow. It was founded right before the start of WW I by the celebrated painter Wyndham Lewis and the ubiquitous modernist poet Ezra Pound. However, whereas the Futurists originated in France and Italy and then spread out over the continent to Russia, Vorticism remained located in London. The Vorticists took pride on being independent of similar movements. In their literature, they utilised bare-bones vocabulary that resonated in likeness to the mechanical forms found in English shipyards and factories, and, in their writings as well as their paintings, the Vorticists espoused abstraction as the only way to sever ties with the dominant and suffocating Victorian past so that they could advance to a new era. However, Vorticism, like Futurism, struggled to cope with the incomprehensible destruction during WW I that was a result of the new machines, which they so highly praised. Some of the early poems of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot were also published in *Blast* and Pound used it to elaborate his theory of the image. As WW I came to an end and as the Vorticists like T. E. Hulme and Gaudler Brseska, died in action, Vorticism became limited to only a few by the beginning of the 1920s.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: How founded Vorticism? How did they view literature?

2.4.4 Imagism [Adapted from *New Princeton Encyclopaedia*, 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 7: Who are the imagist poets? Mention the characteristics of Imagist poetry.

Q 8: What are some of the main concerns of the Imagists?



2.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have learnt about the idea of Avant Garde and how it revolted against established rules and norms of the society. Avant Garde introduced many innovative ideas and practises in art and literature. As part of the Avant Garde thinking, there also developed various non-traditional aesthetic innovations and experiments reflecting different art and literary movements such as Cubism, Futurism, Vorticism and Imagism. A careful reading of these movements will help us to understand the various contours of modernism and its influence on literary practises of the 20th century.



2.6 FURTHER READING

Abrams, M. H. (1999). *A Glossary of Literary Terms.* (7th Edn). Thomson Learning.

Cuddon, J. A. (1998). *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory.* Penguin Books.

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

Web Resources:

https://www.britannica.com/list/10-modernist-art-movements

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avant-garde



2.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: The term refers to a small, self-conscious group of artists and authors who deliberately violated the accepted conventions and proprieties, not only of art but of all types of social discourses… …they tried to create innovative and experimental artistic forms and styles and introduce hitherto neglected, and sometimes forbidden, subject matter.

Ans to Q 2: The Frankfurt School indicated that "mass culture" refers to bogus culture constantly being manufactured by a newly emerged culture industry… …the rise of the industry meant that artistic excellence was displaced by sales figures as a measure of worth… …a novel, for example, was judged meritorious solely on whether it became a best-seller…

Ans to Q 3: The central aims of the Cubists were to discard the conventions of the past to merely mimic nature and to start in a new vein to highlight the flat dimensionality of the canvas… …they used various conflicting vantage points and painted pictures of common objects such as musical instruments, pitchers, bottles, and the human figure.

Ans to Q 4: Filippo Marinetti… …it likened humans to machines and vice versa in order to embrace change, speed, and innovation in society while discarding artistic and cultural forms and traditions of the past. However, at the centre of the Futurist platform was an endorsement of war and misogyny.

Ans to Q 5: Futurist Paintings were typically of automobiles, trains, animals, dancers, and large crowds; and painters borrowed the fragmented and intersecting planes from Cubism in combination with the vibrant and expressive colours of Fauvism in order to glorify the virtues of speed and dynamic movement.

Ans to Q 6: Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound… they utilised bare-bones vocabulary that resonated in likeness to the mechanical forms found in English shipyards and factories… …they espoused abstraction as

the only way to sever ties with the dominant and suffocating Victorian past so that they could advance to a new era.

Ans to Q 7: 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 8: 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."



2.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Write a detail note on the emergence of the Avant Garde as a prominent feature of Modernism.

Q 2: Avant Garde is an important and much used term in the history of art and literature. Discuss.

Q 3: How did the various art movements of the 20th century provide experimental, radical, and unorthodox response to art, culture and society? Discuss.

Q 4: Why is Futurism often called a controversial movement of the modernist era? Discuss.

Q 5: Discuss the important concerns of Imagist poetry with particular reference to the Imagist poets.

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UNIT 3: EXPRESSIONISM, DADAISM AND SURREALISM, EXISTENTIALISM AND ABSURDISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

3.1 Learning Objectives

3.2 Introduction

3.3 Expressionism

3.4 Dadaism and Surrealism

3.5 Existentialism and Absurdism

3.6 Let us Sum up

3.7 Further Reading

3.8 Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

3.9 Possible Questions

3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- identify the major objectives of Expressionism and analyse its impact on literature
- discuss the major premises on which rest the meaning of Dadaism and Surrealism
- make a survey of the concept of Existentialism and discuss how it deals with the existence of men in modern times
- explain the term Absurdism and identify the greatest absurd writers as well as their works

3.2 INTRODUCTION

The turn of the 20th century was a time rife with unprecedented changes in society. The outbreak of World War I, or the supposed War to End All Wars, and the devastation that ensued challenged the foundations of the belief systems in many cultures which led to a great deal of experimentation and exploration by artists with morality and in defining what exactly Art should be and do for a culture. What followed from this was a

litany of artistic movements that strived to find their places in an ever-changing world—Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Existentialism and Absurdism. In this unit, we shall try to discuss these movements so that we can explore how they influenced literary activities throughout Europe and other parts of the world in the 20th centuries. We shall read about the movements mostly from M. H. Abram's *A Glossary of Literary Terms* and J. A. Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory.*

3.3 EXPRESSIONISM

Expressionism, a German movement in literature and the visual arts, which was at its height between 1910 and 1925—that is, in the period just before, during, and after World War I. Its main precursors were artists and writers who had in various ways departed from realistic depictions of life and the world, by incorporating in their art visionary or powerfully emotional states of mind expressed and transmitted by means of distorted representations of the outer world. Among these precursors in painting mention may be made of Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and the Norwegian Edward Munch. Munch's lithograph *The Cry* (1894) depicting, against a bleak and stylised background, a tense figure with a contorted face uttering a scream of pure horror, is often taken to epitomise what became the expressionist mode.

Prominent among the literary precursors of the movement in the 19th century were the French poets Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud, the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and above all the Swedish dramatist August Strindberg. Expressionism itself was never a concerted or well-defined movement. Its central feature was a revolt against the artistic and literary tradition of *realism,* both in subject matter and style. The expressionist artist or writer undertakes to express a personal vision—usually a troubled or tensely emotional vision—of human life and human society. This is done by exaggerating and distorting the objective features of the world, and by embodying violent extremes of mood and feeling. Often the work implies that what is depicted or described represents the experience of an individual standing alone and

afraid in an industrial, technological, and urban society which is disintegrating into chaos. Expressionists who were radical in their politics also projected Utopian views of a future community in a regenerate world.

The Expressionist painters tended to use jagged lines to depict contorted objects and forms, as well as to substitute arbitrary, often lurid colours, for natural hues; among these painters were Emil Nolde, Franz Marc, Oskar Kokoschka, and, for a time, Wassily Kandinsky. Expressionist poets (including the Germans Gottfried Benn and Georg Trakl) departed from standard meter, syntax, and poetic structure to organise their works around symbolic images. Expressionist writers of prose narratives (most eminently Franz Kafka) abandoned standard modes of characterisation and plot for symbolic figures involved in an obsessive world of nightmarish events.

Drama was a prominent and widely influential form of expressionist writing. Among the better-known German playwrights were Georg Kaiser *(Gas, From Morn to Midnight),* Ernst Toller *(Mass Man),* and in his earlier productions Bertolt Brecht. Expressionist dramatists tended to represent anonymous human types instead of individualised characters, to replace plot by episodic renderings of intense and rapidly oscillating emotional states, often to fragment the dialogue into exclamatory and seemingly incoherent sentences or phrases, and to employ masks and abstract or lopsided and sprawling stage sets. The producer Max Reinhardt, although not himself in the movement, directed a number of plays by Strindberg and by German expressionists; in them he inaugurated such modern devices as the revolving stage and special effects in lighting and sound. This mode of German drama had an important influence on the American theatre.

Eugene O'Neill's play *The Emperor Jones* (1920) projected, in a sequence of symbolic episodes, the individual and racial memories of a terrified modern African-American protagonist, and Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923) used non-realistic means to represent a mechanical, sterile, and frightening world as experienced by Mr. Zero, a tiny and helpless cog in the impersonal system of big business. The flexible possibilities of the medium made the motion picture an important vehicle of German

expressionism. Robert Wiene's early expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920)—representing, in ominously distorted settings, the machinations of the satanic head of an insane asylum—as well as Friedrich Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) are often shown in current revivals of films.

Expressionism had begun to fade by 1925 and was finally suppressed in Germany by the Nazis in the early 1930s, but it has continued to exert influence on English and American, as well as European, art and literature. We recognise its effects, direct or indirect, on the writing and staging of such plays as Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman,* as well as on the theatre of the *absurd;* on the poetry of Allen Ginsberg

and other *Beat* writers; on the prose fiction of Samuel Beckett, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., Joseph Heller, and Thomas Pynchon; and on a number of films, manifesting the distorted perceptions and fantasies of disturbed characters, by such directors as Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, and Michelangelo Antonioni.



LET US KNOW

The term Expressionism refers to a movement in Germany very early in the 20th century in which a number of painters seeking to avoid the representation of external reality and, instead, to project themselves and a highly personal vision of the world. The term can be applied to literature, but only judiciously. Briefly summarised, the main principle involved is that expression determines form. Indeed, according to the expressionists, any of the formal rules and elements of writing can be bent or disjointed to suit the purpose. Expressionism dominated the theatre for a time in the 1920s. Theatrically, it was a reaction against Realism and aimed to show inner psychological realities. The origins of this are probably to be found in Strindberg's *The Dream* (1907) and *The Ghost Sonata* (1907). Wedekind's plays of the same period were also strongly expressionistic. He wrote violent anti-bourgeois plays, three of which are chiefly

remembered: *Spring Awakening* (1891), *Lulu* (1895) and *Pandora's Box* (1902).

Expressionistic theories also affected writers like Wyndham Lewis, Virginia Woolf, Frantz Kafka. The more involved and exaggerated prose experiments of James Joyce, William Faulkner and Samuel Beckett also bear some traces of Expressionism. Merely sonic and colour effects in poetry and attempts at synaesthesia where much of the sense is sacrificed for the sake of sound as in some of the works of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Roy Campbell, Edith Sitwell (like "I Do Like to be Beside the Seaside") might also be described as expressionistic.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What are the main objectives of the Expressionist writers?

Q 2: What did the Expressionist dramatists try to do?

Q 3: Who are the precursors of the movement called Expressionism?

3.4 DADAISM AND SURREALISM

Dadaism

Dada is a French word meaning a hobby-horse. Dadaism is a nihilistic movement in art and literature that started in Zurich in 1916 by a Romanian, Tristan Tzara, an Alsatian, Hans Arp, and two Germans, Hugo Ball and Richard Huelsenbeck, and it continued till 1922. It was seen as "a product of hysteria and shock" and was deliberately anti art and anti sense. One of its most significant and characteristic product was the reproduction of the famous painting *Mona Lisa* decorated with a moustache and an obscene caption LKOOQ by Marcel Duchamp. The term was used to signify everything and nothing, or total freedom, anti rules, ideals and traditions.

Dadaism became popular in Paris following World War I. The war came as a holocaust, traditional values were weighed down and men were at the crossroads of history. During the war, Switzerland gave asylum to

several exiled artists. Poets from different European countries such as Hans Richter, Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara and Hans Arp who were sick of the War gathered in Zurich, established a literary club known as 'Cabaret Voltaire' which soon became the forum for a large number of writers. In David Gascoigne's analysis, Dadaism was a delirious revolt against all sorts of accepted norms, "Negativism, revolt, destruction of all values, Dada was a violent protest against art, literature, morals, society. It spat in the eye of the world. Life is a disgusting riddle, but we can ask harder ones, was a Dadaist attitude. To many intelligent men at this time, suicide seemed to be the one remaining solution to the problem of living, and Dada was a spectacular form of suicide, a manifestation of almost lunatic despair."

The basic word in the Dadaist's vocabulary was 'nothing'. The Dadaists opted for psychic automatism as they believed that imagination should be free from the tyranny of reason. Roger Vitrac's *The Mysteries of Love* is a remarkable example of automatic writing. Two lovers are the victim of a hallucination; they see Mussolini and Loyd George cutting off heads. Similarly, in his play *Victor ou les enfants au Pouvoir,* Vitrac narrates a gruesome story of adultery and suicide. In England and America, its influence is discernible in the poetry of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot and in the art of Ernst and Magritte. By 1921, Dadaism as a movement was subsumed by Surrealism. However, its influence was detectable for many years.

Perhaps best summed up by the famous Dadaist poet Hugo Ball, the Dadaist goal of art was not to have art be "an end in itself, but [to be] an opportunity for the true perception and criticism of the times we live in." And surely enough the times of Dadaism were filled with grief, destruction, and chaos, as they witnessed the rampant mass devastation of WWI. The movement was a loosely knit international network that was prominent in Zürich, Switzerland; New York City; Berlin, Cologne, and Hanover, Germany; and Paris. Dadaists were not connected by their styles, mediums, or techniques. Instead, they were connected by their uniform practices and beliefs. They saw themselves as crusaders against rational thought, which they believed to be responsible for the declination of social structures, the growth of corrupt and nationalist politics, and the spread of violence and

war. They challenged and mocked the definition of art and its elitist establishment with such works as Marcel Duchamps *Fountain* (1917), which was a porcelain urinal, and they utilised photomontages, as well as a plethora other artistic mediums, in their public meetings to protest against the nascent Nazi party in Germany. Dadaists fought strongly across the globe against such repressive social institutions, though were written-off by some as merely absurdist and inconsequential based on their plentiful antics and scattered network.

Surrealism

Surrealism as a literary movement began as an offshoot of Dadaism which emerged in 1916 out of disgust with the brutality and destructiveness of the World War I. It was launched as a concerted artistic movement in France by André Breton's *Manifesto on Surrealism* (1924), and set out to engender a negative art and literature that would destroy the false values of modern bourgeois society. Distinguished writers who experimented with surrealistic methods were mostly Frenchmen: apart from Breton, Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, Benjamin Peret and Philippe Soupault. While among the surrealistic painters, mention may be made of Chirico, Max Ernst, Picasso and Salvador Dali. The aim of Surrealism was a revolt against all restraints on free creativity, including logical reason, standard morality, social and artistic conventions and norms, and all control over the artistic process by forethought and intention. To ensure the unhampered operation of the "deep mind," which they regarded as the only source of valid knowledge as well as art, surrealists turned to *automatic writing* (writing delivered over to the promptings of the unconscious mind), and to exploiting the material of dreams, of states of mind between sleep and waking, and of natural or artificially induced hallucinations. The surrealists attempted to express in art and literature the workings of the unconscious mind and to synthesise these workings with the conscious mind. The surrealist allows his work to develop non-logically (rather than illogically) so that the results represent the operations of the unconscious.

The term 'super-realism' was coined by Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918), but, as mentioned above, it was not until 1924 that the poet Andre

Breton issued the first manifesto of surrealism, which recommended that the mind should be liberated from logic and reason. Breton had been influenced by Freudian analysis and had experimented with automatic writing under hypnosis. The surrealists were particularly interested in the study and effects of dreams and hallucinations and also in the interpenetration of the sleeping and waking conditions on the threshold of the conscious mind, that kind of limbo where strange shapes materialise in the gulfs of the mind. In his second manifesto (1929), Breton explained how the surrealist idea was to revitalise the psychic forces by a 'vertiginous descent' into the self in quest of that secret and hidden territory where all that is apparently contradictory in our everyday lives and consciousness will be made plain. There was a 'point' in the mind, he thought, where, beyond realism, one attained a new knowledge.

Surrealism was a revolutionary movement in painting, sculpture, and the other arts, as well as literature; and it often joined forces, although briefly, with one or another revolutionary movement in the political and social realm. The effects of surrealism extended far beyond the small group of its professed adherents such as André Breton, Louis Aragon, and the painter Salvador Dali. The influence, direct or indirect, of surrealist innovations can be found in many modern writers of prose and verse who have broken with conventional modes of artistic organisation to experiment with free association, a broken syntax, on logical and non chronological order, dreamlike and nightmarish sequences, and the juxtaposition of bizarre, shocking, or seemingly unrelated images. In England and America such effects can be found in a wide range of writings, from the poetry of Dylan Thomas to the flights of fantasy, hallucinative writing, startling in consequences, and *black humor* in the novels of Henry Miller, William Burroughs, and Thomas Pynchon.

The long-term influence of surrealism all over the world has been enormous. Apart from poetry, it has affected the novel, the cinema, the theatre, painting and sculpture. A great many writers have continued to explore the territories of the conscious and semiconscious mind; delving into and exposing the private chaos, the individual hell. In doing so they

have often experimented with stream of consciousness techniques. Surrealistic poetry is now rare, but plays and novels often show the influence of surrealism. From the scores of examples available, one may mention the work of Antonin Artaud, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Samuel Beckett, William Burroughs, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Alan Burns and B. S. Johnson.



LET US KNOW

As one of the most famous art movements of the Modernist era, Surrealism has come to be remembered for its production of visceral, eye-grabbing and aesthetic images. Leaping off from the absurdist inclinations of the Dadaists and the psychoanalytical writings of Sigmund Freud, André Breton, a well-known poet and critic of his time, published "The Surrealist Manifesto" in 1924, in which he declared the group's intention to unite consciousness with unconsciousness so that the realms of dream and fancy could merge with everyday reality in an "absolute reality, a surreality." Although they were best remembered for the work of their painters—such as Jean Arp, Max Ernst, and André Masson—Surrealists worked with a variety of mediums, including poetry, literature, sculpture, and the then-new medium of film.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: How did David Gascoigne analyse the term Dadaism?

Q 5: Mention the main aim of Surrealism.

Q 6: What were some of the stylistic innovations of the Surrealists?

3.5 EXISTENTIALISM AND ABSURDISM

Existentialism

The term existentialism means 'pertaining to existence' and mostly derives from the thinking of Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55), especially in his

books *Fear and Trembling* (1843), *The Concept of Dread* (1844) and *Sickness Unto Death* (1848). In these and other works, Kierkegaard was trying to negate a belief that through God and in God, men may find freedom from tension and discontent—a belief that prevailed in much Christian thinking over many centuries. After him, existential thought was greatly expanded at the beginning of the 20th century by Heidegger and Jaspers, whose ideas in turn influenced a large number of European philosophers and in whose work are to be found the sources of atheistic existentialism.

An important feature of atheistic existentialism is the argument that existence precedes essence (the reverse of many traditional forms of philosophy) for it is held that man fashions his own existence and only exists by so doing, and, in that process, and by the choice of what he does or does not do, gives essence to that existence. Jean-Paul Sartre has been a pioneer of modern existentialism expressed through his novels, plays and philosophical writings. In Sartre's view, man is born into a kind of void, a mud. He has the liberty to remain in this mud and thus lead a passive, supine, acquiescent existence in a 'semi-conscious' state and in which he is scarcely aware of himself. However, he may come out of his subjective, passive situation in which case he would 'stand out from', become increasingly aware of himself and, conceivably, experience metaphysical and moral anguish. If so, he would then have a sense of the absurdity of his predicament and suffer despair. In *L'Existentialisme est une humanisme* (1946) Sartre expressed the belief that man can emerge from his passive and indeterminate condition and, by an act of will, become engaged; whereupon he is committed (through engagement) to some action and part in social and political life. Through commitment, man provides a reason and a structure for his existence and thus helps to integrate society. In 1946, Sartre founded the review 'Les Temps Modernes', a medium for existentialist writings.

Apart from Sartre, some of the main exponents of existentialism have been Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty and Jean Wahl. The main exponent of Christian existentialism has been Gabriel Marcel, the philosopher and dramatist, who has written some brilliant critical analyses of Sartre's point of view, and who, in his Existence et objectivite (1921),

was very probably the first to introduce the term existentialisme into the vocabulary of French philosophy.

Absurdism:

Absurdism shares some concepts, and a common theoretical template, with existentialism and nihilism. It has its origins in the works of the existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Absurdism is a belief system that was born of the European existentialist movement that ensued, specifically when Camus rejected certain aspects of that philosophical line of thought and published his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The aftermath of World War II provided the social environment that stimulated absurdist views and allowed for their popular development, especially in the devastated country of France. As a philosophy, Absurdism furthermore explores the fundamental nature of the Absurd and how individuals should respond to it. Camus stated that individuals should embrace the absurd condition of human existence while also defiantly continuing to explore and search for meaning. However, in the field of literature, the term is applied to a number of works in drama and prose fiction, which have in common the sense that the human condition is essentially absurd, and that this condition can be adequately represented only in works of literature that are themselves absurd. Both the mood and dramaturgy of absurdity were anticipated as early as 1896 in Alfred Jarry's French play *Ubu Roi (Ubu the King).* The literature has its roots also in the movements of *expressionism* and *surrealism,* as well as in the fiction, written in the 1920s, of Franz Kafka *(The Trial, Metamorphosis).*

As stated above, the current movement, however, emerged in France after the horrors of World War II, as a rebellion against essential beliefs and values of traditional culture and traditional literature. This earlier tradition had included the assumptions that human beings are rational creatures who live in an at least partially intelligible universe, that they are part of an ordered social structure, and that they may be capable of heroism and dignity even in defeat. After the 1940s, however, there was a widespread tendency, especially prominent in the *existential philosophy* of men of letters such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, to view a human being as an

isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe, to conceive the universe as possessing no inherent truth, value, or meaning, and to represent human life—in its fruitless search for purpose and meaning, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end—as an existence which is both anguished and absurd.

As Camus said in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity Or as Eugène Ionesco, French author of *The Bald Soprano* (1949), *The Lesson* (1951), and other plays in the theater of the absurd, has put it: "Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless." Ionesco also said, in commenting on the mixture of moods in the literature of the absurd: "People drowning in meaninglessness can only be grotesque; their sufferings can only appear tragic by derision."

Samuel Beckett (1906-89), the most eminent and influential writer in this mode, both in drama and in prose fiction, was an Irishman living in Paris who often wrote in French and then translated his works into English. His plays, such as *Waiting for Godot* (1954) and *Endgame* (1958), project the irrationalism, helplessness, and absurdity of life in dramatic forms that reject realistic settings, logical reasoning, or a coherently evolving plot. Beckett's prose fiction, such as *Malone Dies* (1958) and *The Unnamable* (1960), present an *antihero* who plays out the absurd moves of the end game of civilisation in a network, which tends to undermine the coherence of its medium, language itself. However, typically Beckett's characters carry on, even if in a life without purpose, trying to make sense of the senseless and to communicate the incommunicable.

Another French playwright of the absurd was Jean Genet (who combined absurdism and diabolism); some of the early dramatic works of the Englishman Harold Pinter and the American Edward Albee are in a similar mode. The plays of Tom Stoppard, such as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) and *Travesties* (1974), exploit the devices of absurdist

theatre more for comic than philosophical ends. There are also affinities with this movement in the numerous recent works, which exploit black comedy or black humour: baleful, naive, or inept characters in a fantastic or nightmarish modern world play out their roles in what Ionesco called a "tragic farce," in which the events are often simultaneously comic, horrifying, and absurd. Examples are Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Thomas Pynchon's *V* (1963), John Irving's *The World According to Garp* (1978), and some of the novels by the German Günter Grass and the Americans Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and John Barth. Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* is an example of black comedy in the cinema. More recently, some playwrights living in totalitarian regimes have used absurdist techniques to register social and political protest.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: What is Jean Paul Sartre's view on man's existence?

Q 8: Who were the forerunners of the Theatre of the Absurd?



3.6 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, we have learnt that modernist artistic and literary movements like Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Existentialism and Absurdism—all developed out of the specific socio-historical period of the early 20th century. The outbreak of World War I and the unprecedented devastation it brought challenged the foundations of many established belief systems and order. Finally, this led to a great deal of experimentation and exploration by both the artists and writers who tried to explore what exactly art should be and mean for a culture. The knowledge we have gained from this unit should be used to properly understand the major aspects of each of these movements, while analysing some of the prescribed literary texts of the 20th century.



3.7 FURTHER READING

Abrams, M. H. (1999). *A Glossary of Literary Terms.* (7th Edn). Thomson Learning.

Cuddon, J. A. (1998). *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory.* Penguin Books.

Web Resources:

https://www.britannica.com/list/10-modernist-art-movements



3.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: To express a personal, troubled or tensely emotional vision of human life… … and human society…. …to exaggerate and distort the objective features of the world… …to offer description of things representing the experience of an individual standing alone and afraid in an industrial, technological, and urban society which is disintegrating into chaos.

Ans to Q 2: Expressionist dramatists tended to represent anonymous human types instead of individualised characters… …replaced plot by episodic renderings of intense and rapidly oscillating emotional states… …fragmented the dialogue into exclamatory and seemingly incoherent sentences or phrases… …employed masks, abstract or lopsided or sprawling stage sets.

Ans to Q 3: Expressionism, a German movement in literature and the visual arts… …main precursors were artists and writers who departed from realistic depictions of life and the world… …they expressed emotional states of mind by means of distorted representations of the outer world… …mention may be made of Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and the Norwegian Edward Munch.

Ans to Q 4: "Negativism, revolt, destruction of all values, Dada was a violent protest against art, literature, morals, society. It spat in the eye of the world. Life is a disgusting riddle, but we can ask harder ones, was a

Dadaist attitude. To many intelligent men at this time, suicide seemed to be the one remaining solution to the problem of living, and Dada was a spectacular form of suicide, a manifestation of almost lunatic despair."

Ans to Q 5: The aim of Surrealism was a revolt against all restraints on free creativity, including logical reason, standard morality, social and artistic conventions and norms, and all control over the artistic process by forethought and intention.

Ans to Q 6: They turned to *automatic writing*… …to exploiting the material of dreams, of states of mind between sleep and waking, and of natural or artificially induced hallucinations… …to express in art and literature the workings of the unconscious mind and to synthesise these workings with the conscious mind… …to develop non-logically (rather than illogically) so that the results represent the operations of the unconscious.

Ans to Q 7: Man is born into a kind of void, a mud… …he has the liberty to remain in this mud and thus lead a passive, supine, acquiescent existence in a 'semi-conscious' state… …he may come out of his subjective, passive situation… …he will experience metaphysical and moral anguish… …he would then have a sense of the absurdity of his predicament and suffer despair.

Ans to Q 8: Irish Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot, Endgame*), French Jean Genet, English Harold Pinter, American Edward Albee, Tom Stoppard (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Travesties).*



3.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the growth and development of Expressionism in Germany and also explain how it influenced art and literature of the 20th century.

Q 2: Expressionism dominated the theatre for a time in the 1920s. Discuss.

Q 3: Discuss the significance of Dadaism and Surrealism as artistic movements of modern times that also made it presence felt in the field of literature.

Q 4: Who is the founder of the Surrealist movement? Do you agree that Surrealism was a revolt against all restraints on free creativity? Discuss with particular reference to of the Surrealist writers wanted to do in their works.

Q 5: Existentialism applies to a vision of the condition and existence of man, his place and function in the world. Discuss.

Q 6: Write a note on the concept of the Absurdism with reference to contents of some of the well-known absurdist literature.

Q 7: Provide a comprehensive note on Absurd Drama with reference to the major exponents.

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UNIT 4: THEORIES OF MODERN DRAMA

UNIT STRUCTURE

1.1 Learning Objectives

1.2 Introduction

1.3 The Emergence of Modern Drama

1.4 Important Continental Movements Influencing Drama

1.5 Important Theorists/Practitioners of Modern Drama

1.6 Let us Sum up

1.7 Further Reading

1.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

1.9 Possible Questions

4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- understand modern drama against the context of different movements in art and literature
- relate the interconnections between different theatre movements
- get introduced to the different major practitioners of modern drama in Europe

4.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the last unit of the Block. In this unit, we shall discuss the theories of modern drama. However, in Course 2 of the previous Semester, we have already discussed modern drama in sufficient detail in the context of Europe. Hence, many of the information provided in this unit shall be repetitive. However, we should assume that a reading of this unit shall help us recollect many of the important aspects related to Modern drama which shall further help us to discuss the prescribed plays in this Course. As we finish reading the unit, we should be in a position to identify the different continental movements and theorists of modern drama. However, for the sake of reference, we shall also read about some of the Movements in Art and Literature which we have already studied in the previous units of the Block.

4.3 THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN DRAMA

Modern drama, as a pan-European and North American theatrical practice, had its genesis somewhere around the last few decades of the 19th century. The literary as well as the socio-political environment of the 19th century is characterised by a sense of discontent with socio-cultural and literary ideals, restless criticism and an intense probing into the disturbances and irregularities in the modern world. This ideological and social turmoil of the time did influence pioneers of the modern theatre like Henrik Ibsen, Hauptman or Gorki, Chekhov or Shaw. The fellow and follower dramatists of these pioneers of modern drama in Europe continued with the tradition of protest and revolt and the diversity of experimentations in their pursuit of the dramatic art.

The modern theatre, as such, is an enormous enterprise strongly characterised by diversity of themes and techniques as well as a good variety of genres. Different literary movements and approaches like Realism and Naturalism, Symbolism, Expressionism and Impressionism, Existentialism, Poetic drama, and many other styles have been part of modern theatre. Besides, many plays exhibit a complex intertwining of many different theatrical styles as well as theoretical approaches. Thus, it is difficult to find a play dealing with pure Realism, or stark Symbolism, or pure Expressionism. Whereas Ibsen shows kinship with Realism and Symbolism, Eugene O'Neill's adheres to Realism and Expressionism, and Strindberg appears to be both naturalist and expressionist. American dramatist Tennessee Williams employs several Brechtian techniques including the alienation effect; Weiss incorporates the Artaudian idea of cruelty within the Brechtian framework of Epic theatre; while Pirandello's attempt at Symbolism makes him a forerunner of the theatre of the Absurd. Theatre in the early 19th century Europe liberated itself from the conventional norms in order to accommodate newer forms of technical and theoretical engagements. These experimentations touched and tested everything that is part of stage production, i.e. acting, music, dance, scenic design, stage lighting, costume design and architecture. Even the interrelationship

between the audience and actors present in the theatre underwent varying combinations and alterations.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What were the factors that influenced the modern playwrights?

1.4 IMPORTANT CONTINENTAL MOVEMENTS INFLUENCING DRAMA

The following is an attempt at explaining the various strands of modern drama in some detail.

Naturalism:

Naturalism can be considered a kind of umbrella term used for various theatrical experimentations undertaken by masters like André Antoine, J. T. Grenin, Otto Brahm, Konstantin Stanislavsky among many others. André Antoine's 'Theatre Libre' in Paris, J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre in London, Otto Brahm's Freie Bühne of Berlin, and Konstantin Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre along with several other independent theatres promoted modern playwrights to perform works outside of commercial theatres. Originated in the 1860s France, as a movement influenced by science, Naturalism viewed social behaviour of men as the product of biological factors. It opposed Romanticism's interest in the expression of human emotion and personal experience. Naturalism drew its inspiration from Darwin's theories of the origin, development of species, their struggle for survival, the process of natural selection, and their dependence on the environment. As such, Naturalism's approach to human experiences and relations appears very clinical in nature. Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen is a major exponent of this movement.

Naturalist theatre gave importance to the use of realistic props and realistic acting on stage. Konstantin Stanislavsky was highly interested in realistic acting; for the performance of Norwegian dramatist Ibsen's plays, he even put on stage Norwegian furniture in order to help actors merge with

their roles. Changes in ensemble acting and vivid crowd scenes were introduced by Georg II, the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen (1826–1914). Naturalism's emphasis on realistic acting fuelled the emergence of a band of modern actresses playing daring female roles. Actresses like Eleanora Duse, Elizabeth Robins, and Eva Le Gallienne often developed their signature styles and roles from women-centric plays like that of Ibsen's.

Realism:

As a literary and artistic movement, Realism attempts to truthfully represent subject matter, without any artificiality and avoiding other artistic conventions or the use of exotic and supernatural elements. As a theatrical movement, Realism is often associated with the representation of the social and psychological problems of ordinary life. It has to be noted here that the line of distinction between Naturalism and Realism in theatre is very narrow and they are often overlapping in their techniques and motives. The Influence of the ideas of Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin and others inspired many artists to theatre from a psychological point of view that focused on the inner dynamics of the characters onstage. Beginning with the Russian playwrights like Ivan Turgenev, Alexander Ostrovsky and Leo Tolstoy, Realism found avid expressions in the works of Emile Zola in France and Henrik Ibsen in Norway in the late 19th Century. With the emergence of writers like George Bernard Shaw and Edward Albee, Realism dominated most of the theatrical productions of the 20th century in Britain and North America.

In Russia, with the establishment of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898, Realism found its first grips much earlier than the rest of the world. The works of Konstantin Stanislavski and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, attempted to reform the Russian stage which was hitherto been dominated by melodrama. Drawing inspiration from André Antoine's Théâtre Libre and other theatre activists, they opened a realistic theatre company, which later became internationally renowned. The production of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* in 1898, where Stanislavski played the role of Trigorin, was hailed by the audience and critics for its fidelity in the delicate representation of everyday life, its intimate and ensemble acting, and the resonance of its

mood of despondent uncertainty with the psychological disposition of the Russian intelligentsia of the time. The company successfully produced many other plays of Chekhov along with Ibsen and Shakespeare. Stanislavski developed a unified system of acting whereby he trained actors to create reliable characterizations for their performances. This system, which he revised throughout his life, was partially founded on the idea of emotional memory; while performing, the actor focuses internally on the character's emotions. Many connected areas like concentration, voice modulation, physical appearance and skills, emotional memory, observation, etc. were part of this approach. His system became very popular in Russia as well as in the U.S. In the U.S., experimentations with his method began in the second decade of the 20th century and many theatre schools and professional companies have continued it throughout the century.

Symbolism:

With Symbolism, modern drama focused on its evocative and suggestive nature, and it brought to the stage rhythmic, playful and introspective language of poetry. Symbolism did not pay attention to the accuracy of props, unlike the Naturalist or Realist trends, and reduced the embellishments on the stage to a few draperies or a few curtains of certain specific colours or even to some symbolic gestures. It emphasised mysticism, subjectivity, and suggestion instead of direct, common speech. In the Symbolist movement, the central tendency of dramatic expression was to de-theatricalise the theatre. The use of language and vocabulary also underwent much experimentation. The Symbolist theatrical stage often transformed itself into a complex site of different forms of arts. For expressing the central themes and essence of the play, and to sustain and enhance particular emotions, dramatists like Adolph Appia, Gordan Craig, and Meyerhold, and many others concentrated on the scene design of their plays. Thus, most of their stage designs showed some kind of complex unions of different art forms. Similarly, Wagner experimented with the flexible properties of light and color in is plays. Stages such as Aurélien Lugné-Poe's Theatre de l'OEuvre in Paris championed simple sets over the Naturalists' cluttered stages while Edward Gordon Craig's abstract sets in

London parallel Symbolist settings. The symbolist theatre gave a new emphasis to the creation of new atmosphere and mood in modern drama. Dramatists like Hauptmann, Strindberg, Claudel, Garcia Lorca, Ghelderode and many others made extensive use of symbols throughout their dramatic careers. Symbolism, as a theatrical movement, was associated with Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949) of Belgium, Madame Rachilde (1860–1953) of France and William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) of Ireland. The surrealist fantasies in Lorca's plays or the grotesque farce in Ghelderode's plays or even the repetitions and pauses in Samuel Beckett's plays were highly symbolic in nature. Symbolism also drew inspiration from the literary and artistic movement of Dadaism and Surrealism. As an opposition to Naturalism and Realism, Symbolism demanded that drama is not merely a copy of real life, it is something more than what is common and mundane. Symbolist plays are performed in such a manner that the audience has to think beyond what is seen or heard on the stage.

The Avant-Garde:

The term Avant-Grade, also known as Experimental Theatre, loosely connects many experimental approaches to the modern theatre since the last part of the 19th century. This umbrella term covers a great number of theatrical experimentations over a vast period. As part of the movement called 'Futurism' under the leadership of F. T. Marinetti (1876–1944) in Italy, human characters were removed from theatre and puppets, machines, and inanimate objects were placed on stage. In Dadaism, which flourished in the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich during World War I, under the leadership of Romanian Tristan Tzara (1896–1963), nonsense poems, musical pieces were produced and masked performances were made on stage. Surrealism focused on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical and dream theories. *King Ubu* (1896) by Alfred Jarry became an iconic surrealist play. Antonin Artaud (1894–1948) from France was one of the most influential dramatists of Surrealism. He created a Theatre of Cruelty – a primal theatre inspired by ancient rituals. Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double* (1938) discusses plague, primitive myths, and Balinese "animated hieroglyphics" in the

context of curing the decadence of modern life. The avant-garde was also associated with progressive art, particularly related to socialism and anarchism. The Futurists in Italy developed association with Fascism, which functions on extreme nationalism and advocates for war. The Russian futurists participated in the Russian October Revolution of 1917 as socialists. On the other hand, the Dadaists opposed war and embraced socialism in order to destroy class-based societies. The Surrealists often expressed their inclination for the communist parties.

German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) is the most influential political playwright of avant-garde movements. With a strong Marxist undercurrent of thought, he experimented with both themes or contents and style of his productions and developed Epic Theatre. Epic Theatre uses a technique that interrupts the flow of plot and acting, and transforms the audience into critics rather than mere observers of the spectacle on stage. From Erwin Piscator, Bertolt Brecht learnt the value of using film and other art forms in theatre. His experimentations later led to the collaborative performances on the theatre stage.

Expressionism:

Expressionism was a byproduct of the different types of experimental techniques employed by the Dadaists, Surrealists as well as the larger group of Symbolists. In Expressionism, the playwrights attempt to look into the mind of the character and discover the inner workings of the person. It takes recourse to the representation of hallucinations, dreams and other modes of subjective experiences. Strindberg's 'dream plays' are some important exponents of this technique as they have developed a whole new dimension of modern drama. Expressionism relies on the depiction of external reality coupled with the illogical and frenzied behavior of the hidden self, which results in the development of an environment of weird angularity and distortion. Linear narrative is replaced by fragmented episodes; centrality of the protagonist is replaced by the multiple and depersonalised abstractions; normal conversation is replaced by epigrammatic and ironic language delivering nervous and explosive dialogues.

Theatre and Cultural Renewal: Ireland

The mass appeal of theatre was used by dramatists for different political, cultural and nationalistic purposes. In Ireland, Abbey Theatre in Dublin, under the leadership of Lady Augusta Gregory and John Millington Synge (1871–1909), focused on establishing cultural independence from England. Lady Gregory's emphasised using Irish language instead of theatrical productions in Ireland. John Millington Synge criticised and subverted the popular romanticised views of the Irish peasantry. His *Playboy of the Western World* created havoc in theatres. W. B. Yeats also participated as a poet and playwright in this Irish nationalist movement.

The Theatre of the Absurd:

Martin Esslin devised and gave the term 'Theatre of the Absurd' to a section of plays written in the 1950s and 1960s. This theatre derived from French philosopher Albert Camus' essay "The Myth of Sisyphus", claims that existence is meaningless and absurd; it ends in "casual slaughter". Playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Adamov, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, Genet, Eugene Ionesco produced plays that questioned the very meaning of man's existence. Most of their plays written in this theatre form share a similar view that man lives in a universe, which is empty of reason and logic. Man's existence is purposeless, it ends purposeless and throughout his existence, he remains confused, spiritually disturbed and obscurely threatened. The essential motive of the 'Theatre of the Absurd' is the reflection of the metaphysical anguish of the contemporary times. In the Post-war modern period, the looming sense of futility and emptiness reflected in the mechanical nature of human beings led them question the purpose of their living. In such a world devoid of reason and logic, man feels isolated as the established values of society, culture, religion fall apart. The Absurd theatre is a strategy to come to terms with that universe.

Absurd writing, as a literary tradition, finds its roots in the Avant Garde experiments in art and literature in 1920s. The Second World War left humanity with the shocking experiences of the disgust, developed with the devaluing of morals, crisis of religious faith, disregard for the socio-cultural

conventions and triviality of human life. It can also be perceived as an effort to restore the significance of myths and traditions to the contemporary age by making men conscious of his true condition in this alienated world. The Absurd theatre achieves this by startling human beings out of their mechanical and complacent reality. The authors of the Absurd plays debunked the old forms and standards that cease to be conclusive and lost their validity. The Absurd Theatre is thus an anti-theatre, which rises against the conventional theatre. It is surreal, illogical and without plot or necessary conflict. The dialogues seem unrelated and nonsensical and defy comprehension. Language loses its functionality; it is inadequate instrument of communication and is reduced to meaningless exchanges. 'Silence' as also used by the dramatists as an effective technique to present the unsolved mysteries of human condition. The unsaid meaning is delivered through ellipses, gaps, and half-finished sentences. Disrupting logic and breaking language to fragments, Absurd drama strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational structures in understanding life.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 2: Write a note on the basic thematic concerns of the Naturalist theatre.

Q 3: What do you understand by the theatre of the Absurd?

Q 4: What are the characteristics of Epic theatre?

1.5 IMPORTANT THEORISTS/PRACTITIONERS OF MODERN DRAMA

In this section, we shall discuss some of the important theorists and practitioners of Modern drama.

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906):

The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen was the most important pioneering figure of modern drama in Europe. Ibsen emerged as a playwright

at a time when Europe was undergoing a spell of drought in the field of successful drama. In Britain, the 19th century was a very prolific period for English literature in terms of poetry, novels and non-fiction; but it was equally barren in the field of drama. Ibsen, hailing from Norway, which did not have any remarkable dramatic tradition, could break that spell of drought and inspired a wave of new writers to experiment with the dramatic form. Ibsen refused to follow the conventional rules of theatre at the time and was determined to forge his own style of drama. There was a growing sense of revolt against the frivolous entertainment on mainstream stages of his time and he could sense the demand by the new intelligentsia for a realistic, serious "thinking" theatre. Ibsen's realist plays, such as *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *Wild Duck*, and *An Enemy of the People*, caused storm in the theatres ad they became highly popular throughout Europe. The success of Ibsen's plays fuelled the formation of new theatres in major cultural capitals like London, Paris and Berlin. Modern theatre soon became an integral part of modern culture in Europe.

Ibsen deviated from the conventional theatrical norms in different ways. He succeeded in innovating three key ingredients – the use of colloquial dialogue, objectivity, and tightness of plot – that helped him establishing his own signature in the field of drama. His audience could recognise and relate to the settings and props he used on the stage, and identify themselves with his characters and narratives. This Realism functioned as the decisive factor behind the success of his plays. Ibsen could successfully rouse the intelligentsia's discomfort by confronting them with the social hypocrisies, the conflict between conventional moral values and the changing values in the context of the world after Darwin. The changing human relations in the industrial-capitalist society are vehemently tested in his plays.

His production of *A Doll's House* in 1879 left the theatergoers and critics with tremendous amount of shock and bewilderment because of it subversion of well-established conventions of family relations as well as plot designs. In many cities, the production of the play roused public anger and even he was compelled to revise his ending scene of the play. His

Ghosts also created disgust among the audience as it exposed the hypocrisies hidden within the polite faces of the middle class civic society. *Ghosts*, with a plot touching upon venereal disease and incestuous relationships, were widely banned in many cities. *Hedda Gabler*, *An Enemy of the People* in 1882 also spoke of the darker aspects of the contemporary society. In his next few plays, *The Wild Duck* (1884), *Rosmersholm* (1887), and *The Lady from the Sea* (1888), Ibsen delved into darker and more psychologically complex depictions of human relations and their social existence.

Federico Garcia Lorca:

The celebrated Spanish playwright Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936) holds a unique place among the greatest dramatists of the 20th century. As a poet and dramatist, he tried to infuse elements of folktale, folk songs into the fabric of the modern times. However, he started his career and also became popular as a poet. His plays written during the last few years of his life made him the most significant voice from Spain in modern drama. Most of his plays portray a dreamlike experience soaked in the mystic Andalusian folklores. His use of bold, profound metaphors and culturally rooted symbols along with the use of music and dance sequences create in his plays a surrealist environment.

With his first Andalusian tragedy *Blood Wedding* (1933), which is an expressionist work that recalls ancient Greek, Renaissance, and Baroque sources, Lorca achieved his first major theatrical success. It is followed by his second Andalucian tragedy, *Yerma* (1934). These plays, including other popular plays like *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1936) are basically rural plays, and they draw on classical forms and archetypal characters moulded to a Spanish rural milieu. During the very short life and career, Lorca built a reputation both at home and abroad as a rising socialist, who believed that the purpose of theatre was to question and challenge societal norms. His political associations got reflected very subtly in the reformative, revolt motifs of his plays. Such political affinities may be considered the causes of his mysterious assassination at a very young age during the Spanish Civil War.

Luigi Pirandello:

The Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello (1867-1935), is counted among the peer group of modern European dramatists. Pirandello did not adhere to any one exclusive theatre technique, but his works incorporate elements of Naturalism and Futurism. He was associated with an Italian theatre company through the *teatro del Grotesco* movement, the theatre that adopts the ancient native Italian tradition of *Commedia Dell'arte.* This association provided him with all necessary environments for his experimentations. Among his other plays, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is the most prominent one.

Pirandello made significant use of puppet-like characters in his plays that allowed him to infuse both reality and fantasy. The puppet nature of the characters in h dramatic art provided him with a means of manipulation, which is essential to the realization of fantasies. For this, he had to depend on certain highly skilled methods of acting, including the capacity for improvisation, which was a central method of Commedia Dell'arte. The conflict between life and mask, broken personalities and disjuncted psyches become the hallmark of the plays of Pirandello. He was dissatisfied with the conventional theatricality because he felt that life, which is constantly changing, is distorted and killed when presented on the stage. He believed that human motives could not be reduced to simple formula; therefore, he wanted all drama to be as fragmentary as life itself. His dramatic technique comprises of his command over art of compression, dexterity in the portrayal of characters and sudden climax. His language is often seen fractured. His powerful artistry along with his concepts and attitudes kept his work alive and transformed it into drama.

Bertolt Brecht:

Bertolt Brecht (1896-1956) is considered one of the most important dramatists of the 20th century because of his experiments with the theatrical media as a tool for spreading social and political messages. He appeared on the scene with an entirely new dramaturgic concept, alienating empathy from the stage, destroying the forth wall convention to demonstrate his

ideologies. He disregarded emotional identification and purgation on the ground that a play should perturb viewers, prompt their critical faculties, unnerve and jolt them out of complacency. He argues in his article 'On the Experimental Theatre' that the function of the conventional theatre was morally and intellectually degrading because, "the more the public was emotionally affected, the less capable it was of learning".

He formulated what became popular as 'Epic Theatre' whose aim is to arouse the attention of the spectator into the irregularities surrounding them and look beyond the habitual way of looking at a thing. Epic theatre tries to disrupt the difference between the stage and the audience and still unite them in mutual enjoyment Brecht frequently opposed the Naturalistic theatre and believed that the theatre should give up its attempt at portrayal of truth on stage. For him it was important for theatres to create a kind of distancing – a certain degree of separate existence from what was happening on the stage so that the spectators would be able to enter into an unusual dramatic experience and would be able to grasp things rather than be mastered by them. This distancing is attained by what the 'alienation effect' or 'verfremdungseffekt', as Brecht calls it. The reaction of the audience out of this alienation effect forms the foundation of Epic theatre. The plays are woven in contrasting episodes juxtaposed with one another. This structure helps the spectators to see, ponder and criticise the play. Placards are used to display the theme on curtains. Music, songs interludes are some other alienating devices employed by Brecht. Some of the significant plays of Brecht are *The Threepenny Opera*, *Life of Galileo*, *Mother Courage and Her Children, The Good Person of Szechwan, The Caucassian Chalk Circle, The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui.* Among them, *Mother Courage and Her Children* is one of the most popular and highly staged plays of the modern times.

Eugene Ionesco

Eugene Ionesco (1909 - 1994), is a Romanian-born French dramatist who is basically known for his expressions of the existential questions of the modern man. His one-act "antiplay" *La Cantatrice Chauve*

(1949) or *The Bald Soprano* inspired a revolution in dramatic themes and techniques and inaugurated the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. In the most famous scene of *The Bald Suprano*, two strangers while exchanging banalities about the weather, where they live, and how many children they have, suddenly arrive at the astonishing discovery that they are indeed husband and wife. Such a scene is one among the series of scenes where Ionesco deals with the recurrent themes of self-estrangement and the difficulty of communication at the modern times. Ionesco developed the 'antilogical' ideas that he presented in *The Bald Soprano* in a number of plays written recurrently. Plays like *La Leçon* (1951; *The Lesson*), *Les Chaises* (1952; *The Chairs*), and *Le Nouveau Locataire* (1955; *The New Tenant*) were expressive of his recurrent existential questions about being, living, and the fear and horror of death. In *The Lesson*, a timid professor uses the meaning he assigns to words to establish tyrannical dominance over an eager female pupil. In *The Chairs*, an elderly couple gathers empty chairs and awaits the arrival of an audience to hear the old man's last message. Giving the responsibility to speak on his behalf, the old man and his wife commit a double suicide. However, the orator turns out to be dumb can speak only gibberish.

His longer plays like *Amédée* (1954), *Tueur sans gages* (1959; *The Killer*), and *Le Rhinocéros* (1959; *Rhinoceros*) lack the dramatic unity he achieved in his one-act plays. His other important works include *Le Roi se meurt* (1962; *Exit the King*), *Le Piéton de l'air* (1963; *A Stroll in the Air*), *La Soif et la faim* (1966; *Thirst and Hunger*), *Jeux de massacre* (1970; *Killing Game*); *Macbett* (1972), which is a retelling of Shakespeare's Macbeth, and *Ce formidable bordel* (1973; *A Hell of a Mess*). Among these, *Rhinoceros*, a play about totalitarianism, is considered as Ionesco's most popular work.

Ionesco's plays are important because of the fact that they have popularised a wide variety of nonrepresentational and surrealistic among audiences conditioned to a Naturalistic convention in the theatre. His tragicomic farces dramatise the absurdity of bourgeois life, the meaninglessness of social conventions, and the futile and mechanical

nature of modern civilization. His plays build on bizarrely illogical or fantastic situations using such devices as the humorous multiplication of objects on stage until they overwhelm the actors. The clichés and tedious maxims of polite conversation surface in improbable or inappropriate contexts to expose the deadening futility of most human communication. Ionesco's later works show less concern with witty intellectual paradox and more with dreams, visions, and exploration of the subconscious.

Samuel Beckett:

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), who wrote in both French and English, is perhaps best known for his plays, especially *En attendant Godot* (1952; *Waiting for Godot*). His most well known works, written between the Second World War and the 1960s were written in French. Beckett's plays revolted against the traditional norms with conventional plot and time and place references. He tried to concentrate on the essential elements of the human condition in dark humorous ways. As a practitioner of the "Theatre of the Absurd", his plays focus on human despair and the will to survive in a hopeless world that equally unintelligible. Bceckett's rise to world fame began with the amazing success of *Waiting for Godot* at the small Théâtre de Babylone in Paris, in January 1953 and soon he became renowned as an absurd playwright.

Beckett's works are concerned primarily with the morbidity, meaninglessness and purposelessness of human existence. He plays test human beings in extreme situations in order to examine the essential aspects of human experience. The subject matter of so much of the world's literature – the social relations between individuals, their manners and possessions, their struggles for rank and position, or the conquest of sexual objects – appeared to Beckett as mere external trappings of existence. These are the accidental and superficial aspects that mask the basic problems and the basic anguish of the human condition. The basic problems for human beings are the challenges of understanding life, understanding being, understanding the nature of being, understanding the true nature of our self – the 'I'.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: In what way, did Henrik Ibsen deviate from conventional theatrical representation?

Q 6: Explain briefly Samuel Beckett's contribution to modernist theatre.



1.6 LET US SUM UP

At the end of this unit, we have come across some basic information about the growth and development of modern drama in Europe, the important dramatic movements and some important personalities associated with modern drama in Europe. Modern drama is a very dynamic field of thematic and technical experimentations performed by dramatists hailing from different parts of Europe during a period spanning from the middle of the 19th century the latter half of the 20th century. Some of the important movements in modern drama include Naturalism, Realism, Symbolism, Expressionism, Theatre of the Absurd, Political Theatre etc. Ibsen is considered the father of modern drama. Some of the important playwrights of the modern times include names like G B Shaw, Garcia Lorca, J M Synge, W B Yeats, Chekov, Luigi Pirandello, Bertolt Brecht, Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and so on.



1.7 FURTHER READING

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1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: The 19th century sense of discontent with socio-cultural and literary ideals… … restless criticism and an intense probing into the disturbances and irregularities in the modern world… …the ideological and social turmoil of the time influenced the pioneers of the modern theatre.

Ans to Q 2: Post-Darwin social context… …industrial, urban, middle class… …thinking intellectuals… …problems inherent in polite societies… …social hypocrisy… …faithful image of society… …Ibsen's plays.

Ans to Q 3: Martin Esslin… …"Myth of Sisyphus"… …meaning of being… …purpose of life – meaninglessness, purposelessness… …obscure existence – fear, angst… …Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter.

Ans to Q 4: Brecht's alienation effect… …loose plot structure… …no forth wall… …audience as participant and critic… …awareness about invisible problems and realities.

Ans to Q 5: Ibsen introduced three key ingredients–the use of colloquial dialogue, objectivity, and tightness of plot… …audience could recognise and relate to the settings and props he used on the stage… …identify themselves with his characters and narratives… …exposed

social hypocrisies, the conflict between conventional moral values and the changing values in the context of the world after Darwin.

Ans to Q 6: Beckett's plays revolted against the traditional norms with conventional plot and time and place references… … presented the essential elements of the human condition in dark humorous ways… …his 'absurd' plays focus on human despair and the will to survive in a hopeless world that equally unintelligible.



1.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Explore the socio-cultural contexts behind the development of Naturalist theatre in Europe.

Q 2: What are the thematic concerns of the theatre of the absurd? How do the absurd playwrights experiment with plot and the stage in order to deal with the philosophical questions? Discuss.

Q 3: Write a detailed note on the theatrical experimentations of Luigi Pirandello with reference to the plays you have read.

Q 4: Discuss the significance of cultural symbols in Lorca's plays.

Q 5: Explore how different movements in modern drama are interconnected.

Q 6: How have the movements in art and literature influenced modern European drama? Discuss in detail.

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UNIT 5: CHARLES BAUDELAIRE: "CORRESPONDENCES"

UNIT STRUCTURE

5.1 Learning Objectives

5.2 Introduction

5.3 Charles Baudelaire: The Poet

- 5.3.1 His Life
- 5.3.2 His Works

5.4 The Poem: "Correspondences"

- 5.4.1 The Text of the Poem
- 5.4.2 Reading the Poem
- 5.4.3 Major Themes
- 5.4.4 Baudelaire's Poetic Style

5.5 Critical Reception of Baudelaire

5.6 Let us Sum up

5.7 Further Reading

5.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

5.9 Possible Questions

5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- reflect on the life and works of Charles Baudelaire
- discuss the various issues related to the poem "Correspondences"
- make an assessment of the reception of the poem and of Baudelaire
- form an idea of how movements such as symbolism and modernism are related to the poetry of Baudelaire
- form an idea of Charles Baudelaire as a major French poet

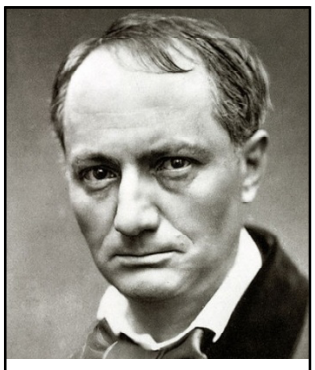
5.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of Block 2 of the course on Modern European Literature. In this unit, we shall discuss the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and his poem "Correspondences". We shall note that Baudelaire undeniably occupies a prominent place among the great poets of the world. Being a remarkable litterateur in the canons of European and world literature, he had rendered tremendous influence on the poets worldwide. Further, he is a significant art critic who had a profound effect on the development of art criticism as well. He also played a vital role in translating the American poet and short-story writer Edgar Allan Poe, and English Romantic writer Thomas de Quincey into French. His literary criticism explored the restrictions and possibilities of the age along with revealing his own aesthetic convictions and practices. Moreover, as Barbara Johnson has opined, Baudelaire did not only extend the range of subjects and emotions available for verse-poetic treatment, but also established the genre of prose poetry as it is known today. Baudelaire contributed to the development of Aestheticism as he believed in the claim made by Edger Allan Poe that 'a poem written solely for the poem's sake'. Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil)* can be seen as the symbolic manifesto of French poetry. "Correspondences", which is an important poem in this collection, indicates a belief that there exists a relationship between the physical world and a spiritual world. By the time we finish reading this unit, we shall learn how such a view on the part of Baudelaire can be seen as an antecedent to Symbolism.

5.3 CHARLES BAUDELAIRE: THE POET

In the following sub-sections, we shall briefly study the life and works of Charles Baudelaire, one of most significant poets in French literature who also contributed to the development of literary modernism in Europe.

5.3.1 His Life



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Charles_Baudelaire

Charles Baudelaire was born in Paris in 1821. His father Joseph-Francois Baudelaire was a senior civil servant and his mother was Caroline Archimbaut Dufays. Baudelaire's father died in 1827 when Baudelaire was only six. The following year, Caroline married Lieutenant Colonel Jacques Aupick, who later became an ambassador of France. Baudelaire had a very cordial attachment to his mother, but he became intensely upset when she married Jacques Aupick. Their family shifted to Lyon in the year 1833 where Baudelaire attended a military boarding school. He was irregular in his studies, sometimes attentive or at times prone to idleness. He returned to Paris in and attended the Louis-le-Grand there. He was expelled from the college, Louis-le-Grand in 1837. He then decided to embark upon literary career instead of his stepfather's wish to be a diplomat.

Baudelaire spent the next two years in 'Latin Quarter' chasing a career as a writer and accumulating debt. Some sources indicate that he contracted syphilis around this time. Subsequently, his parents sent him on ship to Calcutta, India in 1841, as they expected that the experience would help reform his bohemian urges. It provided good impressions of the sea, sailing, and exotic ports, which he later employed in his poetry. However, he returned to Paris in 1842. While he had returned to the native soil, he received a large inheritance. It rendered him to live the life of a rich man. He developed a love for clothing and spent his days in the art galleries and cafes of Paris. Meanwhile, he also started using drugs such as hashish and opium. During that time, Baudelaire fell in love with Jeanne Duval, who inspired the "Black Venus" section of *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil)*. However, he had spent nearly half of his

inheritance by 1844. His family won a court order that appointed a lawyer to manage Baudelaire's fortune and forfeit him little "allowance" for the rest of his life. Subsequently, Baudelaire started to write art criticism, essays, and reviews for various journals in an attempt to supplement his income. His early criticism of contemporary French painter such as Eugene Delacroix earned him a reputation as an important critic. In 1847, he published the autobiographical novella *La Fanfarlo*. He also took part in the 'Revolutions of 1848' and wrote for a revolutionary newspaper. The task was indeed momentary.

His first publications of poetry appeared in different journals in the mid-1840s. In 1854 and 1855, he published translations of Edgar Allan Poe whom he called a "twin soul". His translations were widely praised in France. The first edition of *The Flowers of Evil* was published in 1857. After its publication, it was criticised for violating public morality as some poems of the volume treated lesbian love, sadism, and also questioned conventional morality. The second edition in 1861 dropped the six poems that were banned by the Public Safety section of French Administration. The ban on these poems was not lifted in France until 1949. In 1861, Baudelaire added thirty-five new poems to the collection. Though at first *The Flowers of Evil* afforded Baudelaire a degree of notoriety; writers such as Gustave Flaubert and Victor Hugo wrote in praise of the poems. Flaubert wrote to Baudelaire claiming that he had found a way to inject new life into Romanticism and that he possessed a unique voice. Unlike earlier Romantics, Baudelaire rendered a new treatment of the urban life of Paris as he argued that art must create beauty even from the most depraved or "non-poetic" situations.

The Flowers of Evil, with its explicit sexual content and juxtapositions of urban beauty and decay, however, added to Baudelaire's reputation as a controversial poet. Baudelaire enhanced this reputation by flaunting his eccentricities. In the 1860s, he continued to write articles and essays on a wide range of subjects

and figures. He was also publishing prose poems, which were posthumously collected as *Little Poems in Prose* in 1869. By writing these non-metrical poems, Baudelaire was the first poet to make a radical break with the form of verse. This highly original style of prose-poetry influenced a whole generation of poets including Stephane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, and Arthur Rimbaud.

By 1859, his illnesses had increased due to his long-term use of laudanum and poverty. He had aged noticeably. But at last, his mother relented and agreed to let him live with her for a while at Honfleur. Baudelaire was productive and at peace in the seaside town, his poem *Le Voyage* being one example of his efforts during that time. His financial difficulties increased again, particularly after his publisher Poulet Malassis went bankrupt in 1861. In 1864, he left Paris for Belgium, partly in the hope of selling the rights to his works and also to give lectures. His long-standing relationship with Jeanne Duval continued on-and-off, and he helped her to the end of his life. He smoked opium, and in Brussels, he began to drink excessively. Baudelaire suffered a massive stroke in 1866 and paralysis followed. After more than a year of aphasia, he received the last rites of the Catholic Church.

The last two years of his life were spent in a semi-paralysed state in Brussels and in Paris, where he died on August 31, 1867 at the age of forty-six. Although, the doctors at the time did not mention it, it is likely that syphilis caused his final illness. Baudelaire was buried in the Cimetière du Montparnasse, Paris.



LET US KNOW

Baudelaire's views helped in the growth of the movement called 'the Decadence'. The Symbolist Movement, in a way, started with Baudelaire. Again, his great verse poem 'The Swan' is often considered to be a work that instigated literary Modernism. Rosemary Lloyd in *The Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire* states that Baudelaire's influence on

international Modernism was so far-reaching that it is difficult to understand that crucial movement unless one is familiar with Baudelaire. Thus, Baudelaire's predecessors such as Rimbaud saw him as a god; Mallarm´e and T. S. Eliot recognised him for the great genius he was. They all regarded that his impact on twentieth-century poetry was unavoidable and memorable. Baudelaire also inspired several artists such as Gauguin, Matisse, Picasso and Nolan. His poetry has been set to music by some prominent composers. His poetry has been translated by literary icons such as Richard Wilbur, Robert Fitzgerald, Seamus Heaney, Richard Howard and Norman Shapiro. However, they are subjected to a huge range of criticism including those of Walter Benjamin, T. S. Eliot, Georg Lukacs, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and so on. It is seen that sometimes Baudelaire's cultural roots go back into the past, it draws nutrition from the great writers of antiquity, especially from Ovid and Virgil, from Dante, Rabelais and Montaigne, from thinkers and artists such as Sade, Rembrandt, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Delacroix. Thus, we get a unique blend of poetic self in the voice of Baudelaire.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Why was Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* criticised after its first publication in 1857?

Q 2: What, according to you, accounts for Charles Baudelaire's significance as a great writer?

5.3.2 His Works

Baudelaire is one of the major figures in French literature. His poetry was influenced by the French romantic poets and in turn, he started influencing a number of modern poets worldwide. Baudelaire started his literary career as an art critic while he did a

review of 'Salon' in 1845. In the same year, he also wrote a poem entitled "To a Creole Lady". Many of Baudelaire's critical opinions were new to his time. Some of his views in fact seem remarkably in tune with the future theories of the Impressionist painters. By that time, Baudelaire's translations of the works of Edgar Allan Poe begin to appear in the French press. His *Salon of 1846* published in the next year. This second Salon review gave him additional integrity as an advocate and critic of Romanticism. His support of Delacroix as the foremost Romantic artist gained widespread notice. His novella, *La Fanfarlo* got published in 1847. In 1848, Baudelaire collaborated on a newspaper, *La Salut public*, of which only two numbers appear. In the same year, Baudelaire's first translation of Poe, the tale called *Magnetic Revelation* published.

Baudelaire was a slow and difficult writer, often preoccupied by emotional distress and illness, and it was not until 1857 that he published his first and most famous volume of poems, *The Flowers of Evil*. Some of these poems had already appeared in the *Review of Two Worlds* in 1855. The poems of the volume represent the changing nature of beauty in modern, industrialising Paris during the time. The volume found a small, appreciative audience, but greater public attention was given to their subject matter. The effect on his fellow artists was "immense, prodigious, unexpected, mingled with admiration and with some indefinable anxious fear". Gustave Flaubert, attacked in a similar fashion for his *Madame Bovary,* was impressed and wrote to Baudelaire: "You have found a way to rejuvenate Romanticism... You are as unyielding as marble, and as penetrating as an English mist". However, the major themes of sex and death in his poems were considered scandalous. Baudelaire also touched on lesbianism, sacred and profane love, metamorphosis, melancholy, the corruption of the city, lost innocence, the oppressiveness of living, and wine. Baudelaire's use of imagery of the sense of smell and of fragrances, which is used to evoke feelings of nostalgia and past intimacy, is quite remarkable.

The book quickly became an epitome for profanity among mainstream critics of the day. Some critics called a few of the poems "masterpieces of passion, art and poetry". Some intellectuals of the time led the charge against Baudelaire who responded to the quarrel in a prophetic letter to his mother stating that he had always considered literature and art as independent of morality, and that beauty of conception and style was enough for him. Baudelaire, his publisher and the press, nevertheless, were prosecuted for creating an 'offense' against public morals. They were fined but Baudelaire was not imprisoned. Six of the poems were suppressed, but printed later as *The Wrecks* (1866). Another edition of *The Flowers of Evil*, without these poems, but with considerable additions, appeared in 1861. Victor Hugo wrote to him: "Your *The Flowers of Evil* shine and dazzle like stars... I applaud your vigorous spirit with all my might". Baudelaire did not appeal the judgment but his fine was reduced. Nearly 100 years later, on May 11, 1949, Baudelaire was vindicated, the judgment officially reversed, and the six banned poems reinstated in France.

Baudelaire's translation of Poe's novel *Arthur Gordon Pym* was published in 1858. He then worked on a translation and adaptation of Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater.* Other works in the years that followed included *Small Prose Poems* which is a series of art reviews published in the *Country, World Fair*; studies on Gustave Flaubert; on Théophile Gautier (1858); various articles contributed to Eugene Crepet's *French poets; Artificial Paradises: Opium and Hashish* (1860); and *A Final Chapter of the history of works of Balzac* (1880). Many of Baudelaire's works were published posthumously. His reputation as poet at that time was secure. The writers such as Stephane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, and Arthur Rimbaud claimed him as a predecessor. In the 20th century, thinkers and artists as diverse as Jean-Paul Sartre, Walter Benjamin, Robert Lowell, and Seamus

Heaney started to look at Baudelaire from certain new perspectives and established his worth as a great poet of the 19th century.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: How did Baudelaire begin his literary career?

Q 4: What are the important characteristics of Baudelaire as a poet?

5.4 THE POEM: "CORRESPONDENCES"

The following sections, will guide us to read the prescribed poem "Correspondences" in terms of its various important aspects.

5.4.1 The Text of the Poem

Correspondences

Nature is a temple where living pillars
Let sometimes emerge confused words;
Man crosses it through forests of symbols
Which watch him with intimate eyes.

Like those deep echoes that meet from afar
In a dark and profound harmony,
As vast as night and clarity,
So perfumes, colors, tones answer each other.

There are perfumes fresh as children's flesh,
Soft as oboes, green as meadows,
And others, corrupted, rich, triumphant,

Possessing the diffusion of infinite things,
Like amber, musk, incense and aromatic resin,
Chanting the ecstasies of spirit and senses.

Geoffrey Wagner, *Selected Poems of Charles Baudelaire* (NY: Grove Press, 1974)

5.4.2 Reading the Poem

Baudelaire's "Correspondences" indicates a belief that there exists a relationship between the physical world and a spiritual world. This view is often considered an antecedent to symbolism and is beautifully presented in the poem "Correspondences". The poet reveals the connection between Nature and the Metaphysical world. Nature is presented as a 'temple' whose living 'pillars' speak to man and whose 'forest of symbols' observes him. The poet expresses that perfumes, colours, and sounds interact with each other like echoes in a dark and deep unity. In a way, the poem talks about the unity of nature and human perceptions of interdependence in sense perceptions. One becomes aware of this unity only at exceptional moments. When one loses one's ordinary state of mind, when one no longer separates oneself from one's surroundings and objects from one another, one may be able to perceive the likeness of one sense impression to another—perfume to sight, sound to colour.

In the lines such as "rich, corrupt and masterful", "the sounds, the scents, the colors" and "incense, amber, benjamin and musk" the poet uses rhetorical device called asyndeton. It is used to achieve dramatic effect. These lines also indicate parallelism in which all words are associated to the poem's meaning as a whole. There is an antithesis in the contrast— 'corrupt' yet 'masterful' senses. The 'forest of symbols' that may walk through one's life is a metaphor for the connection between all things outside one's self and all things inside one's self. The "temple of nature" and "forest of symbols" in which a man walks can also be seen as the relation of the body to what surrounds the body.



LET US KNOW

In fact, the combination of body and mind is central to the perception of reality by Baudelaire, which receives fuller expression in the poem. Though the poet

does not include a direct expression of faith in God or gods in the poem, his mystical belief in the world's fundamental unity is clear. Therefore, this particular world order "possesses the power of such infinite things" for the poet.

A central idea reflected in 'Correspondences' is that the material world suggests some abstract meanings. This idea was not new as it had already been developed by the Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg. Besides, this idea proved to be a rich layer in Western European literature starting with Balzac and E. T. A. Hoffmann to W.B. Yeats. Here, the trees, or columns of a temple, seem to be winking knowingly, as though they contain a hidden message, which only the poet can translate. In a way, the poem epitomises the poet's complicated spirituality in order to "praise the senses, raptures and the mind's". What is put forward, however, is a vertical movement in one direction only – from Earth to Heaven – and is not to be confused with the combination of different modes of perception, known as 'synaesthesia'(the transformation of one form of sensory perception into another, for example seeing music or hearing a work of visual art), underpinning the sestet. Through synaesthesia- in which sounds, colours, and scents are tied together to create mental images, where all senses are stimulated through the mind's eye, the poet transfers a French Symbolist impression of Art and Nature onto the reader. The physical sensations are here shown to be interrelated in such a way that a perfume can suggest the softness of touch of a child's skin, the sound of an oboe or the green of a pasture. These, moving from one sense impression to another, are examples of horizontal synaesthesia. Other perfumes – in the instance adduced by Baudelaire, less pure – are rich, sultry and heady. They can lead to the rapture of mind and body and may be characterised as vertical, as well as horizontal synaesthesia.

The sense of ecstasy in the poetic expression, however, suggests a state of "standing outside" oneself. Such an altered state

of consciousness may be induced by hallucinogenic drugs. Baudelaire admired Thomas De Quincey, the author of *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), and Edgar Allan Poe, whose dreamlike poems and stories were extremely influential in France. Baudelaire himself took opium and hashish. Another inducement to a unitary state of mind, a traditional and universal way, is the practice of meditation in many forms: quieting the analytical mind by dancing, chanting, repeating a mantra, or putting the service of others before one's own ego demands. Most religious sects enable devotees to attain "oneness" with God by such practices. For centuries, "out of body" experiences have been recorded by mystics. Thus, the poem "Correspondences" marks a powerful union of the physical and the non-physical. In a way, the poem is a symbolic representation of the connection of 'Self' to its surroundings. Baudelaire has abundantly used metaphors, synaesthesia, and other rhetorical devices to take the reader on a journey through nature's correspondence with consciousness.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What is the basic idea in the poem "Correspondences"?

Q 6: Why did *The Flowers of Evil* create controversy at the time of its publication?

5.4.3 Major Themes

The major themes of the poem "Correspondences" can be best understood in connection with the other poems of *Flowers of Evil*.

The poem "Correspondences" deals with themes such as men's **relationship with nature, men's sense perception corresponding to the outer world, the relationship between the physical world and a spiritual world** and so on. To an extent, the poem is about the unity of nature, human perceptions of

interdependence in sense perceptions. He based the symbolic mode of the poem on the ancient belief in **correspondences—the view that there exist inherent and systematic analogies between human mind and the outer world**, between the material and the spiritual worlds. Baudelaire termed this doctrine as – "Everything, form, movement, number, color, perfume, in the spiritual as in the natural world, is significative, reciprocal, converse, correspondent." Such views in fact worked on in the others poem of *The Flowers of Evil*. An isolated reading of the poem, therefore, may not reveal the larger possibilities that the poet seeks to explore through his poetry. Hence, having a cursory look on the major issues in *The Flowers of Evil* may help you in understanding the main concerns in "Correspondences".

The Flowers of Evil, to a great extent, **extracts beauty from the malignant**. The poems in *The Flowers of Evil* can be seen as confession of hopes, dreams, failures, and sins. Unlike traditional poetry that relied on the serene beauty of the natural world to convey emotions, Baudelaire felt that modern poetry must evoke the artificial and paradoxical aspects of life. He thought that beauty could evolve on its own, irrespective of nature and even fuelled by sin. The result is a clear opposition between two worlds, "spleen" and the "ideal" represented in the poems such as "Spleen" (i, ii, ii, iv) and "The Ideal" respectively. Spleen signifies everything that is wrong with the world: death, despair, solitude, murder, and disease. (The spleen is an organ that removes disease-causing agents from the bloodstream; hence, it has been used as a major symbol) In contrast, the ideal represents transcendence over the harsh reality of spleen, where love is possible and the senses are united in ecstasy.

LET US KNOW



Spleen and the Ideal:

You would like to know that for Baudelaire, the ideal is primarily an escape from reality through wine, opium, travel, and passion. Having the harsh impact of one's failure and regrets, the ideal is an imagined state of happiness or ecstasy where time, death find no place. Baudelaire often uses erotic imagery to convey the impassioned feeling of the ideal. However, the speaker is consistently disappointed as spleen again takes up its reign. He is endlessly confronted with the fear of death, the failure of his will, and the suffocation of his spirit. Yet even as the poem's speaker is thwarted by spleen, Baudelaire himself never desists in his attempt to make the bizarre beautiful, an attempt perfectly expressed by the juxtaposition of his two worlds. As in the poem "Carrion" the decomposing flesh has not only artistic value but inspires the poet to render it beautifully.

Within the poetic journey in *The Flowers of Evil* we see different concerns of the poet. There is, first of all, the traditional one, leading from birth in "Benediction", to death in "Le Voyage", tracing the outline of human destiny. Humanity is shown as seeking for some infinite satisfaction in art and love ('Spleen and the Ideal'), in the life of the city ('Parisian Scenes') in stimulants ('Wine'), in perversity ('Flowers of Evil') in rebellion against the nature of things ('Revolt') and finally, in death ('Death'). Within each of these sections – and often within the poems themselves–a threefold pattern may be detected of aspiration towards the ideal, followed by disillusionment. However, his acute sense of the contemporary social system is well manifested in the opening poem 'Au lecteur'. The insidious corruption, cowardice, stupidity, and self-seeking hypocrisy of the world are related to all human beings, in both mind and body in the poem–which has been a recurring dichotomy throughout his *The Flowers of Evil*.

Women are important source of symbolism for Baudelaire. They often serve as an intermediary between the ideal and spleen. Thus, while the speaker must run his hands through a woman's hair in order to conjure up his ideal world, he later compares his lover to a decomposing animal, reminding her that one day she will be kissing worms instead of him. His lover is both his muse, providing ephemeral perfection, and a curse, condemning him to unrequited love and an early death. Women, thus, embody both what Baudelaire called the elevation toward God and what he referred to as the gradual descent toward Satan: They are luminous guides of his imagination but also monstrous vampires that intensify his sense of spleen, or ill temper. The result is a moderate misogyny: Baudelaire associates women with nature; thus, his attempt to capture the poetry of the artificial necessarily denied women a positive role in his artistic vision.

Baudelaire's poetry also evokes the **presence of death**. In "To a Passerby," a possible love interest turns out to be a menacing death. Female demons, vampires, and monsters also consistently remind the speaker of his mortality. However, the passing of time, especially in the form of a newly remodelled Paris, isolates the speaker and makes him feel alienated from society. This theme of alienation leaves the speaker alone to the horrific contemplation of himself and the hopes of a consoling death. Baudelaire further emphasises the proximity of death through his reliance on religious imagery and fantasy.

Baudelaire's treatment of **violence features** criminal acts of murder and suicide, verbal threats and the solitary melancholy of illness, and generalised suffering. In his portrayals of the artist, the lover and the criminal, a sense of intimacy connects these fictional characters with the reader. In the poems and prose poetry, the identity of the speaker or narrator – frequently masculine, but sometimes neutral – is not known. Accompanied by this mysterious speaker, the reader plunges into Baudelaire's cityscapes, deserted

spaces, cemeteries and boudoir scenes. It may seem paradoxical, but the violence that permeates *Les Fleurs du Mal* has not prevented readers from viewing Baudelaire as one of the greatest poets of desire, love and memory.

Elements of fantastical horror—from ghosts to bats to black cats—also amplify the destructive force of the spleen on the mind. Baudelaire was inspired by Edgar Allen Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination,* and he saw Poe's use of fantasy as a way of emphasizing the mystery and tragedy of human existence. For example, Baudelaire's three different poems about black cats express what he saw as the taunting ambiguity of women. Moreover, the presence of tortured demons and phantoms make the possibility of death more immediate to the speaker, anticipating the fear and isolation that death will bring.

However, the central issue reflected in 'Correspondences' is that the **material world suggests some abstract meanings**. The idea had been developed by Emanuel Swedenborg, which found a place in certain significant writers such as Balzac, E. T. A. Hoffmann and Yeats. In the poem the trees, or columns of a temple, seem to be sparkling. In a way, the poem epitomises the poet's complicated spirituality in order to 'praise the senses' raptures and the mind's'. 'Synaesthesia' has been adequately employed and through synaesthesia—in which sounds, colours, and scents are tied together to create mental images, where all senses are moved through the mind's eye, the poet transfers a Symbolist impression of Art and Nature onto the reader. The physical sensations are here shown to be interrelated in such a way that a perfume can suggest the softness of touch of a child's skin, the sound of an oboe or the green of a pasture. Whatever might be the poet's real intention, the poem 'Correspondences', as stated above, is a symbolic representation of the connection of 'Self' to its surroundings. To do so, the poet aptly uses various metaphors, synaesthesia, and other rhetorical devices in the text of the poem.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: What, according to you, is the main poetic device in "Correspondences"?

Q 8: What are the main aspects in the poetry of Baudelaire?

Q 9: Why did Baudelaire use symbol in the poem?

5.4.4 Baudelaire's Poetic Style

Baudelaire's impact on literary and cultural history can be seen in terms of his using of symbols, figures, images and poetic techniques. Baudelaire combines aspects of the old and the new to create a Modernist poetics. To an extent, early Modernism, the way the term has been used to indicate innovations in terms of content and style in literature and art, emerges from Baudelaire's transformation of French Romanticism, and this transformation continues to influence writers, artists and critics. In essays, translations, verse and prose poetry, from the early poetics of 'Spleen' or 'The Ideal' to the final sections of *The Flowers of Evil* and *Little Poems in Prose*, Baudelaire's trans-romantic aesthetics goes beyond the boundaries of genre to surprise the reader. As the first poet of the Symbolist tradition and precursor to the poets such as Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarme, Rilke or T.S. Eliot, his influence on modern poetry is immense. In addition, the importance greatly lies in his poetic style, in his use of symbols. The notion of 'avant-garde' is significantly rooted in Baudelaire. Baudelaire re-articulated the inherited aesthetic vocabulary of Imagination, the Ideal and the Beautiful to make it a modern aesthetic. Therefore, Baudelaire adopted a unique way to narrate his subjects, sometimes putting an implied speaker behind his poetic self.

The introductory poem of *The Flowers of Evil* takes in the element of evil and violence. The power of this poem and many others originate in the new relationship between the theatrical and poetic voice of the speaker or narrator, and the familiar but anonymous 'you', the poem's presumed reader. For Baudelaire, evil

is everywhere: the Catholic dogma of original sin pervades the human condition. With a tone that is disturbingly bitter and intimate, the narrator accuses the reader of every human failing. Evocations of prostitution, hypocrisy and acts of criminal violence lead to the narrator's final dramatic example. The last figure of human weakness presented in the speaker's identification with the reader leads to a strangely anti-climactic ending. The poem paints a final portrait of someone suffering from *ennui*, a French name for the Romantic concept of Spleen. The victim of Spleen is subject to a state of boredom and a disconcerting lack of will power. After a detailed list of humanity's crimes, the personified vice of *ennui* is proclaimed to be the most horrible of all sins. Sometimes the entire treatment of the poem raises the question if the narrator's denunciation of the figure of *ennui*, passively smoking the water pipe, an ironic dismissal of the poor reader. The narrator is ironic here, he dramatically reveals the reader to be his own likeness and his brother. It is a unique style of conveying the thought of the poet. The resemblance between self and other defines Baudelaire's term of likeness. Baudelaire's aesthetic of resemblance leads from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to the Modernism of Arthur Rimbaud, Stephane Mallarme, Guillaume Apollinaire, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Nathalie Sarraute, and Samuel Beckett and so on.

In the poem "Correspondences", along with the use of some loaded symbols, the poet evokes Emanuel Swedenborg's doctrine of the correspondences to illustrate the human connection to the natural world. With his vision of correspondence, Baudelaire takes up the question of meaning in a secular context that contrasts 'the spirit' with 'the senses' but gives the last word of the poem to sensuality. The poem also links sensual experience and the vocabulary of art within aesthetics of suggestion. Baudelaire reshapes the Romantic concept of synaesthesia as a form of voluptuous sensual experience and as the translation of that experience into art. Many of Baudelaire's poems and prose poems

achieve the effects of correspondence: like Balzac and Gautier before him, Baudelaire was fascinated by E. T. A. Hoffmann's literary experimentation with synaesthesia. In "Correspondences", voluptuous experience dominates the second quatrain, and the translation into art of sensual exchanges of sounds, colours and sensory qualities occurs in the sestet. The poem accomplishes the art of correspondence that it represents. The plenitude of correspondence connects the power of involuntary memory–the most sensually oriented form of memory–with the evocative powers of art. In his novel *In Search of Lost Time*, Marcel Proust places the programme of Baudelaire's "Correspondences" at the centre of his character's experience of time rendered visible, and the ambition to capture that experience in writing. In the poem, Baudelaire articulates an aesthetic approach to experience that will allow the senses, the arts and thought.

5.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF BAUDELAIRE

Charles Baudelaire has been a crucial author for critics as his works bear different connotations and meanings. He has received a large body of critical responses. One of such criticisms is Walter Benjamin's *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism.* Here Benjamin challenges the image of Baudelaire as a late-Romantic dreamer, and opines that the modern poet was caught in a life-or-death struggle with the forces of the urban commodity capitalism that had emerged in Paris around 1850. Before Benjamin's radical reorientation of the image of Baudelaire, he had usually been considered in purely aesthetic terms-as a late Romantic or as a forerunner of the French Symbolists. For Benjamin, however, Baudelaire's greatness consisted precisely in his representativeness*:* in the manner in which his poetry often expresses the structure and mechanisms of his age. Benjamin was hardly alone among his contemporaries in such estimation of Baudelaire. Benjamin, moreover, finds in Baudelaire a capability analogous to the one he attributes to Kafka in his great essay of 1934: an intimate knowledge of humanity's "mythical prehistory."

You perhaps known that Baudelaire was a touchstone for T. S. Eliot, who translated Baudelaire into English and produced an important essay on Baudelaire's relation to modernity. In Germany, the great lyric poet Stefan George was an important link between Baudelaire and modern German writing. His translation of *The Flowers of Evil* is in many ways important. Eliot and George, however, saw in Baudelaire a writer very different from the one discovered by Benjamin. For Eliot, Baudelaire was the key to adequate spiritual comprehension of modernity, an important predecessor in Eliot's own quest to find a path informed by religion through the modern wasteland. Similarly, for George, Baudelaire's poetry opened onto a vast, wholly aesthetic landscape that was a proof against the indignities of the modern world.

You will find that such criticisms often help the readers of Baudelaire to have some ideas on his reception in subsequent periods.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 10: How do critics view Baudelaire?

Q 11: Why is Baudelaire regarded a pioneer of modernism?



5.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have noticed that Charles Baudelaire is a prominent poet in world literature as he greatly contributed to the development of Aestheticism, which in turn developed the movement called 'the Decadence'. The Symbolist Movement, it is believed, started with Baudelaire. His great verse poem "The Swan" is often considered to be a work that instigated literary Modernism in France and in Europe. Baudelaire immensely influenced writers such as Stephane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud and T.S. Eliot. The notion of 'avant-garde' is significantly rooted in Baudelaire. His *The Flowers of Evil* is regarded as a masterpiece in world literature. His poetry has been subjected to a huge range of criticism

including those of Walter Benjamin, T. S. Eliot, Georg Lukacs, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan and so on. Baudelaire's poem, "Correspondences" indicates a belief that there exists a relationship between the physical world and a spiritual world. This view is looked as an antecedent to symbolism and is presented in the poem. The poet reveals the connection between Nature and the Metaphysical world. Nature is presented as a 'temple' whose living 'pillars' speak to man and whose 'forest of symbols' observes him. The poet expresses that perfumes, colours, and sounds interact with each other like echoes in a dark and deep unity. In a way, the poem talks about the unity of nature and human perceptions of interdependence in sense perceptions. The central idea that is reflected in "Correspondences" (that the material world suggests some abstract meanings) had been developed by the Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg. The next unit shall introduce you to yet another important modern poet of the 20th century.



5.7 FURTHER READING

Benjamin, Walter. (1973). *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism.* trs. H. Zohn. London: NLB.

Michael Jennings. Jennings, Michael. (Ed.). (2006). *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Chesters, Graham. (1988). *Baudelaire and the Poetics of Craft.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lloyd, Rosemary. (Ed.). (2005). *The Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

— (1986). *The Conquest of Solitude: Selected Letters of Charles Baudelaire*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Martin, Walter. (1997). *Charles Baudelaire: Complete Poems.* Manchester: Carcanet.

Web Resources:

http://en. Wikipedia.org/wiki/ Baudelaire

5.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: It was criticised for violating public morality as some poems of the volume treated lesbian love, sadism, and also questioned conventional morality.

Ans to Q 2: Baudelaire has tremendous influence on poets worldwide... …he did not only extend the range of subjects and emotions available for verse-poetic treatment, but he also established the genre of prose poetry as it is known today... …Symbolist Movement, in a way, started with Baudelaire… … he argued that art must create beauty even from the most depraved or "non-poetic" situations.

Ans to Q 3: Baudelaire started his literary career as an art critic as he did a review of 'Salon' in 1845... …by that time Baudelaire's translations of the works of Edgar Allan Poe began to appear in the French press… …his masterpiece, his first and most famous volume of poems *The Flowers of Evil* published in 1857.

Ans to Q 4: Baudelaire gave a new treatment to the contemporary poetry with his extensive use of symbols... ...his poetry represents the changing nature of beauty in modern, industrializing Paris during the time.. …in a way, his poetry paved the path of modern poetry with his content and style... …he re-articulated the inherited aesthetic vocabulary of Imagination, the Ideal and the Beautiful to make it a modern aesthetic in his poetry.

Ans to Q 5: 'Correspondences'' reflects a belief that there exists a relationship between the physical world and a spiritual world. ... the poet reveals the connection between Nature and the Metaphysical world. The central idea reflected in 'Correspondences' is that the material world suggests some abstract meanings.

Ans to Q 6: The major themes of the poems such as sex, lesbianism, sacred and profane love, metamorphosis, melancholy, the corruption of the city, lost innocence, the oppressiveness of living, and wine etc. created controversy.

Ans to Q 7: The poet uses a device known as 'synaesthesia'... ...it is the transformation of one form of sensory perception into another, for example seeing music or hearing a work of visual art... …through synaesthesia, in which sounds, colours, and scents are tied together to create mental images, and where all senses are stimulated through the mind's eye, the poet transfers a French Symbolist impression of Art and Nature onto the reader.

Ans to Q 8: The poet's main concerns in his poetry were beauty, nature, sin, sex, love, death, boredom, despair, solitude, murder, disease in a modern industrial world.

Ans to Q 9: Baudelaire believed that there exists a relationship between the physical world and a spiritual world… …this view is seen as an antecedent to symbolism and is presented in the poem… …he reveals the connection between Nature and the Metaphysical world… …Nature is presented as a 'temple' whose living 'pillars' speak to man and whose 'forest of symbols' observes him.

Ans to Q 10: Charles Baudelaire received a large body of critical responses… …for example, the Marxist critic Walter Benjamin challenges the image of Baudelaire as a late-Romantic dreamer, and opines that the modern poet was caught in a life-or-death struggle with the forces of the urban commodity capitalism that had emerged in Paris around 1850… …Eliot translated Baudelaire into English.

Ans to Q 11: As the first poet of the Symbolist tradition and precursor to the poets such as Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarme, Rilke and T.S. Eliot, his influence on modern poetry is immense... …such importance greatly lies in his poetic style, in his use of symbols... ...the notion of 'avant-garde' is significantly rooted in Baudelaire.



5.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss Baudelaire as a practitioner of symbolism with special reference to your reading of "Correspondences".

Q 2: Critically discuss the major issues reflected in the poem "Correspondences".

Q 3: Do you consider Baudelaire a pioneer of modernism? Make an assessment in the light of 'Correspondences'.

Q 4: Examine "Correspondences" as a replica of Baudelaire's own aesthetic convictions and his belief of the world order.

Q 5: Comment on the poetic style of Baudelaire in his poem "Correspondences". Discuss the features of Baudelaire's poetry with particular emphasis on "Correspondences".

Q 6: *The Flowers of Evil*, with its explicit sexual content and juxtapositions of urban beauty and decay, however, added to Baudelaire's reputation as a controversial poet. Discuss.

Q 7: In what ways, according to you, does the poem "Correspondences" deal with men's relationship with nature.

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UNIT 6: FEDERICO GARCIA LORCA: "LAMENT FOR IGNACIO SANCHEZ MEJIAS"

UNIT STRUCTURE

6.1 Learning Objectives

6.2 Introduction

6.3 Federico Garcia Lorca: Life and Works

6.4 Reading the Poem

- 6.4.1 Text of the Poem
- 6.4.2 Analysis of the Poem
- 6.4.3 Major Themes
- 6.4.4 Lorca's Poetic Style

6.5 Critical Reception of Lorca

6.6 Let us Sum up

6.7 Further Reading

6.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

6.9 Possible Questions

6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss briefly the life and works of F G Lorca
- provide a brief summary of the poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias"
- discuss the major themes of the poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias"
- grasp a comprehensive idea of Lorca'a poetic style
- discuss the importance of the cultural and traditional practices Spain such as bullfighting

6.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall deal with another European poet Federico Garcia Lorca with reference to his poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias". Federico Garcia Lorca's reputation rests equally on his poetry and his plays.

He is widely regarded as Spain's most distinguished twentieth-century writer. Lorca achieved international recognition as a member of the Generation of 27, a group of poets who is believed to have introduced the tenets of European movements (such as Symbolism, Futurism and Surrealism) into Spanish literature. He was executed by Nationalist forces at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. The poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias" is divided into four sections that have relevance with the four stages of human psyche. The central leitmotif of this lyrical poem is the demise of his bullfighter friend, Ignacio Sanchez Mejias. It is an elegy written on the fondness of the Spanish individuals for wild bulls and the subsequent death of Ignacio who has died fighting heroically with a fierce bull.

6.3 FEDERICO GARCIA LORCA: LIFE AND WORKS

[Adapted from *Gale Encyclopaedia*]



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federico_Garc%C3%A1a_Lorca#/media/File:Lorca_(1914).jpg

Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936) was born and raised in rural Andalusia, the southernmost province of Spain and a region greatly influenced by Arabic and Gypsy culture. His life and career often seem to have coincided with the significant events in the historical and political issues of his time. For instance, the year of his birth coincided with the so-called Disaster of 1898, when Spain lost the war against the United States followed by the loss of its last remaining colonies: Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines.

Lorca spent his first eleven years on the vega (fertile plain) of Granada, to the west of the city, his family dividing its time between two villages, Fuente Vaqueros and Asquerosa. His father, Federico Garcia Rodriguez, was a well-off farmer and landowner; while his mother, the former Vicenta Lorca Romero—his father's second wife—was a local primary-school teacher. Both parents, but particularly his mother, exerted a strong influence on Garcia Lorca's character and sensibility in their different

ways. He attended schools in the nearby town of Almeria and studied law and literature at the University of Granada. After moving to Madrid in 1919, Lorca continued his studies at the Residencia de Estudiantes, a centre for writers, critics, and scholars of cultural liberalism.

While in Madrid, Lorca earned a law degree and came in contact with several emerging literary and artistic figures, many of whom would later comprise the Generation of 1927. The members of this group rejected what they considered to be the sentiment and superficiality of Romanticism and instead advocated hermetic expressionism. The years 1924 to 1927 were also a time, after the closure of the Poema del cante jondo/ Canciones phase, when he became engaged in a wide-ranging exploration of very different modes of poetic writing. One vein, or direction, is represented by what turned out to be Garcia Lorca's most successful, most popular, and best-known collection of poetry, *Gypsy Ballads* (1928).

While not as well known as *Gypsy Ballads*, *Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter and Other Poems* (1935) is also considered a masterpiece. This four-part elegy was occasioned by the mauling death of Spain's most celebrated matador, Ignacio Sanchez Mejias, who was one of Garcia Lorca's closest friends. A celebration of Spanish sound, rhythm, and assonance, Lament evidences Garcia Lorca's unique blend of poetry and drama. Despite the fact that Garcia Lorca's work was extremely popular throughout the 1920s, the poet suffered an emotional crisis in 1928, stemming from his belief that he was being stereotyped as a "gypsy poet." Leaving the Andalusian landscape with which he was so familiar, Lorca travelled to New York City in 1929, where he came in contact with images directly contrasting those of his homeland. Deeply disturbed by the monotony of industrial life and America's reliance on mechanisation, Garcia Lorca began writing verse that was later collected in the posthumous volume *Poet in New York* (1940), considered to be his most abstract and surrealistic volume due to its themes of chaos and alienation.

Although Garcia Lorca wrote the drama *The Spell of the Butterfly* in 1920, it was not until he returned to Spain in 1930, shortly after the proclamation of the Spanish Republic, that he composed the majority of his

dramatic works. Among his best-known plays are *Blood Wedding* (1933), *Yerma* (1935), and *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1945). *Blood Wedding*, which closely resembles a classical Greek tragedy, is the story of a bride who runs off with another man on her wedding day. In contrast to *Blood Wedding* and the similar follow-up *Yerma*, which are generally considered expressionistic and abstract, *The House of Bernarda Alba* is intensely realistic. This work focuses on Bernarda, a tyrannical woman who virtually imprisons her five daughters in her home.

In 1936, an army coup against the government of the Second Spanish Republic resulted in the start of the Spanish Civil War, a three-year conflict that resulted in the founding of the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, a nationalist. The political unrest forced Garcia Lorca into hiding, despite the fact he had never aligned himself with any particular political party and referred to himself as a "Catholic, communist, anarchist, liberal, conservative, and monarchist." Garcia Lorca was eventually discovered at the home of a friend and then arrested by Franco's Nationalists. After being detained by the civil government in Granada for several days, Garcia Lorca was executed by a firing squad in an olive grove outside the tiny village of Viznar and buried in an unmarked grave. His murder is often considered a tragically ironic ending for an author who so frequently wrote about death. Scholars maintain, however, that although death is a prevalent theme in his works, Garcia Lorca is perhaps more strongly esteemed for his abiding humanitarian concerns, deep affection for Andalusian culture and landscapes, and passionate dedication to all art forms.

Lorca drew upon all elements of Spanish life and culture to create poetry at once traditional, modern, personal, and universal. Combining classical verse with folk and Gypsy ballads, Garcia Lorca sought to liberate language from its structural constraints and bring out the musicality inherent in Spanish dialect. While initially influenced by the symbolists, who believed the function of poetry was to evoke and not describe, Lorca began to experiment with startling imagery, scenic metaphors, and complex rhythms after coming in contact with filmmaker Luis Bunuel, poet Pablo Neruda, and artist Salvador Dali. Garcia Lorca's dramatic approach to poetry led

him to devote the latter part of his life to playwriting. In his drama, like his verse, Lorca wrote about death, frustrated sexuality, and the relationship between dream and reality. While his poetry and drama continue to be widely studied among literary scholars, Garcia Lorca emphasised that he wrote for and about common people.

By the time Libro de poemas was in the bookshops, Garcia Lorca had already turned his back on the kind of writing it exemplified, focusing instead on a new manner that would absorb him for the next four or five years. He opted for short, often minimal lines, arranged in loosely structured patterns, often employing parallelism, repetition (sometimes with internal variation), exclamations, unanswered questions, and ellipses; the resulting short poems were arranged in thematically grouped sequences he called suites. By contrast, the eighteen poems of the *Gypsy Ballads* are all written in the traditional octosyllabic (eight syllables per line) ballad meter, whose origins go back at least as far as the fourteenth century and which had been perpetuated in a continuous oral tradition down to Garcia Lorca's times. Garcia Lorca, along with the other members of the Generation of 1927, played an influential role in bridging the gap between classical Spanish literary tradition and the European avant-gardes that came after him. Lorca's so-called rural trilogy of plays—*Blood Wedding*, *Yerma*, *The House of Bernarda Alba*—all touched upon death and rebellion against society's restrictions, often featuring women as both protagonists and antagonists, always with tragic results.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What are the major collections of poetry of Lorca?

Q 2: Write about the significance of Lorca's *Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter and Other Poems* (1935).

Q 3: How did Lorca draw his raw materials from Spanish life and culture?

6.4 READING THE POEM

With the help of the following subsections, we shall try to understand the prescribed poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias"

6.4.1 Text of the Poem

"Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias" (Source: http://www.boppin.com/lorca/lament.html)

I. Cogida and Death

At five in the afternoon.
It was exactly five in the afternoon.
A boy brought the white sheet
at five in the afternoon.
A frail of lime ready prepared
at five in the afternoon.
The rest was death, and death alone.

The wind carried away the cottonwool
at five in the afternoon.
And the oxide scattered crystal and nickel
at five in the afternoon.
Now the dove and the leopard wrestle
at five in the afternoon.
And a thigh with a desolated horn
at five in the afternoon.
The bass-string struck up
at five in the afternoon.
Arsenic bells and smoke
at five in the afternoon.
Groups of silence in the corners
at five in the afternoon.
And the bull alone with a high heart!
At five in the afternoon.
When the sweat of snow was coming
at five in the afternoon,
when the bull ring was covered with iodine
at five in the afternoon.
Death laid eggs in the wound
at five in the afternoon.
At five in the afternoon.
At five o'clock in the afternoon.

A coffin on wheels is his bed
at five in the afternoon.
Bones and flutes resound in his ears
at five in the afternoon.
Now the bull was bellowing through his forehead
at five in the afternoon.
The room was iridiscent with agony
at five in the afternoon.
In the distance the gangrene now comes
at five in the afternoon.
Horn of the lily through green groins
at five in the afternoon.
The wounds were burning like suns
at five in the afternoon.
At five in the afternoon.
Ah, that fatal five in the afternoon!
It was five by all the clocks!
It was five in the shade of the afternoon!

II. The Spilled Blood

I will not see it!

Tell the moon to come,
for I do not want to see the blood
of Ignacio on the sand.

I will not see it!

The moon wide open.
Horse of still clouds,
and the grey bull ring of dreams
with willows in the barreras.

I will not see it!

Let my memory kindle!
Warm the jasmines
of such minute whiteness!
I will not see it!
The cow of the ancient world
passed har sad tongue
over a snout of blood
spilled on the sand,
and the bulls of Guisando,
partly death and partly stone,
bellowed like two centuries
sated with threading the earth.
No.

I will not see it!

Ignacio goes up the tiers
with all his death on his shoulders.
He sought for the dawn
but the dawn was no more.
He seeks for his confident profile
and the dream bewilders him
He sought for his beautiful body
and encountered his opened blood

Do not ask me to see it!
I do not want to hear it spurt
each time with less strength:
that spurt that illuminates
the tiers of seats, and spills
over the cordury and the leather
of a thirsty multiude.
Who shouts that I should come near!
Do not ask me to see it!

His eyes did not close
when he saw the horns near,
but the terrible mothers
lifted their heads.
And across the ranches,
an air of secret voices rose,
shouting to celestial bulls,
herdsmen of pale mist.
There was no prince in Sevilla
who could compare to him,
nor sword like his sword
nor heart so true.
Like a river of lions
was his marvellous strength,
and like a marble toroso
his firm drawn moderation.
The air of Andalusian Rome
gilded his head
where his smile was a spikenard
of wit and intelligence.
What a great torero in the ring!
What a good peasant in the sierra!
How gentle with the sheaves!
How hard with the spurs!

How tender with the dew!
How dazzling the fiesta!
How tremendous with the final
banderillas of darkness!
But now he sleeps without end.
Now the moss and the grass
open with sure fingers
the flower of his skull.
And now his blood comes out singing;
singing along marshes and meadows,
sliden on frozen horns,
faltering soulles in the mist
stoumbling over a thousand hoofs
like a long, dark, sad tongue,
to form a pool of agony
close to the starry Guadalquivir.
Oh, white wall of Spain!
Oh, black bull of sorrow!
Oh, hard blood of Ignacio!
Oh, nightingale of his veins!
No.
I will not see it!
No chalice can contain it,
no swallows can drink it,
no frost of light can cool it,
nor song nor deluge og white lilies,
no glass can cover mit with silver.
No.
I will not see it!

III. The Laid Out Body

Stone is a forehead where dreames grieve
without curving waters and frozen cypresses.
Stone is a shoulder on which to bear Time
with trees formed of tears and ribbons and planets.
I have seen grey showers move towards the waves
raising their tender riddle arms,
to avoid being caught by lying stone
which loosens their limbs without soaking their blood.

For stone gathers seed and clouds,
skeleton larks and wolves of penumbra:
but yields not sounds nor crystals nor fire,
only bull rings and bull rings and more bull rings without walls.

Now, Ignacio the well born lies on the stone.
All is finished. What is happening! Contemplate his face:
death has covered him with pale sulphur
and has place on him the head of dark minotaur.

All is finished. The rain penetrates his mouth.
The air, as if mad, leaves his sunken chest,
and Love, soaked through with tears of snow,
warms itself on the peak of the herd.

What is they saying? A stenching silence settles down.
We are here with a body laid out which fades away,
with a pure shape which had nightingales
and we see it being filled with depthless holes.

Who creases the shroud? What he says is not true!
Nobody sings here, nobody weeps in the corner,
nobody pricks the spurs, nor terrifies the serpent.
Here I want nothing else but the round eyes
to see his body without a chance of rest.

Here I want to see those men of hard voice.
Those that break horses and dominate rivers;
those men of sonorous skeleton who sing
with a mouth full of sun and flint.

Here I want to see them. Before the stone.
Before this body with broken reins.
I want to know from them the way out
for this captain stripped down by death.

I want them to show me a lament like a river
wich will have sweet mists and deep shores,
to take the body of Ignacio where it looses itself
without hearing the double planting of the bulls.

Loses itself in the round bull ring of the moon
which feigns in its youth a sad quiet bull,
loses itself in the night without song of fishes
and in the white thicket of frozen smoke.

I don't want to cover his face with handkerchiefs
that he may get used to the death he carries.
Go, Ignacio, feel not the hot bellowing
Sleep, fly, rest: even the sea dies!

IV. Absent Soul

The bull does not know you, nor the fig tree,
nor the horses, nor the ants in your own house.
The child and the afternoon do not know you
because you have dead forever.

The shoulder of the stone does not know you
nor the black silk, where you are shuttered.
Your silent memory does not know you
because you have died forever

The autumn will come with small white snails,
misty grapes and clustered hills,
but no one will look into your eyes
because you have died forever.
Because you have died for ever,
like all the dead of the earth,
like all the dead who are forgotten
in a heap of lifeless dogs.

Nobady knows you. No. But I sing of you.
For posterity I sing of your profile and grace.
Of the signal maturity of your understanding.
Of your appetite for death and the taste of its mouth.
Of the sadness of your once valiant gaiety.

It will be a long time, if ever, before there is born
an Andalusian so true, so rich in adventure.
I sing of his elegance with words that groan,
and I remember a sad breeze through the olive trees.

6.4.2 Analysis of the Poem

The poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias" by Federico Garcia Lorcais divided into four parts namely The Goring and the Death, The Spilled Blood, The Body Laid-out and The Soul Absent.

The first section **"Cogida and Death"** starts with the line 'at five in the afternoon' that seems to repeat several times to mark the intensity of the incident occurred at 5 o'clock in the afternoon. The reiteration of the line is like the repetition of the ringing of a bell in a monotonous way that heralds death to the life of the author's

friend Ignacio Sanchez Mejias who valiantly fights with the ferocious bull in the ring. The news of the demise of his friend received just at 5 O'clock in the evening has had a traumatic effect upon the poet. Remarkably, the line "five in the afternoon" functions as the outpouring of the reality which is nothing but mortal nature of human beings.

The second section, entitled **"The Spilled Blood"**, takes the readers away from the constant reminder of the precise time of death to another kind of narrative that is associated with the incidence itself. Here the readers get to know about the brave fighter Ignacio Sanchez Mejias. The repetition of "I will not see it" indicates his desire to see his friend alive on earth though it is not possible now. He does not wish to see "the blood of Ignacio in the sand". Iggnacio "sought for the dawn but the dawn was no more". The poet invites the Moon to shed its light and the clouds to appear just because he does not wish to see the blood of his dear friend. Ignacio is such a brave fighter that "his eyes did not close when he saw the horns near". His personality is so high that even "there was no prince in Sevilla who could compare to him,/ nor sword like his sword/ nor heart so true".

In the third part of the poem **"The Laid Out Body",** Lorca seems to be angry with the inanimate object like stone on which his friend was laid before death. Stone is used as a symbol of death; Stone is lifeless like death. It embraces the grief, letting it to be, severe. According to the voice of the poet, "Stone is a forehead where dreams grieve…a shoulder on which to bear Time."

Stone is symbolic in the poem that does something more, as it "gathers seed and clouds/ skeleton larks and wolves….but yields not sounds nor crystals nor fire/ only bull rings and bull rings and more bull rings without walls." The recurrence of the words 'bull rings' here emphasises the incidents happened in the ring. Ignacio is now dead, "the well born lies on the stone."

Contemplating the pale face of the his friend the poet laments, "death has covered him with pale sulphur and has placed on him the head of a dark minotaur." Death is the ultimate equalizer; after death "all is finished". There is no return in the part of his friend from the circle of death. He will not be fighting like a hero anymore. The body is now fading away "with pure shape which had nightingales" and now it is "being filled with depthless holes". Death has heralded numbness to every bullfighters as "nobody sings here, nobody weeps in the corner". That day no horse rider "pricks the spurs", a spiky metal wheel fitted to the heel of a horse-rider's boot which is being used to make the horse faster. Ignacio was undoubtedly among the "men of hard voice./Those that break horses and dominate rivers;/ those men of sonorous skeleton who sing with a mouth full of sun and flint." The poet here urges those brave bull fighters to show a lament like a river which will have mists and deep shores" because his friend Ignacio has not embraced a spineless death; his courage could be seen by each and every bystander in the ring of bullfighting. The final lines of this third section shows the ultimate celebration of death itself by Lorca:

"I don't want them to cover his face with handkerchiefs
that he may get used to the death he carries.
Go, Ignacio; feel not the hot bellowing.
Sleep, fly, rest: even the sea dies!"

This fourth and concluding section entitled **"Absent Soul"** seems to be gloomy, bitterness, full of submission and acceptance.

The repeated use of the line "because you have died forever" definitely indicates the actual loss of the life of Ignacio. It constantly reminds the grivers as well as the readers of this poem that once we go into the dark vault, no one will come back to perform his/her earthly duty. Once human beings leave this world no one will remember them. Even the name of his friend will not be in focus after death because death is a final destination without any return.

The bull does not know you, nor the fig tree
nor the horses, nor the ants in your own house.
The child and the afternoon do not know you
because you have died for ever.

But the poem is arguing that what the poet can do is to write an elegy in the name of his beloved friend:

But I sing of you.
For posterity I sing of your profile and grace.
Of the signal maturity of your understandings
Of your appetite for death and the taste of its mouth.

Though the poet will also hug death one day but his song written in the form of a requiem will be read by the generations to come that will of course retell about the dauntless activities done by Ignacio, the bullfighter.



LET US KNOW

An elegy seems to follow the standard form: the initial manifestation of grief and sorrow in the incidence related to death, acknowledgement of the universal nature of loss or death, admiration of the deceased soul, philosophical contemplation on the concept of death, and an ardent endeavour to commemorate the reminiscence of a dead person especially of an acquaintance.

Bullfight seems to be part and parcel sport in Spain and Lorca in this poem tries to portray the outcome of this kind of fascinating but dreadful fight. But, he does not blame this game or amusement as the bull is seen to be worshiped by the Spanish and it is essentially connected to the their traditions and customs. It is considered a challenging task for them to face an aggressive bull; it is like confronting death itself. Lorca in the poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias" endeavours to depict the whole scenario when a bullfighter was facing death in the evening of a paricular day due to the aggressive attack by a bull in the ring.

The author with his creative talent of writing poetry transforms the whole melancholic situation of the menace of death into a celebration of the heroic feat of the bullfighter that indirectly signals the fascination of the passionate Spanish folk for heroic death. The poem shows the grave ambiance of that particular game but nowhere does he seem to condemn or challenge it owing to its connection to the deep rooted as well universally accepted traditional beliefs of the people of Spain. The Bull seems to be adored since the ancient time due to supposed reflection of the instincts of human folk in the images of bulls and even the pictures of them found in Greece, India, Mesopotamia, Egypt and Spain were seen to be depicted on the cave-walls for decorative purposes. Like the bulls, people of Spain also worship those who battle with the powerful animals. This tradition, known as National Fiesta, is symbolic in the sense that similar to its celebration of heroic death during fighting, it celebrates common death of human beings that is constantly facing deadly moments even while leading life itself. Bullfighting is so deeply embedded in the minds of the Spanish people that marking the importance of it Ortegay Gasset comments, "If bullfights can't be understood, to understand our people's psychology will get really harder."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Is the poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias" an elegy?

Q 5: What are the four phases of lamentation "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias"

6.4.3 Major Themes

The following are some of the major themes of the poem.

Celebration of Cultural Practices:

One of the major themes of this poem is the celebration of cultural practices as prevailing in Spain. The Spanish people always

place different aspects associated with the culture in the very first position and they celebrate the feelings of nationalism enthusiastically. Their affection for bullfighting is very much prevalent in the cultural scenario as the citizens consider it as a sign of gallantry and honour. Lorca's poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias" is the best manifestation of the importance of culture and traditional practices that place the spirit of nationalism above anything else.

Death

Death is one of the hovering aspects in Lorca's poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias" as it depicts the elegiac mood of the poet while unfolding the incident of bull fighting that caused severe wounds and finally, death to his friend Ignacio in the fighting ring. Loss is unavoidable; death is a part of human life. Lament for the dead one seems to be preset beneath each line of the poem. The Spanish people believe that it is courageous to accept death through a challenging or courageous task like bullfighting than to the embrace natural death. The practice of bullfighting defines the fundamental character of a nation, which recognises human life as becoming continuously face to face with death.

Isolation and Melancholy

Lorca's earnest longing or attempt for bringing spiritual, cultural and religious reforms to the Spanish society and the subsequent results of these attempts have brought a melancholic mood into his own self. He poetically reveals the problems associated with the acceptance of the self in the hostile world, struggle to surpass isolation with the help of love and sympathy as well as the existential complications. Death and anxiety appears to haunt his life as well as his poetry. By announcing death as noble and heroic, Lorca's poem, for instance, "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias", attempts to teach humanity to take death positively by incorporating it with cultural practices. He does not wish for immortality on earth; but accepts mortal nature of human beings in a befitting way.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: What is the most do minant theme in the poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias"?

Q 7: Other than death, what are the additional significant aspects seen in Lorca'a poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias"?

Q 8: How does Lorca reflect Spanish culture and tradition through his poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias"?

6.4.4 Lorca's Poetic Style

F. G. Lorca seems to follow a peculiar kind of style in his poetry where the use of powerful symbol contains the meaning of his literary work. Though the symbols vary from work to work, the recurrent theme is undoubtedly death. Andalusia where Lorca should have been born permeates through his works giving it unique feelings of Spain. His poems have lyrical or song like qualities that talk about the culture of Andalusia. His poetry seems to evoke rather than describe. Lorca's poetic prowess can be noticed in the style he employs in the poem. He uses short lines in asymmetrical patterns to explore his anguish and suffering. He shows proficiency in his use of metaphors, which are unusual as they have their own significance. His symbols are basically the Moon, water, blood and the horse, metals and grass. The Moon symbolises death as well as fertility, eroticism, beauty etc.; water stands for life and vitality; Grass and metals indicate death. His works are full of traditional and folk materials. Conventional songs and other music with the traces of Spanish culture seem to dominate his poetry.

Lorca is a great experimenter with different poetic as well as dramatic performances who was undoubtedly influenced by the miscellaneous artistic forms and styles developed during his time period. His plays and poetry combine components of Andalusian myth with stylish and often surrealistic poetic methods. Due to the experimental nature, his works do not fit easily into any particular

fold; his work vaires widely between different styles, and as he matured as a poet he developed more and more innovative and unusual forms that would undoubtedly revolutionize Spanish-language poetry. In the early days of his poetic career, his verse was marked by modern techniques as well as Surrealistic style which were followed by Spanish artist like Salvador Dali. In the later part, his style was heavily influenced by the poetry of American intellectual Walt Whitman after his travel to America. Moreover, the folk music of Spanish countryside also shaped his poetic tendencies.

6.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF LORCA

Federico Garcia Lorca is one of the celebrated figures in the Spanish world of literature who appears to be the Spain's most famous poet as well as dramatist just after Cervantes. Influenced by the Andalusian revival of 20th century, Lorca's poems are filled with the spirit of nationalism for which his fame has spread far and wide and different critics appreciate his works due to his authentic presentation of the Spanish cultural practices and beliefs with pride and glory.

Xon De Ros in his article "Science and Myths in Llanto por Ignacio Sanchez Mejias" comments on the issue of grief as shown by Lorca due to the untimly death of his friend Ignaciao by a fierce bull in the ring for bullfighting. Though it is a personal loss to the poet Lorca being an intimate friend, it seems not to be a poem evoking personal grief but it has "a wider significance beyond the personal expression of grief". Xon De Ros is trying to express Lorca's sense of nationalism reflected in his poem particularly in "Llanto por Ignacio Sanchez Mejias". His poetry is marked by Ebr Yener as "mood of mourning" as the tone of melancholy and sadness is always there. His way of mourning is peculiar as it is associated with not only the loss of his friend but also the loss for the whole nation because the Spanish culture and tradition always acknowledge gallantry shown by the native citizens. Famous critic Rios Ruiz seems to praise Lorca for his deliberate treatment of the theme of bullfight saying that "If bullfight cannot be understood, to understand our people's psychology will get harder."

The Gypsy Ballads (1928) is widely regarded as a masterpiece of Spanish poetry. In this volume, composed of eighteen poems written between 1924 and 1927, Garcia Lorca incorporated images of Gypsy village life with traditional ballad forms to create verse both thematically accessible and lyrically complex. Utilizing such dramatic elements as action, characterisation, and dialogue, Garcia Lorca created what Londre described as "symbolist dramas in miniature." Since its publication, *The Gypsy Ballads* has been popular in Spanish-speaking countries worldwide due to its focus on common people and its use of idiomatic language.



6.6 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, we have learnt that Federico Garcia Lorca's achievement in the field of literature is not unidirectional in its nature; he deals with various issues of modern men in day today life. He is one of the most popular representative poets of Spain who embody authentic picture of the Spanish world. In the poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias" the narrator goes through four phases of lamentation: sudden shock, denial, anger and finally acceptance. Spanish people consider bullfighter as a hero who is the symbol of courage, aggressiveness and victory. Human life is like a coin having two faces—life and death and Lorca tries two celebrate both the aspects with the help of his poem. The poem is an elegy and the sense of lament is present throughout the poem. It has taught humanity an essential lesson that though death is inevitable one should know how to face it valiantly. No one knows when death knocks at the door of human life; accepting it is certainly an art. The main motif behind the poem is to highlight the fact that facing death is not a big deal in human life as it is an inevitable phenomenon. But to consider it in the positive light, as the poet has done in the poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias", should be the proper way to confront death. Spanish culture is very much attuned to this outlook as in 1930, Lorca stated in a speech that 'Spain is the only country where death is a national spectacle'. He seemed to remain true to his native culture of Andalusia, and to the landscape from where his poetic language has gathered its strength and essence that is truly national in character.



6.7 FURTHER READING

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Stainton, Leslie. *(2013). Lorca: A Dream of Life. London: Bloomsbury,*

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Web Resources:

http://www.boppin.com/lorca/lament.html



6.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Lorca's major poetry collections include: *Impresiones y paisajes (Impressions and Landscapes* 1918), *Libro de Poemas* (Book of

Poems 1921), *Suites* (posthumously published in 1983), *Caciones* (published in 1927), *Odes* (Written 1928), *Lament for Death of a Bullfighter and Other Poems* (1937), *Primeras canciones* (First Songs 1936), Selected Poems (1941).

Ans to Q 2: *Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter and Other Poems* (1935) is also considered a masterpiece. This four-part elegy was occasioned by the mauling death of Spain's most celebrated matador, Ignacio Sanchez Mejias, who was one of Garcia Lorca's closest friends.

Ans to Q 3: Lorca drew upon all elements of Spanish life and culture to create poetry at once traditional, modern, personal, and universal… …combined classical verse with folk and Gypsy ballads… …liberated language from its structural constraints… …experimented with startling imagery, scenic metaphors, and complex rhythms… …in his drama too, Lorca wrote about death, frustrated sexuality, and the relationship between dream and reality.

Ans to Q 4: Yes, the poem is truly an elegy… …bears a note of sadness and melancholy at the untimely death of the young Spanish bullfighter Ignacio Sanchez Mejias… …elegy appears to follow the standard form: the initial manifestation of grief and sorrow in the incidence related to death, acknowledgement of the universal nature of loss or death, admiration of the deceased soul, philosophical contemplation on the concept of death, and an ardent endeavour to commemorate the reminiscence of a dead person especially of an acquaintance.

Ans to Q 5: The poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias"is divided into four sections that have relevance with the four stages of human psyche… …in all the sections, the most dominant theme seems to be the death which is inescapable.

Ans to Q 6: In the poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias", the narrator goes through four phases of lamentation: sudden shock, denial, anger and finally acceptance… …the news of Ignacio's death in the bullfighting has given sudden shock to the narrator of the poem with a sense of anger… … he learns to accept death with a positive attitude as it is inevitable.

Ans to Q 7: Celebration of cultural practices… …note of lamentation… …isolation and melancholy… …importance of society… …willingness to accept death heroically.

Ans to Q 8: Spanish people always place different aspects associated with the culture in the very first position… …rejoice the feelings of nationalism…. …Spainiard's affection for bullfighting is very much widespread in the cultural scenario… …symbol of chivalry and honour… …this poem best displays the significance of culture and traditional practices that place the spirit of nationalism above anything else.



6.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Write a comprehensive note on "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias" by Federico Garcia Lorca.

Q 2: Discuss the four stages of the poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias"?

Q 3: How does Lorca celebrate the cultural practices of bullfighting in the poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias"?

Q 4: Discuss the life and works of Lorca with particular reference to the poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias".

Q 5: Is death a major aspect in Lorca's poem? Discuss with reference to the poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias."

Q 6: How does Lorca formulate the pattern of grief in his poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias"?

Q 7: Discuss Lorca's narrative style with reference to the poem "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias."

Q 8: Discuss how Garcia Lorca has been received as a poet of the 20th century.

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UNIT 7: PABLO NERUDA: “ARS POETICA”

UNIT STRUCTURE

7.1 Learning Objectives

7.2 Introduction

7.3 Pablo Neruda: The Poet

- 7.3.1 His Life
- 7.3.2 His Works

7.4 The Poem: “Ars Poetica”

- 7.4.1 The Text of the Poem
- 7.4.2 Reading the Poem
- 7.4.3 Major Themes
- 7.4.4 Neruda’s Poetic Style

7.5 Critical Reception of Neruda

7.6 Let us Sum up

7.7 Further Reading

7.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

7.9 Possible Questions

7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss Neruda as one of the most celebrated and highly discussed poets in World Literature
- gain some basic ideas regarding the life and works of Neruda
- introduce yourself to Latin American poetry through Neruda’s poem
- get acquainted with Neruda’s poetry in the context of his time and history
- read “Ars Poetica” critically in terms of its themes and style

7.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we have discussed the poet Lorca with reference to his poem “Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias”. This unit shall introduce us to the Latin American poet Pablo Neruda who will be studies in terms of

the prescribed poem "Ars Poetica". As we read the poem, we realise that this poem is not about the art of writing poetry but about the experience of a poet undergoing the 'labour' of poetic creation. The poem "Ars Poetica" is one of Neruda's most discussed poems that explores the experience of the torment, pain, and death and decay that the artist has to undergo while engaged in the moment of composing poetry or creating art. This unit is designed to provide you with the introductory information and basic understanding of the poem "Ars Poetica". You should not treat the content of this unit as complete and exhaustive as it is just a humble beginning for you to enter the mystic and enticing realm of Neruda's poetry. Beginning with this unit, try to develop your own reading of the poem. Follow the list of references, which will enrich your knowledge of the poetry of Neruda.

7.3 PABLO NERUDA: THE POET

In the following subsections, you will get to read about the life and works of Neruda.

7.3.1 His Life



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Pablo_Neruda

Pablo Neruda (1904-1973), one of the greatest Latin American poets, was born on 12 July 1904, in the town of Parral in Chile. Pablo Neruda was his first name adopted in memory of the Czechoslovac poet Jan Neruda. His real name is Neftalí Ricardo Reyes Basoalto, christened after his mother's middle name. Born to José del Carmen Reyes Morales, a Railway worker and to Rosa Basoalto, a schoolteacher who died soon after his birth, Neruda spent his childhood and youth at Temuco. It was at Temuco that Neruda got acquainted with Gabriela Mistral, a future Nobel Prize winner, working as the head of the girls' secondary school, and developed a close relationship with her. This correspondence served as one of his early inspirations for writing

poetry. Despite his father's discouragement, Neruda started writing for journals at an age as early as thirteen years. His first publication, an essay entitled "Entusiasmoy Perseverancia", appeared in a local daily called *La Mañana.* Since 1920, he started contributing regularly to the literary journal *Selva Austral* under the pen name of Pablo Neruda. His main intention of publishing under a pseudonym was to avoid his father's disapproval of his career in writing.

In 1921, at the age of sixteen, Neruda went to Santiago and joined the University of Chile to study pedagogy and French, and thought of the career of a teacher. However, soon he realised his weakness towards poetry and decided to devout his whole life to poetry. By 1923, Neruda published his first book of verses *Crepusculario* which included some of his poems written till that time. In 1924, he published one of his most read and highly translated works *Veintepoemas de amory unacanciondesesperada.* This collection of love poems encouraged numerous criticism and controversies on account of its bold treatment of sexuality and eroticism. By the age of twenty, Neruda established himself as a familiar name in the field of poetry across the world. However, despite this worldwide fame, he had to live in stark poverty. In 1926, he published the collection *Tentativa del hombre infinito* (*The Attempt of the Infinite Man*) and the novel *El habitante y suesperanza* (*The Inhabitant and his Hope*).

Between 1927 and 1935, he had to serve the government by being in charge of a number of honorary consulships. This job made him travel to Burma, Sri Lanka, Java, Singapore, Buenos Aires, Barcelona, Madrid and many other places. During this difficult period, he continued writing and published, among other works, *Residencia en la tierra* (1933), a collection of surrealistic poems. This volume marked his literary breakthrough. In Java, he got married to a Dutch bank employee named Maryka Antonieta Hagenaar Vogelzang. After his return to Chile, Neruda was again posted as diplomats in Buenos Aires and then in Barcelona, Spain. Later, he

succeeded Gabriela Mistral as consul in Madrid. Here he developed a lively literary circle that included writers like Rafael Alberti, Federico García Lorca, and the Peruvian poet César Vallejo.



LET US KNOW

Throughout his life, Neruda happened to experience different moments of emotional highs and lows very vividly, and these experiences were well reflected in his poetry. At moments of inspiration, he was capable of intense romanticism. His passionate love affairs, especially with his third wife, often inspired him to delve deeper into the realm of poetry. Neruda's capacity for experiencing and expressing joy and reverence toward life is evident in works such as *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* (1924) and *100 Love Sonnets* (1960).

His experiences of the Spanish Civil War affected him a lot. The most important incident that changed his attitude towards poetry and politics was the execution of García Lorca by forces loyal to the Spanish dictator Franco. After Lorca's death, Neruda became an ardent communist. He joined the Republican movement, first in Spain, and later in France, where he started working on his collection of poems *España en el Corazón* (1937). The same year he returned to his native country, to which he had been recalled, and his poetry during the following period was characterised by an orientation towards political and social matters. *España en el Corazón* had a great impact by virtue of its being printed in the middle of the front during the civil war. Bolstered by his experiences in the Spanish Civil War, Neruda became an admirer of the Soviet Union and of Joseph Stalin, especially for the role it played in defeating Nazi Germany and the idealist views of theoretical Marxist doctrine.

Neruda's next diplomatic post was as Consul General in Mexico City, from 1940 to 1943.By this time, he was already

separated from his first wife and during his stay in Mexico, he married del Carril. Neruda faced another series of severe criticism and controversies over his association with a Mexican painter David Alfaro Siqueiros, who was accused of being one of the conspirators in the failed attempt to assassin Leon Trotsky. In Mexico, Pablo Neruda developed acquaintances with the famous Mexican writer Octavio Paz. However, Neruda's growing interest in Stalinism later created a rift between these two friends.

Neruda returned to Chile in 1943, and in 1945, he was elected senator of the Republic. In the same year, he joined the Communist Party of Chile. Due to his protests against his one-time political alley and then President González Videla's repressive policy against striking miners in 1947, he had to live underground in his own country for two years until he managed to leave in 1949. Neruda took advantage of the slight resemblance between him and his friend, the future Nobel Prize-winning novelist, Miguel Ángel Asturias, and travelled to Europe using Asturias's passport. Pablo Picasso helped him to enter into Paris. Until his return to Chile in 1952, Neruda spent the three years of exile travelling extensively throughout Europe as well as visiting India, China, Sri Lanka and the Soviet Union. Most of his writings published during that period of exile bear the stamp of his political activities. During this period, a Chilean singer called Matilde Urrutia took care of him following which Neruda began an affair with her. This relationship would later culminate into their marriage.

In 1952, the Chilean Socialist Party was going to nominate Salvador Allende as its candidate for the presidential elections. The party was keen to have Neruda, who was by now regarded as Chile's most prominent left-wing literary figure, in their campaign. The González-Videla government was marred by allegations of corruption. Neruda returned to Chile in that year and rejoined his then wife Delia del Carril, with whom his marriage was crumbling. Del Carril came to know about his affair with Matilde Urrutia. She

managed the Chilean officials to lift his arrest and allow Urrutia and Neruda to go to Italy. Neruda spent the rest of his life with Urrutia in Chile.

In the year of 1970, Neruda was nominated as a candidate for the Chilean presidency. However, he extended his support to Salvador Allende helping him winning the election. Shortly thereafter Neruda was appointed the Chilean ambassador to France from 1970 to 1972. During this period in Paris, Neruda helped to renegotiate the billions of external debt of Chile, owed to European and American banks. However, within months of his arrival in Paris, his health began to deteriorate and he had to return home.

One of the most important aspects of the poetic genius in Neruda was that **even in times of great happiness he could slip dark imagery into his poetry**. This tendency also heightens the sense of mystery surrounding the poet's poetic sensibility. When read in a different light, his love poems appear to be a subtle but powerful wail against life's tragedies. Neruda's moments of happiness were often interposed with extreme depression; politics or financial troubles often forced him to abandon his friends, his country, and even his wives. On such occasions, the passion he had reserved for these loves often turned inward and resulted in an aggravating sense of loneliness. The dark undertones in his daily life also were represented in his poems. Even during the times of composing love poems in times of joy, he sometimes composed poems dealing with the crude macabre. *Residence on Earth* (1935) is one such collection that details the sinister energy the poet was able to derive from everyday objects.

It was in this quest to seek out and attempt to describe the essence of life that he most closely resembled, and sometimes imitate, Walt Whitman. Like Whitman's poems, on many occasions, Neruda's poems, like those included in his *General Study* (1950), were an attempt to discover and explain truths across multiplicity of themes. His works often tried to connect nature with nation, with

history, as well as with freedom. Paradoxically, Neruda was also able to capture the intrinsic value inherent in plants, animals, and simple objects without unduly colouring the odes with emotion. His *Elementary Odes* (1954) also followed Whitman's lead, and were heralded for their insightful brand of simplicity. Neruda's greatest literary success was his ability to approach the grandiose and the minute, the tragic and the joyous, with equal patience and reverence.

Neruda's views on Time and Death

As a poet, Neruda differed starkly from his European counterparts in his treatment of time and death. In the traditional Western poetry obsessed with death, time is often represented as winged, a thing in constant flux, a fleet-footed phenomenon in eternal hurry. However, it was not so in the case of Neruda. For Neruda, each moment that passes by emerges into a silent and slowly accumulating menace that would fill his environment. In him, time grows like a parasitic plant, eating away at life. Time, for Neruda, is a symbol serving as a bridge between the related themes of death and of solitude.

Neruda also tried to give voice to the oppressed. In the year of 1945, Neruda composed one of his most famous poems *Las alturas de Macchu Picchu*, which formed the earlier part of his monumental work *Canto General.* In this poem, Neruda strives to show his concern for man. Man is what matters because 'man is wider than all the sea'. In this poem, Neruda wants to get through all the men who died building the city so that they might rise again to birth – with him and through him – as his brothers. It was his desire to give voice to the voiceless, give freedom to the captives, give energy to the weak and give life to the dying that encouraged Neruda to compose such poems. *Canto General* is one of his greatest achievements that represent the poet's boundless ambition of translating history into the language of lyric. The poem involves the whole of the South American continent, its flora and fauna, its dreams and realities. He explores the history of the people of his country Chile that goes deep into the history of the continent.

In 1971, Neruda was awarded the Nobel Prize. The next year he was awarded with the prestigious Golden Wreath Award at the Struga Poetry Evenings. In 1973, Neruda was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Despite his illness, Neruda was extremely happy during his final years in Chile, and his love for his country served as an equally powerful contributor to his poetry. He passed away in the year of 1973.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Which are the important aspects of Neruda's poetry?

Q 2: How did the Spanish Civil War affect Neruda as a poet?

Q 3: How did Neruda differ from the other European poets in terms of his views on Time and Death?

Q 4: What is the significance of *Canto General* by Pablo Neruda?

7.3.2 His Works

As a poet, who earned worldwide popularity at a tender age, both because of his intense poetic sensibility as well as radical political stance, Neruda drew his inspirations from various great authors of the past as well as his contemporary times. As a boy, Neruda met Gabriela Mistral, a future Nobel Laureate and derived his early inspirations from her. In 1933, Neruda met the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca in Buenos Aires, Argentina and developed deep friendship with him. Lorca, along with many other renowned writers and poets, had deep influence in the development of political attitude in his poetry. Garcia Lorca also introduced him to influential Communists and publicly supported Neruda's poetry. Neruda developed interest in both national and international aspects of literature. He was inspired to translate foreign works by many older and influential authors like William Blake and William Shakespeare. At the same time, he also carefully studied the major Spanish language writers like Garcia Lorca, Jorge Luis Borges, and Miguel

de Cervantes. However, throughout his career, Neruda acknowledged that Walt Whitman had been his deepest inspiration.

Neruda began his career as a writer at a very early age. On 18th July, 1917, when he was only thirteen, he published his first work, an essay entitled *Entusiasmoyperseverancia* (*Enthusiasm and Perseverance*) in the local daily newspaper under the name Neftalí Reyes. As Neftalí Reyes, he published numerous poems, such as "Misojos" ("My eyes"), and essays in local magazines from 1918 to mid-1920. By mid-1920, when he adopted the pseudonym Pablo Neruda, he established himself as a well-known author of poetry, prose, and journalism. His first volume of verse, *Crepusculario* (*Book of Twilights*), was published in 1923. In 1924, he published his next volume of love poems *Veintepoemas de amory unacanciónde sesperada* (*Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*), which was highly controversial and severely critiqued by readers for its eroticism, especially in connection with the poet's young age.



LET US KNOW

You will like to know that the Chilean publishing house Nascimento, which published his earlier collection, refused to print the love poems, as it was felt that they were too erotic to be published at the cost of the good reputation of the press. Love and sex have long been traditional subjects of poetry. However, it was the treatment of the erotic theme that challenged the traditional construction of love and sex. Idealism, that centred the earlier representations, was replaced by sensualism, abstraction by concreteness. In *Veintepoemas de amor*, love was not sentimental and unrequited; through the representation of love, Neruda rather openly celebrated the exalted erotic passion and the sensual delights of the flesh. Neruda, in this collection, set aside all the poetic conventions in order to celebrate the call of anonymous flesh and carnal pleasure: the body of woman, any woman, all women.

In 1926, Neruda published the poetry collection *Tentativa del hombre infinito* (*The Attempt of the Infinite man*) and the novel *El habitantey suesperanza* (*The Inhabitant and his Hope*). *Residencia en la tierra*, published in 1933, was a collection of some surrealistic poems. After joining the Republican movement, first in Spain, and later in France, where he started working on his collection of poems *España en el Corazón* and published it in 1938. In 1939, as the Consul General in Mexico, Neruda rewrote his *Canto General de Chile* and transformed it into an epic poem about the whole South American continent, its nature, its people and its historical destiny. This work, entitled *Canto General*, consisting of approximately 250 poems brought together into fifteen literary cycles, was published in Mexico in 1950, and also underground in Chile. It constitutes the central part of Neruda's production. Shortly after its publication, *Canto General* was translated into some ten languages and acclaimed critical response from across the world.

In 1943, Neruda made a tour of Peru, where he visited Machu Picchu. The beauty of the Inca citadel later inspired *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, a book-length poem in twelve parts, which he completed in 1945, and which marked a growing awareness and interest in the ancient civilisations of the Americas, themes he was to explore further in *Canto General*. In *Alturas*, Neruda celebrated the achievement of Machu Picchu, but also condemned the slavery, which had made it possible. In *Canto XII*, he called upon the dead of many centuries to be born again and to speak through him. Martín Espada, poet and professor of creative writing at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, has hailed the work as a masterpiece, declaring "there is no greater political poem".

Neruda's admiration of Soviet Union and Marxist ideologies echoed in poems such as "Canto a Stalingrado" (1942) and "Nuevo canto de amor a Stalingrado" (1943). In 1953, Neruda was awarded the Stalin Peace Prize. In the same year at Stalin's death, Neruda wrote an ode to him; during World War II, he wrote poetry in praise

of Fulgencio Batista "Saludo a Batista", ("Salute to Batista") and later to Fidel Castro too. During his days in exile in various European countries between 1949 and 1952, what Neruda published carried the mark of his political activities. *Las Uvas yel Viento,* published in 1954, can be regarded as the diary of Neruda's political exile. In *Odaselementales* (1954-1959) his message is expanded into a more extensive description of the world, where the objects of the hymns-things, events and relations-are duly presented in alphabetic form.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Name the poets who inspired Neruda.

Q 6: Why did the Chilean publishing houses refuse to publish the poems of Neruda?

7.4 THE POEM: "ARS POETICA"

Read the following subsections to gain a better grasp of the various aspects of the poem "Ars Poetica".

7.4.1 The Text of the Poem

The poem "Ars Poetica" was published in his collection *Residence on the Earth* (1933). The text of the poem in English translation is as follows:

Between shadow and space, young girls and garrison,
saddled with a strange heart, with funeral dreams,
taken suddenly pale, my forehead withered
by the rage of a widower's grief for each day of lost life —
oh for each invisible drop I drink in a stupor
and for each sound I harbour, trembling,
I nurse the same far thirst, the same cold fever,
a noise in labour, a devious anguish —
as if thieves or emanations were coming —
in the enveloping shell, rooted, profound,

like a humiliated scullion, a bell cracked a little,
a mirror tarnished, the fug of a deserted house
whose guests come in at night sloshed to perdition,
with a stench of clothes scattered on the floor
and a yearning for flowers —
another way to put it perhaps, a touch less sadly:
but the hard truth is if you want it so,
this wind that whacks at my breast,
the unbounded expanse of night collapsing in my bedroom,
the morning's rumours afire with sacrifice
now beg of me this prophecy I have, with mournfulness
and a lurch of objects calling without answers,
with a truceless movement, a name I can't make out.

7.4.2 Reading the Poem

The poem "Ars Poetica" narrativises the experience of a creator, a poet or an artist, at the moment of creativity. The speaker does not seem to be addressing anyone as audience, either real or imaginary; the voice seems to be talking to itself as a kind of brooding over a personal journey to the inner self. The narrative seems to be a monologue in which the speaker strives hard at self-exploration and understand the moment of artistic creativity where he himself is the artist trying to give an expression to the ever confusing and paradoxical experiences of life.

In the **first two lines** of the poem, the poet tries to set the stage for the reader, disclosing the conditions in which he has undertaken this journey. It is a situation 'between shadow and space', a realm between reality and dream, between the beautiful and youthful and the dangerous (young girls and garrisons), he starts his journey. The poet does not understand his own feelings as 'saddled with a strange heart' he enters 'with funeral dreams'– with dreams soaked in the feelings of death and despair. In the next two lines, the poet's responds to this situation with a crumpled forehead.

He is filled from inside with a rage that can be compared to the anger evoked by the deep sense of loss experienced by a widower at the realisation of the lost possibilities of life at the death of his companion. This anguish grows within him, unknowingly like the 'invisible drop' of emotions that he does 'drink in a stupor'. The poet is aware as well as watchful of everything happening outside; 'for each sound' that he harbours, he nurses the same feeling of anguish, which he understands as the 'same far thirst' and 'the same cold fever'. Both these 'thirst' and 'fever' condition an internal burning desire for something unknown, unrealised that well up the anguish inside of the poet. This anguish torments him from within; he shrieks like a woman at childbirth. He experiences a sensation as if ghosts or apparitions coming, flying towards him.

In **lines 11-12**, the images of 'the enveloping shell,' the 'humiliated scullion' refer to the defence mechanisms we employ in order to cope with anguish. The image of the mirror being tarnished refer to the defragmented, disintegrated understanding of the self– confusing and multiple layered images of the face being reflected on the pieces of the broken mirror. The defence mechanism, in terms of the 'enveloping shell,' distances the poet from the self. In lines 12-16, the poet draws the image of the 'fug' of a 'deserted house', where drunken guests come stumbling in with their stinking clothes. He employs the images of the fug in the deserted house, the drunken guests as signifiers of death and decay. However, this dogged situation itself has a desire to get purified; the environment of death and decay has a yearning to get recovered; the stinking house itself has a yearning for the fresh smell of the flowers. The house desires for the freshness of the flowers, which will balance the stench and the mustiness.

Lines 17-24 are part of the poet's attempt to re-phrase his realisation in gentler, plainer terms. For him, the hard, cold truth is that the 'wind that whacks at' his heart – all of these vast, descriptive dreams, possibly the answers to all the questions of the universe –

dissolve in the in-between state. The poet is describing a feeling of forgetting what it was he was dreaming, what it was he was about to discover or realize. He wakes up before he can solve the mystery. Every night, the poet receives an infinite amount of substance, knowledge and prophecy in his dreams.

This poem is a description of that moment of the artist being engaged in the process of creation and the detailing of how he can only capture a fraction of his experiences with the world with his writing. The usage of the 'shell' metaphor is of particular note in this work. The description of the humiliated scullion brings to mind an image of a servant wearing a trembling, faltering smile while being slated by a superior. The shell that he refers to is the false smile worn while enduring the abuse the world unleashes on the individual. The tarnished mirror is also significant because it is a metaphor for the defence mechanisms that humans employ in traumatic situations. However, we do not see clearly in the tarnished mirror, as the world does not see us clearly, when we erect our facades. Therefore, it refers to a condition when recreation of the experiences in art becomes difficult and tormenting.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: What does the poem "Ars Poetica" narrativise?

Q 8: What, according to you, is the poem "Ars Poetica" all about?

7.4.3 Major Themes

In "Ars Poetica", unlike what the title of the poem suggests, the poet does not deal with the art of composition of poetry or creation on art. Instead, he presents an image of the **artist at work**. The artist is a kind of sentinel to everything that surrounds life; he is alert to the activities within world and responsible for capturing every sign of life, no matter how vague or insignificant that might seem. And, there is no necessity to impose an absolute order and meaning on

the experience that the sentinel perceives; because to put it into a structure is to afflict it with violence.

The poem is full of paradoxical experiences and explanations that contribute to the development of a sense of **internal confusion significant of the modern world** in which we live. The poet here seems as sensitive as a 19th century romantic; but he is no longer a visionary like them. He simply exposes his inability to understand the mystery of his experience. The poem reads like a catalogue of desolate experiences in which the speaker, who seems to have embodied an extraordinarily sensitive perception, is repeatedly and unexpectedly disheartened by what he sees and feels. It is very much like a dramatic soliloquy, an interior monologue. It is as if a journey into the inner mind, where the speaker, immersed in the free flow of thoughts, seems to be suddenly jolted into another plane of consciousness requiring yet another mode of discourse.

In the poem, the verses scintillate with sensuous imagery despite representing the anguish about the contemporary social order. This poem was written when Neruda was serving as a diplomat, and when his main themes in poetry used to be time, death, chaos and the past. His preoccupation with history, especially Chile's relationship with Spain as an aftermath of colonisation, unleashed certain uncertainties in his mind that led to his fragmented style. Neruda deliberately juxtaposes **the crude against the beautiful** in order to shock the reader out of complacency. Nature, in this poem becomes intensified and there is deliberate reference to vagueness and violence. In the beginning of the poem, the poet clubs together 'girls and garrisons' to induce an understanding of freshness and youth moving towards destruction caused by battles. To express his own sentiments, he uses very uncommonly used but at the same time domestic metaphors like 'a widower's grief' and 'a humiliated scullion'.

The desire to live and recreate amidst **death and decay** is an important theme of the poem. The poem is full of hints and

imageries of death and decay. There is reference to violence in the 'wind that whacks at my breast'. This reference to violence in the wind has political connotations, suggesting the present condition of his country and the people. Neruda has represented a haunted house with fustiness of air. People who come into this stale smelling, mouldy and stuffy house are intoxicated to such an extent that they are ignorant and forgetful of everything outside their world. They are as if in a state of eternal death–'sloshed to perdition' – from where there is no path to escape. In death and decay, the intoxicated people are stark naked in their forgetfulness – as the room is filled with the stench of their 'clothes scattered on the floor'. However, within this environment of death and decay, the house has a desire for life. The 'stench of clothes' discarded uselessly awakens 'a yearning for flower' that would drive out the odour of the other. The environment outside is actually entering the house and the description of the 'night collapsing in my bedroom' is acutely surrealistic where the action of 'collapsing' continues the process of general decay that surround the poet.

The **theme of poetic creation** is an important aspect of the poem. In "Ars Poetica", Neruda talks about the different ways in which inspiration can find a writer and the difficulty of creating a tangible product from it. For him, inspiration comes when he least expects it; through no effort of his. He talks about inspiration coming from 'a tarnished mirror, the fug of a deserted house'. He is inspired by his surroundings, by the experiences of the people around him: inspiration is an external experience that finds him. Neruda has discovered and realised that poetry is not created simply by beauty or what is beautiful; poetry must be recovered or created from a perception of that which appears grim and destroyed, and from the hidden recesses of human consciousness. In the phrase 'a name I can't make out', Neruda refers to that realm which remains undetected, uncared for, and unthought of, in the human heart. It is something whose recreation through pain is necessary to give birth

to poetry. The poet precludes the reader from trying to find the traditional aspects of romanticism or romantic, nature imagery in his verse. The 'devious anguish' and 'a noise in labour' emphasize that poetry must be born out of suffering.



LET US KNOW

The poem was originally written in Spanish under the title 'Arte Poetica' which can be translated into English simply as 'The Art of Poetry' or 'The Poetic Art'. However, the title "Ars Poetica", chosen by the translator of the poem Nathaniel Tarn, distances the poem from the English language and invests classical connotations to it. The title "Ars Poetica" connects to the classical ideas on the art of poetry followed by the Neo-classicists and the Romantics. Neruda's art is, however, divorced from both traditions; he is distant from Spanish Neo-classical characteristics too. By presenting a series of disjointed images, Neruda deliberately asserts his break from these traditions.

The labour required to articulate the inspiration for creation is emphasised by Neruda in this poem. The difficulty of communicating the ideas and experiences is paralleled to the difficulty of articulation that an infant has to undergo. Neruda believes that the poet has to begin at a state of pure ignorance, like that of an infant, and then mould his work into perfection of expression. Neruda begins by knowing nothing and grows into the prophet of whom "the unbounded expanse of night collapsing in my bedroom, the morning's rumours afire with sacrifice" (20) beg a prophecy. He moves from learning a language to becoming master of it. However, for Neruda, the process of writing or travelling from a moment of ignorance to the moment of articulating experiences is always conditioned by labour.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: Write a note on the theme death and decay in the poem "Ars Poetica".

Q 10: How does the poet explore his ideas regarding the moment of poetic creation in the poem "Ars Poetica"?

7.4.4 Neruda's Poetic Style

Many critics have commented that Neruda was a self-indulgent writer. This self-indulgence was escorted by his deep feelings about his surroundings and his passionate self-expression. This poem also reflects the same attitude on the part of Neruda. From the description of the poem, it is evident that the poetic voice does not address anyone; the poetic voice is indulged with itself in a regressive manner to the world outside. However, the strong sense of paradoxes and the starkly different ideas clubbed together in the poem develop the strong sensations getting infused with his thoughts.

In case of his love poems, the lyricism was conditioned by intellectual word play. Frequent submission to nostalgia and a deliberate confusion regarding time and birth are other aspects of his love poems. The use of the images of the human body as the objects of sexual desire is another important aspect of his poetry. Escaping from the traditional conventions of love poems, Neruda established the body, not the soul, as the supreme object of desire and gratification in love. He often speaks of the world unseen, books unwritten, and the realm unimagined and unthought of. The magic realism of Garcia Gabriel Márquez's mythical land finds an echoe here.

Neruda's poems are full of easily understood images, which enhance the beauty of his poems. He often juxtaposes the crude against the beautiful in order to shock the reader. Images of the mundane with the strange, the new with the ancient, the rational with the mythical, the crude with the beautiful, the grotesque with

the lucid were often clubbed together by him in order to combine paradoxical thoughts. He often uses surrealistic images whose influence comes from French literature, especially from Baudelaire. In his images of nature, he often echoes the great American poet Whitman who had also influenced his language that carries thoughts intensified with sensibility and feelings.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 11: Write a note on the poetic style of Neruda in the poem "Ars Poetica".

7.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF NERUDA

Pablo Neruda is one of the greatest poets in the twentieth century and one of the most read poets in literary history. Gabriel García Márquez, the celebrated novelist from Colombia, referred to him as the world's greatest poet of the 20th century in any language. In his book *The Western Canon*, the noted critic Harold Bloom considered Neruda to be one of the 26 writers central to the Western tradition. Along with Marquez, Neruda is one of the prominent writers who have represented the entire Latin American tradition of writing and literary thoughts emphatically in front of the world.

Neruda was such a poet who could embody many styles and many voices. His monumental works are crucial to almost every important change in the twentieth-century Spanish as well as Latin American poetry. Neruda had the remarkable ability to be always ready to welcome and initiate change as he himself has struggled with his own tradition, to his constant need to search for a new system of expression in each new book. Neruda was a poet perpetually in revolution against himself, against his own tradition. Because of this desire for change, he frequently had difficulties in getting so many of the works, which are recognised as major works today, accepted immediately by the public and critics.

Neruda is often categorised by historians to be a member of a group of Spanish poets named as the Generation of 1927. However, he grew

much popular and greater as well as different than his contemporaries like Vallejo, who too remained one of the influential poets. Many critics have commented that Neruda lacked the ability to be critical in his writings on certain contemporary issues, especially in poetry written on Chile and his people and poets. He has also been derided by many for his inclination towards communism. Earning enough laurels since his teenage days as a poet, Neruda wrote in a variety of styles including surrealist poems, historical epics, political manifestos and other prose writings including his autobiography. His erotically charged love poems, especially those published in his 1924 collection *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* invited severe criticism and controversies to the young poet. He often wrote in green ink, which regarded as a personal symbol for desire and hope. During the last few decades of the twentieth century, Neruda became the most quoted poet in the world whose poetry inspired readers from all generations and all ages. His poems have been translated to more than fifty languages all over the world as he still remains one of the most sold and most read poets of all languages all over the world.



7.6 LET US SUM UP

As we finish reading this unit, we have come across various facts and information on Neruda the poet and his poetry. We have come to know that Neruda was not just a poet; he was one of the most influential political activists of Chile in mid-twentieth century. Both Neruda's political life and poetry bear marks of his communist inclination. His poems ranged from themes of naked physical love to patriotism, exploration of the natural world to the songs of the oppressed. The poem "Ars Poetica" represents the poet's philosophy of poetry. The chief thesis of the poem is that the moment of poetic creation is accompanied and conditioned by the experience of deep pain and suffering.



7.7 FURTHER READING

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Dey, Susnigdha. (1988). *Contemporary Latin American Literature*. New Delhi: BR Publishing Corp.

Dutt, Ajanta. (Ed). (2004). *Neruda, Walcott and Atwood: Poets of the Americas*. New Delhi: Worldview.

Marcenac, Jean. (1971). *Pablo Neruda*. 3rd ed. Paris: Sehgars.

Neruda, Pablo. (1978). *Memoirs.* Tr. Hardie St. Martin. London: Penguin.



7.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Even in times of great happiness he could slip dark imagery into his poetry… …his love poems are powerful wail against life's tragedies… …his moments of happiness were often interposed with extreme depression… …he often tried to connect nature with nation and history… …he also tried to capture the intrinsic value inherent in plants, animals, and simple objects without unduly colouring the odes with emotion.

Ans to Q 2: The Spanish Civil War changed his attitude towards poetry and politics… …the execution of poet García Lorca by forces loyal to the Spanish dictator Franco… …Neruda became a communist… …joined the Republican movement, first in Spain, and later in France… …Neruda became an admirer of the Soviet Union and of Joseph Stalin… …affected much of his writings.

Ans to Q 3: The traditional Western poetry obsessed with death, time is often represented as winged, a thing in constant flux, a fleet-footed phenomenon in eternal hurry… …for Neruda, each moment that passes by emerges into a silent and slowly accumulating menace that would fill his environment… …in him, time grows like a parasitic

plant, eating away at life… …time a symbol serving as a bridge between the death and solitude.

Ans to Q 4: Here Neruda shows his concern for man… …because, 'man is wider than all the sea'… …he wanted to get through all the men who died building the city so that they might rise again to birth… …the desire to give voice to the voiceless, give freedom to the captives, give energy to the weak and give life to the dying that encouraged Neruda to compose *Canto General.*

Ans to Q 5: Gabriela Mistral provided the inspirations… …Federico Garcia Lorca helped in the development of political attitude in his poetry… …he was inspired to translate foreign works by many older and influential authors like William Blake and William Shakespeare… … Neruda acknowledged that Walt Whitman had been his deepest inspiration.

Ans to Q 6: They refused to print the love poems, as they were too erotic… …love and sex are traditional subjects of poetry… .but Neruda's treatment of the erotic themes challenged the traditional construction of love and sex… …he openly celebrated the exalted erotic passion and the sensual delights of the flesh… ….Neruda, openly celebrated the body of woman, any woman, all women

Ans to Q 7: The poem "Ars Poetica" narrativises the experience of a creator… …the speaker does not seem to be addressing anyone as audience… …the speaker is brooding over a personal journey into the inner self… …It seems to be a monologue in which the speaker strives hard to explore his self and express the ever confusing and paradoxical experiences of life.

Ans to Q 8: This poem is a description of that moment of the artist being engaged in the process of creation and the detailing of how he can only capture a fraction of his experiences with the world with his writing.

Ans to Q 9: The theme of death and decay is central… …connected to poetic creation… …the poet's understanding of his own self… …experience of anguish… …images of death and decay… …idea of rebirth or revival.

Ans to Q 10: The poem is not about the art of creation… …it is about the moment the poet is at work… …a moment of extreme suffering and pain… …a moment when mysterious, confusing, unimagined images and ideas of the world struggle to get expression.

Ans to Q 11: Absence of a visible addressee… …inwardness… …interior monologue… …passionate expression of experiences… …paradoxical thoughts clubbed together… …combination of opposing images… …surrealistic description and so on.



7.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Write a critical reception of "Ars Poetica" with special reference to Neruda's understanding of his function as a poet.

Q 2: Discuss "Ars Poetica" with reference to the central themes of the poem.

Q 3: Give an account of Neruda's use of images in the poem "Ars Poetica". What purpose do the images serve him in the poem?

Q 4: Discuss, in detail, the style of Pablo Neruda's poetry as reflected in the poem "Ars Poetica." Try to compare and contrast your views with reference to some other poems of the poet that you have read.

Q 5: Do you think that the poem "Ars Poetica" thematically does not bear any connection to Horace's classical text of the same title? Respond to it with a critical reading of the poem.

Q 6: Pablo Neruda is one of the greatest poets in the 20th century and one of the most read poets in literary history. Give an account of the critical reception of Neruda.

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UNIT 8: FRANZ KAFKA: "THE METAMORPHOSIS"

UNIT STRUCTURE

8.1 Learning Objectives

8.2 Introduction

8.3 Franz Kafka: The Writer

8.3.1 His Life

8.3.2 His Works

8.4 Reading the Story

8.4.1 The Storyline

8.4.2 Major Themes

8.4.3 Major Characters

8.4.4 Kafka's Narrative Style

8.5 Critical Reception of Kafka and "The Metamorphosis"

8.6 Let us Sum up

8.7 Further Reading

8.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

8.9 Possible Questions

8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of the German writer Franz Kafka
- identify in Kafka the upbringing of a modern writer and discuss his works
- place "The Metamorphosis" in a specific socio-political and historical background of Germany
- discuss Kafka's story "The Metamorphosis" as an important addition to Modernist Literature

8.2 INTRODUCTION

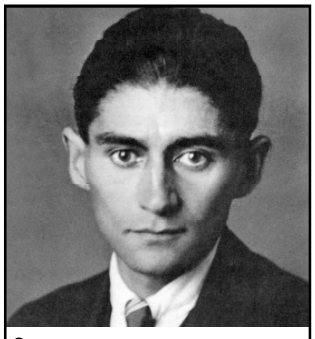
In this unit, we shall read Franz Kafka's short story "The Metamorphosis" which was published in 1915. This is the story of a man who, one morning, discovers that he has turned into an insect: "As Gregor

Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous vermin." This famous and shocking beginning indicates a total subversion of the 19th century realism in storytelling. Ironically enough, Gregor's family accepts his transformation and Gregor also tries to fit into the new ambience. As we finish reading this unit, we shall have acquainted ourselves with one of the most brilliant modern writer of the 20th century.

8.3 FRANZ KAFKA: THE WRITER

The following subsections will help you to read about the life and works of Kafka in some detail.

8.3.1 His Life



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Franz_Kafka#/media/File:Kafka.jpg

Franz Kafka was born on July 3, 1883 in Prague. He was the first son of Herman and Julie Kafka. His mother came from a well-to-do family and his father was a prospering businessman. Along with his brothers and sisters, Franz was mostly brought up by governesses. He was sent to German schools because his father thought that it would give him social privilege. This was part of a remarkable influence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire upon the Czech elites in Prague. As a result, Kafka was equally at ease in both German and his mother tongue Czech. In 1901, he graduated and went to Charles Ferdinand University to study Chemistry. Soon he switched to law. In the next semester, he took German literature as his subject but this too exhausted him. Subsequently, he returned to law again. Later on, he opted for law in order not to destabilize his mental equilibrium. His relationship with Max Brod, whom he met at school, deepened during this period. In June 1906, he graduated with a doctorate in law.

In 1907, he started working at an insurance company but soon left it due to the lengthy working hours and intolerable conditions. In 1908, he got his job at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute where he would spend most of the rest of his life. This job helped him explore his talent for writing. Although he started writing from 1898 sporadically, he destroyed his earlier works and tried his hands at serious writing only from 1904. Max Brod persuaded him to publish some of his writings, and in 1913, a collection of his short stories titled *Meditation* appeared. In that same year, he started gathering information for his novel *Amerika* or *The Man who Disappeared.*

In 1912, Kafka met Felice Bauer and this acquaintance would be crucial in shaping his personal life and literally career. He started writing long letters to her and in his first flush of love, he wrote *The Judgment*. In that same year, he wrote "The Metamorphosis" and started working on *Amerika*. The influence of women in Kafka's life is extraordinary yet paradoxical. Before meeting Felice, he had many temporary affairs with different women and even visited whorehouses frequently. For him except immediate sexual gratification nothing was meaningless. Yet, most strikingly, sex was the most repulsive thing in his life. He thought it to be the strongest deterrent for enjoying normal married life. He wrote in his diary, "Coitus is the punishment for the happiness of being together." This notion would ultimately damage and destroy his personal life. In 1913, he proposed to Felice Beaur and she accepted. However, he never stopped visiting other women. Among them, Gerti Wesner and Grete Bloch were prominent.

The year 1914 was particularly a productive year for Kafka, although his personal life was not so calm. In that year, Felice came to know about his affair with Grete Bloch and they broke off. Kafka started writing *The Trial* and finished it in 1916. Meanwhile, some of his famous short stories including "The Judgment" and "The Metamorphosis" were also published after much persuasion from Max Brod. Since his health had never been extraordinarily good, he

went to a sanatorium in 1913 to improve his physical condition for a brief time.

In 1917, Kafka again proposed to Felice but in the same year he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and this literally ended their relationship. She married another man in 1919. Kafka, soon after his diagnosis, went to stay with his sister Ottla in Jurau. There, he wrote what would become *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, a collection of proverbs and sketches. In 1919, he met Milena Jesenska whose influence would be formidable in his life. They started writing long letters to each other where they discussed everything, including his fear of copulation with her. She was very understanding and soon recognised Kafka's unique talent. He started writing his monumental work *The Castle* in 1922, and she seems to have been a major inspiration, especially in the character of Frieda. However, in 1923, their relationship ended when Melina reconciled with her husband.

In 1924, his physical condition deteriorated rapidly and he went to a couple of sanatoriums. In April, he went to a sanatorium in Kierling, Austria. He agreed to the publication of some of his short stories including "The Hunger Artist". Plagued off and on by tuberculosis from 1911 on, Kafka died of that disease in a sanatorium near Vienna (Kierling), on 3rd June 1924 exactly, one month before his 41st birthday. His family brought him back to Prague for burial.

Although he did not live long enough to witness his nightmare world come true or to suffer at the hands of the Nazis, Kafka's three sisters perished in German concentration camps. Most of his work was published posthumously by his friend and editor Max Brod (who ignored Kafka's request to destroy them). Although he saved Kafka's works from oblivion, Brod also has been criticised in recent years for altering some of Kafka's texts in ways the author himself may not have intended.



LET US KNOW

Kafka's Jewish Heritage:

One of the unresolved tensions that is characteristic of Kafka's work occurs between his early (and growing) awareness of his Jewish heritage and the realisation that modern Central European Jewry had become almost wholly assimilated. This tension remained alive in him quite apart from his situation as a prominent member of the Jewish-German intelligentsia of Prague. The problem concerned him all the more directly because his family clung to Jewish traditions only in a superficial way. Although perhaps of a more orthodox background than her husband—and therefore not quite so eager to attain total assimilation into gentile society—Kafka's mother too made no great effort to cherish Jewish ways. On one level, then, Kafka's animosity toward his father and his entire family may be explained by his mounting interest in his Jewish heritage, which they did not share.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What do you think about Kafka's life history?

Q 2: Do you think Kafka was successful in his love relations?

Q 3: What role did Max Brod play in reviving Kafka's works after his death?

8.3.2 His Works

During his short lifetime, Kafka wrote three novels, all of which remained incomplete. He was also a prolific short story writer. Apart from the fictions, Kafka's letters and diaries also have great literary value.

The Trial was published in 1925. The plot revolves around Joseph K., a bank clerk, who one morning, discovers that he is

arrested "without his having done anything wrong". From this onwards, the novel follows the trials and fruitless tribulations of the protagonist Joseph K. It is not the protagonist's fate on which the novel is mainly focused but the proceedings of Joseph K.'s trial leading to a surrealistic death. Joseph K.'s guilt is paradoxical because from the very beginning he is conscious of it without knowing it. K.'s guilt lies in his inability and unwillingness to remember what this guilt really is. *The Trial* can be regarded as a burlesque on bureaucracy, an attack upon the European capitalism and the dictatorial regime. The court symbolises the terror and the silent, almost invisible torture of the state apparatus where human beings seek for justice and freedom in vain.

The Castle is another great achievement by Kafka although it remained unfinished. In the novel, the protagonist K. is a land surveyor, and he has been summoned to a strange village. However, he soon feels dubious about his engagement as the land surveyor and in order to seek confirmation of his job he tries to enter the castle but all his attempts turn futile. K. never becomes successful in entering the castle. The story is exclusively narrated from the protagonist's point of view and is largely composed of dialogues. The theme of arrival in the village has a major symbolic connotation. It is the arrival of man into the world, his attempt to fit into the order, which remains in a way inaccessible. It is a tussle between K. and the world, and the castle has become an incredible metaphor of a totalitarian world into which human beings are forever barred.

His third and the last novel *Amerika* too remained unfinished. It was published in 1927. The novel describes the immigrant life of a 16 years old teenager Karl Ross Mann in the United States who was forced to go to New York to escape the scandal of seduction by a housemaid. *Amerika* is a harsh criticism of the so-called idealistic projection of the land as an epitome of democratic values and high standard of living. It is also a poignant portrayal of the pitiful conditions of the European immigrants. The beginning of the novel is itself

indicative of the myriad social ills that the land represents. Karl witnesses that the statue of liberty holds a sword rather than a torch. Kafka's America is a land of hotels and slums where people run after money and glamour. The streets and houses are labyrinthine in nature where outsiders lose their way. There is no hope for Karl in America as each time he attempts to climb up the social ladder the society negates him in every possible way.

Kafka has also written a number of short stories, which denote remarkable variation in style, theme, and technique. Some of the short stories are very short, barely a hundred words long. Nevertheless, all the short stories exemplify Kafka's mastery over the genre with his enigmatic and weird vision. Prominent among them are—"The Metamorphosis", "The Hunger Artist", "The Great Wall of China", "The judgment", "The Country Doctor", "In the Penal Colony", "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk", "Investigations of a Dog".

Kafka's diaries, letters, and notebooks are too invaluable literary works. Dora Diamont kept some of Kafka's letters, which could not be recovered. All these works serve as apparatus to look into the inner world of the literary stalwart and into his creative process.

The popular term "Kafkaesque" (*kafkaesk* in German) reflects the bizarre, nightmarish nature of most of the author's works. In *Die Verwandlung* (*The Metamorphosis*) Kafka's character awakes to discover he has become a huge bug: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect." In *Der Prosess* (*The Trial*) the anonymous Josef K suddenly finds himself under arrest and attempting to defend himself against unknown charges. Most Kafka experts attribute the tortured, ambiguous nature of his writings to his personal struggle to understand his own relationship with his domineering father.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Name some of the major works of Kafka?

Q 5: Mention the general themes in some of Kafka's novels?

8.4 READING THE STORY

There are two choices of "reading" about Kafka—one being to see Kafka's world as full of parables and symbols, a world confronting us with a dream vision of our own condition; and the other choice being to forego any claim of even trying to understand his world and to expose yourself to its atmosphere of haunting anxiety, visionary bizarreness, and faint promises of hope. An experience of reading the story "The Metamorphosis" makes everything clear.

8.4.1 The Storyline

The story is divided into three parts, which are as follows:

Part I:

One of the best-known stories by Franz Kafka "The Metamorphosis" opens with the protagonist Gregor Samsa waking up in his bedroom one fine morning and discovering that he has turned into a giant dung beetle. As Gregor struggles to accept the new facets of his insect body, the readers too get to know that Gregor is a travelling salesman who lives with his parents and younger sister inside an apartment, for which Gregor needs to pay the bills. Gregor is also responsible for paying off his parents' debt. As the story progresses, Gregor struggles with the idea that he is going to be late for work. He considers calling in sick, but he doesn't want to arouse suspicion, as "since during his five years' employment he had not been ill once" and he fears his illness would be investigated. As he is contemplating, his mother knocks at his door and inquires about his situation. He answers, in a voice with a persistent horrible twittering squeak behind it that he is getting up. However, the fact

that he is still at home at this late hour of the morning leads his father to bang on his bedroom door, followed by his sister, who asks to be let in.

Gregor has no intention of letting anyone in as yet, setting his mind to the reality of his metamorphosis, hoping that he is only experiencing a temporary delusion and that before long, he will be transformed back into his usual state. However, as he tries to get out of bed, he is faced with the daunting task of arranging his huge body and "numerous little legs". His initial struggles to get out of bed prove fruitless and painful, but he is determined to move before the hour gets too late and someone from his office comes to enquire about him.

The chief clerk from Samsa's office arrives and is greeted by the servant. The family members announce that the chief clerk has arrived, and the clerk himself asks Gregor to open his door. Gregor refuses. The chief clerk wants to know if anything is wrong with him. Gregor responds with a series of pleas and excuses, claiming that he's not well and that he can still make it to the office. After slipping a few times, he finally stabilises himself long enough to hear the chief clerk and his parents talking about how unintelligible his words were. Gregor's mother gets increasingly upset, yelling for her daughter Grete to get the doctor, insisting that Gregor is ill. Deciding to attempt to allow the chief clerk in, he pushes his desk chair toward the door, climbs on top and clamps his toothless jaw around the key in an effort to unlock the door. Although he is pained by the effort, and some brown fluid dribbles out of his mouth, he is successful in his attempt to unlock it.

When the door opens, the chief clerk and Gregor's parents are horrified by the inexplicable sight of the giant dung beetle: the mother faints and the father begins to weep. Gregor tries to converse with the chief clerk, suggesting that he still plans to get dressed and make his way to the office. He requests the clerk to offer a favourable account of his situation, insisting that his condition is only temporary,

that he will bounce back with greater force, and that his parents and sister depend on him to work for the family. As Gregor continues with his plea, the chief clerk reverses slowly toward the front door of Samsa's house. Gregor knows that he must stop the clerk from leaving if he has any hope of holding back his position in office. Gregor's mother finally runs into the arms of her husband who grabs the walking stick that the chief clerk had left behind and uses it to drive Gregor back toward his room.

Thus, Part I of the story concludes with a great push from his father that forces Gregor into his room, followed by the slamming of his bedroom door.

Part II

The next part of the story opens that evening as Gregor wakes from a deep sleep. In an effort to see what is happening outside, he crawls toward the door. He is surprised to find a tray of food, most likely left by his sister. Eventually the light from the living room is turned off, and Gregor hears his family members tiptoeing to their rooms. Upset Gregor wedges his body beneath the couch, for comfort. Hunger and anxiety prevent him from falling into a deep sleep. Next day morning, at the sight of Gregor's body, Gregor's sister slams the door shut, opening it again a few moments later. Much to Gregor's surprise, she returns with some food items, meant to determine what he might want, and leaves. Gregor finds himself drawn to the cheese, vegetables and sauce. Grete returns, opening the door slowly enough to allow Gregor time to hide beneath the couch. She gathers the remains into a bucket and leaves. Thus, Gregor starts getting his meals two times a day—in the morning and in the evening—brought in and picked up by his sister.

After the cook quits, swearing that she won't let anyone know about the situation in the house, Grete is forced to take over the cooking duties. Gregor overhears his father divulging the state of the family's finances, pulling out various articles from his small safe, most left over from the demise of his former business. However,

the reader had already been told that it was the failure of his father's business that forced Gregor to work in an office. Gregor also had a secret plan to send her sister to study music at the Conservatorium. These plans, however, cannot be realised in his current condition. However, Gregor is happy to know that a certain amount of the money still remained with his father.

In an effort to deal with his anxiety, he crawls up and gases outside through the window. But soon everything outside his window appears to be blurred. His inability to see the outside world relates to Gregor's metamorphosis as symbolic of an oppressive state. However, at this point in the story, Gregor's sister is unaware of the change in his vision, so recognizing that Gregor has pushed the chair near the window, she makes a point to return the chair to its place. Gregor is also uncomfortable to find that his sister has to open the windows of his room before she can do anything else. Soon, based on the tracks that Gregor has left from his habit of crawling around the walls and the ceiling, Grete concludes that he would be better off without all the furniture in his room. With the help of their mother, Grete moves the large, heavy objects out of Gregor's room. However, she ensures that Gregor is well covered—hidden as completely as possible beneath the couch and the sheet, and then signals for her mother to enter the room.

Gregor initially supports Grete's idea that his room should be cleared of obstacles, but he soon becomes nostalgic over the desk and pictures that had shaped his life up to the time of his metamorphosis. Unable to contain himself any longer, he runs out from under the couch in hopes of stopping his mother and sister from taking away any more of his furniture. When they return to the room, Gregor is found clamped onto a picture on his wall, causing Grete to shield her mother from witnessing the horror. But before her mother can be led out of the room, she sees Gregor and faints. Grete then shuts Gregor out of his room and proceeds to tend to her mother. In an effort to deal with his helplessness and worry,

Gregor climbs around the walls and ceiling, eventually falling onto the living room table. Grete informs their father that her mother had fainted and that Gregor had gotten loose. Gregor's father grows incensed by what he assumes is Gregor's wrong doing. At this point, the reader becomes aware of how much Gregor's father has changed since Gregor's metamorphosis. He has turned from a lethargic, failed businessman to a productive, active member of the work force. When Gregor sees him, he is stunned by how fit he looks, his appearance enhanced by his blue uniform with gold buttons. When his father finally sees him, a very slow chase around the living room ensues. Just as Gregor gets some distance, his father starts pelting him with apples.

Part II ends with Gregor's mother running out of Gregor's room, begging her husband to spare their son, and Gregor losing consciousness.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: In what ways, does the concern for money become so important in the context of the story?

Part III

This section opens with a discussion of the serious injury inflicted on Gregor, disabling him for over a month, and leaving him with a rotten apple stuck to his body, which no one is willing to take off. At this point, the reader gets to know that each member of the family has got employment which are concrete signs of their respective transformations from inert dependency to active independence: Gregor's mother has found work as a seamstress for an undergarment company, Grete is working as a salesgirl while also learning shorthand and French for bettering herself, and his father, who often falls asleep in his uniform, has become a bank messenger. Besides, the Samsa family has released their previous servant and hired a charwoman to do the rough work.

With the family so busy, Gregor starts considering himself as an increasing burden. He laments that his family members are forced to work so hard, and that they cannot move to a more suitable home because of him. Gregor too finds that the members of his family have begun to neglect him. The charwoman shows no fear of him, and regularly opens his door and says a few words to Gregor. As time goes by, Gregor grows increasingly depressed—a state that Kafka himself found struggling with. He rarely eats and is forced to deal with the stray objects that the family have stored in his room to provide space to three lodgers, described as "serious gentlemen…with full beards". Gregor starts resenting them gradually. On a night, when the lodgers are gorging on steak, Gregor hears the sound of his sister's violin coming from the kitchen for the first time since his metamorphosis. Having finished their meals, the lodgers ask if the violin can be played in the living room instead of the kitchen. Gregor's father agrees for his daughter, and the family carry the music stand, the music and Grete's violin into the living room where Grete sets up and begins to play. Excited by the sound of his sister's violin, Gregor crawls into the living room to listen.

In the beginning of the performance, everyone is absorbed in the music. But after a while, the lodgers grow restless and move toward the back of the room puffing on their cigars. Gregor is thoroughly moved by the music, and crawls farther into the living room. One of the lodgers sees him and points him out to Gregor's father who does his best to divert their attention from Gregor. In the commotion, Grete stops playing her violin and rushes into the lodgers' room to make their beds before her father can usher them back. Finally, the lead lodger announces that he plans to give notice, and that due to the unsanitary conditions, he will not pay for the time he has already spent there. Finally Grete speaks, declaring that the situation cannot go on any longer. She makes a distinction between Gregor and the creature they have been taking care of, demanding that they find a way to get rid of him. Gregor's father tries to think of some sort of agreement they might be able to work out with Gregor,

but Grete is insistent that her father must try to get rid of the idea that this is Gregor. She, in a frightful fury, insists that the creature wants to take over their home. Gregor does his best to turn around and crawl back to his room, but in his weakened state, the process is difficult and slow. When he finally makes it back, his sister rushes to the door and locks him inside. Gregor lets his body relax and wishes that he had the power to disappear.

The following morning, the charwoman enters Gregor's room and tries to tickle him with the end of the broom handle. When she finds no reaction, she begins to prod him until it becomes clear that he is dead. She immediately announces Gregor's death. Grete and her parents all gather at Gregor's door for confirmation. Then, the charwoman opens the window and shuts the door. The three lodgers come out of their room and demand breakfast. The charwoman quiets them and points them into Gregor's room where they can find the corpse. Soon after, the father demands that the lodgers leave immediately, demonstrating an authority that he hasn't possessed since the collapse of his business. After a moment of protest, the lodgers leave and the family feels "as if a burden has been lifted". Grete and her parents decide to take the day off from work and go outside for a stroll. As they're writing their respective letters of excuse, the charwoman announces that she has disposed of Gregor's body.

The story ends as the Samsas leave the apartment together and take the train out to the countryside. They realize that their situation is more hopeful than it had once seemed. They will finally have the opportunity to move to a smaller and more manageable apartment. They realize that the time to find Grete a husband is coming soon.

8.4.2 Major Themes

The following are some of the important themes of the story "The Metamorphosis".

Elements of the Absurd:

Kafka wrote story "The Metamorphosis" at the end of 1912, soon after he finished "The judgment," and it is worth noting that the two stories have much in common. Gregor Samsa is confronted with an absurd fate in the form of a "gigantic insect", while the businessman Georg Bendemann in "The judgment" is confronted by absurdity in the person of his father. Also both men are guilty: like Georg in "The judgment," Gregor Samsa is guilty of having cut himself off from his true self—long before his actual metamorphosis— and, to the extent he has done so, he is excluded from his family. His situation of intensifying anxiety, already an unalterable fact at his awakening, is significant. Gregor is a puzzled victim brought before the Absolute— here in the form of the chief clerk—which forever recedes into the background. This element of receding, an important theme in Kafka's works, intensifies the gap between the hero and the unknown source of his condemnation. Thus, the reader finds himself confronted with Gregor's doom and the existence of enough personal guilt to warrant such a harsh verdict. The selection of an ordinary individual as victim heightens the impact of the absurd.

The Character of Gregor:

Gregor is the prototype of many of Kafka's male characters—a character who is reluctant to act, fearful of possible mishaps, prone to exaggerated contemplation, given to juvenile, surrogate dealings with sex. For example, he uses his whole body to anxiously guard the magazine clipping of a lady in a fur cape. This is a good illustration of his pitiful preoccupation with sex. Though it would be unfair to blame him for procrastinating, for not getting out of bed on the first morning of his metamorphosis, we have every reason to assume that he has procrastinated long before this—especially in regard to a decision about his unbearable situation at work. Gregor has also put off sending his sister to the conservatory, although he promised to do so. He craves love and understanding, but his

prolonged inactivity gradually leads him to feel ever more indifferent about everything. It is through all his failures to act, then, rather than from specific irresponsible actions he commits, that Gregor is guilty. His guilt finally results in agonizing loneliness.

Autobiographical Element:

It is easy to view Gregor as an autobiographical study of Kafka himself. Gregor's parents and his sister also have their parallels in Kafka's family. Gregor feels that he has to appease his father, who "approaches with a grim face" toward him, and it is his father's bombardment with apples that causes his death. The two women, on the other hand, have the best of intentions—his mother pleading for her son's life, believing that Gregor's state is only some sort of temporary sickness; and Grete, so eager to understand and help her brother. She does not want to forgo her "normal" life and is the first one to demand the insect's removal. These people simply do not understand, and the reason they do not understand is that they are habitually too "preoccupied with their immediate troubles."

Gregor's situation in his family is that of Kafka within his own family. He too had a tyrannical father who hated or, at best, ignored his son's writing; a mother, who was not strong enough to cope with her husband's brutality; and a sister, Ottla, whom Kafka felt very close to. Shortly after completing "The Metamorphosis", Kafka wrote in his diary: "I am living with my family, the dearest people, and yet I am more estranged from them than from a stranger." Returning to the subject of Gregor, what strikes one most immediately is the fact that although he is outwardly equipped with all the features of an insect, he reacts like a human being.



LET US KNOW

Gregor's Metamorphosis:

Gregor never identifies himself with an insect. It is important to realize, therefore, that Gregor's metamorphosis actually takes place in his "uneasy dreams," which is something

altogether different than saying it is the result of the lingering impact of these dreams. An interpretation often advanced categorises Gregor's metamorphosis as an attempt at escaping his deep-seated conflict between his true self and the untenable situation at the company. He begs the chief clerk for precisely that situation which has caused him to be so unhappy; he implores him to help him maintain his position and, while doing so, completely forgets that he is a grotesquery standing in front of the chief clerk.

Existentialism:

The term existentialism has been more or less equated since World War II with the works of Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Camus, Sartre, Jaspers, Heidegger and so on. Kafka's relationship with existentialism is much more complex, mainly because the label "existentialist" by itself is rather meaningless. However, he remained fascinated with the major theme of all varieties of existentialist thinking, namely the difficulty of responsible commitment in the face of an absurd universe. Deprived of all metaphysical guidelines, a man is nevertheless obligated to act morally in a world where death renders everything meaningless. He alone must determine what constitutes a moral action although he can never foresee the consequences of his actions. As a result, he comes to regard his total freedom of choice as a curse. Thus, the guilt of the characters of Kafka lies in their failure to choose and to commit themselves in the face of too many possibilities. In "The Metamorphosis", Gregor is frustrated by his totally commercialised existence and yet does nothing about it, other than trying to escape. He vows that once he has sufficient money, he will quit, and yet he has no idea what he will do. This is why Kafka draws this "innermost self" as something strange and threatening to Gregor's commercialised existence. The insect represents all the dimensions of Gregor's existence, which elude description. This is why Kafka was so adamant about not

having the insect reproduced in any conventional manner when the story was published. He wrote to his publisher that it would be wrong to draw the likeness of the insect on the book cover because any literal representation would be meaningless.

Use of Delusions:

The most terrible insight, which the story conveys, is that even the most beautiful relationships between individuals are based on delusions. No one knows what he or anybody else really is: Gregor's parents, for instance, have no idea of their son's serious conflict. They have no idea that one's nature can be deformed by the continued degradation it suffers, but now that this deformation has taken on such horrible proportions, they are puzzled and look at Gregor as something alien. Typically enough, "the words he uttered were no longer understandable." The concern they should have shown for him finds a perverted outlet in their preoccupation with total strangers, the three lodgers who get an enormous amount of attention simply because of the rent they pay. Finally, it is only consistent with their way of thinking that Gregor's parents should do away with the insect.

Gregor too is mistaken about his family. He thought it to be his duty to help them pay their debts and secure a financially carefree life. The truth is that his father has far more money than Gregor knows about; also, he was not nearly as sick as he has made Gregor believe. Gregor's self-chosen sacrifice has been useless. Worse than that, the more he has done for his family, the more "they had simply got used to it." Gregor's relationship with his family members, and also their dealings among each other, are determined solely by the contrived order they have set up for themselves. Their lives are based on compromises and calculations.

Identity of Gregor:

The questions pertaining to Gregor's identity are central to the story. The narrator brings up this problem of identity when he

asks: "Was he an animal, that music had such an effect upon him?" Since only humans respond to music, in the way the insect responds to Grete's playing the violin, we realize that he is indeed part human. The violin playing is also a part of the countless allusions to Gregor's repressed sexual desires, particularly his longing for his sister. As Gregor lies in front of Grete and listens to her music, he has only Grete in his mind. It is almost clear that Gregor responds to the music only now, when he is not the traveling salesman he used to be. Thus, Gregor's "animal state" seems to be a precondition of his yearning for this "unknown food". This food may be sexual. The ambiguity about the nature of the food remains—as does the uncertainty about whether Gregor is experiencing only a relapse into the sphere of the animalistic or whether or not he has been lifted up to a higher plane. His identity cannot be established from his reactions because whenever Gregor is impaired as a human being, he reacts positively as an animal and vice versa.



LET US KNOW

Expressionism and Kafka:

Expressionism is one of the literary movements frequently mentioned in connection with Kafka. Kafka does have certain characteristics in common with the Expressionists. However, if we consider what he thought of some of the leading expressionists of his day, he certainly cannot be associated with the movement. He repeatedly confessed that the works of the expressionists made him sad. He further said: "I don't understand. To me, it merely proves the painter's inner chaos." What he rejected in expressionism is the overstatement of feeling and the seeming lack of craftsmanship.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q7: In what way, would you explain the theme of the absurd available in the story?

Q8: Discuss the theme of Existentialism in Kafka's "The Metamorphosis".

Q 9: What is your view on the identity of Gregor Samsa?

8.4.3 Major Characters

The following are the important characters of the story "The Metamorphosis"

Gregor Samsa:

Gregor is the primary character in the story. He is a commercial traveler (traveling salesman) who lives with his parents and sister in a modest apartment. The story opens with Gregor waking up late for work, only to find himself transformed into a giant dung beetle. In the story, he remains isolated in his room, which in turn becomes an increasing burden on his family. Now his family members are forced to find jobs and take on lodgers to make up for the income that Gregor had formerly provided. By the end of the story, all the family members have grown stronger and more independent while Gregor, struggling in his metamorphosed state, grows increasingly weak and eventually dies.

Grete:

Grete is Gregor's younger sister and the closest family member to him. Initially, she is the most sympathetic member of the family to Gregor's condition, taking on the responsibility of feeding him, but eventually she begins to see Gregor as a burden, ultimately advocating for his removal. By the end of the story, after Gregor has died, it is clear that Grete has made the most dramatic transformation: from a dependent and insecure girl, to an attractive, independent woman.

Mr. Samsa:

Mr. Samsa or Gregor's father has spent the years leading up to Gregor's metamorphosis growing increasingly lethargic, lamenting the collapse of his business, and forcing his son to be the sole provider for the family. He is the most aggressive toward the metamorphosed Gregor, once even pelting him with apples. Forced back to work by Gregor's inexplicable condition, Mr. Samsa becomes a bank messenger and is required to wear a uniform to work. After taking in some lodgers to help pay the bills, Mr. Samsa shows his renewed authority by kicking them out at the end.

Mrs. Samsa:

Mrs. Samsa or Gregor's mother is deeply upset by her son's metamorphosis, fainting upon first sight of him, and even toward the end, resisting her own daughter's suggestion that they remove the dung beetle (Gregor) from their home. She also gets a job to help pay the bills, and following Gregor's death, develops a renewed sense of hope in the budding prospects of her daughter.

The Chief clerk:

The clerk comes to the house on the day of Gregor's metamorphosis to see why he has failed to show up on time. Before Gregor reveals his condition, the chief clerk responds to Gregor's refusal to open his door by ranting about Gregor's dissatisfactory performance at work. Once Gregor opens his door, the chief clerk flees from the house, leaving his walking cane behind.

The Charwoman:

She is an old servant who is largely unaffected by Gregor's metamorphosis. She makes a point of peering into his room everyday playfully checking up on him. In the end, she reveals that she has disposed of the dung beetle corpse and that the Samsas won't have to worry about him anymore.

The Three Lodgers:

They come to stay at the Samsas' home after Gregor's metamorphosis. They take advantage of the Samsas' hospitality, at

one point requesting that Grete play the violin for them and then moving away from boredom and dissatisfaction. When Gregor reveals himself to them, they refuse to pay the Samsas any rent, but stay on in an effort to exploit the conditions even further. Ultimately, Gregor's father kicks them out of the house.

8.4.4 Kafka's Narrative Style

Franz Kafka is one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century. In his works, he turned away from the 19th century realism, and with his unique narrative and weird enigmatic outlook, he created a distinctive style. His writings encompass various trends and stances including existentialism, absurd philosophy, magic realism, and mysticism and even expressionism. The use of humour, which is dark and surreal in its tone, makes his work poignantly haunting. Kafka's heroes are often portrayed lonely, perplexed, and threatened in an alien world. They are constantly seen searching for the code to decipher the systems of the world but their effort ultimately proves fruitless. His works, like any other great literary masterpiece, cannot be confined to any particular category.

Within the story's three-part construction, Kafka also deals with the concept of time. A frequently used device in Kafka's works, the discrepancy between the time shown on the clock and the time as experienced by the hero, time symbolises his alienation. This is why, Gregor's sense of time in the first part of the story, begins to vanish in the second part, when he wakes up "out of a deep sleep, more like a swoon than a sleep." Typically, time is expressed in rather general terms, such as "twilight" or "long evening." There is no longer the regular routine of the first day; Gregor spends his time crawling up and down and around his room. Vague indications of time are reflected in such terms as "soon," "later," and "often," blurring the boundary lines between what used to be precisely measurable units of time. At one point in the story, the narrator tells us that "about

a month" probably has elapsed; on another occasion, Gregor mentions that "the lack of all direct human speech for the past two months" confuses the readers. Gregor's increasing lack of direction and continuous crawling around in circles finally result in his total loss of a sense of time. When his mother and sister remove the furniture from his room in the second part of the story, he loses his "last guideline of direction." Paradoxically, "The Metamorphosis" is enacted outside the context of time, and because of this, time is always frightfully present. As Kafka put it in an aphorism, "It is only our concept of time which permits us to use the term 'The Last judgment'; in reality, it is a permanent judgment."

A story like "The Metamorphosis" should not tempt us to analyze it along the lines of fantasy versus reality. An unchangeable and alienated world unfolds before us, a world governed by its own laws and developing its own logic. However, this world is our world and yet it is not. We encounter people we know and situations we have lived through in our own everyday lives, and yet these people and situations appear somehow estranged. They are real and physical, and yet they are also grotesque and abstract. Finally, the reader seems to be left with two choices of how to "read" Kafka. One is to see Kafka's world as full of parables and symbols, magnified and fantastically distorted (and therefore infinitely more real), a world confronting us with a dream vision of our own condition. The other choice is to forego any claim of even trying to understand his world and to expose oneself to its atmosphere of haunting anxiety, visionary bizarreness, and occasionally—faint promises of hope. These are some of the important qualities of Kafka as a writer.

LET US KNOW



Kafka's ability to successfully join the fantastic and the real is often noted as being at the root of his genius. The very nature of "The Metamorphosis," a work that asks its readers to accept that the

protagonist has been metamorphosed into a giant dung beetle, demands an investigation of the story's events that goes beyond the surface features of plot. Kafka's "Letter to His Father" details a circumstance in which he is left outside and treated as an animal, a concept that influenced Kafka's fictions, including "The Metamorphosis."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 10: Comment on Kafka's narrative style.

8.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF KAFKA AND "THE METAMORPHOSIS"

Since the time of the publication of "The Metamorphosis", it has received an incredible amount of international scholarly attention from a number of different academic angles. In her essay "Transforming Franz Kafka's 'Metamorphosis" Nina Pelikan Straus touches on this vast scholarship, suggesting that the reasons for scholars' interest in Kafka, particularly his masterpiece "The Metamorphosis", reflects a recognition on the part of students of religion, philosophy, psychoanalysis, political and social criticism, Marxism, and literature that Kafka's work is inexhaustible. No single interpretation invalidates or finally delivers the story's significance. In her own essay, Straus also makes the case for viewing "The Metamorphosis" through a feminist lens, focusing on Gregor's sister Grete, as well as Gregor's acknowledgement of her increasing vitality and independence.

Many scholars have also suggested that "The Metamorphosis" is an allegorical tale of oppression, making use of autobiographical circumstances relating to the household within which Kafka was raised—particularly his relationship with his father—and the sickness and depression that Kafka experienced throughout his life. Considerable attention has also been paid to the startling originality of the story. Some scholars have focused on "the variety of suffering which plagued the life of Franz Kafka" suggesting

that this played a part in the conception of Gregor and the "The Metamorphosis." Given the difficulties that Kafka had with his father, his health and his job, many critics have made the case that in "The Metamorphosis," Kafka was portraying a condition where one is treated and/or views oneself as less than human—an animal, an insect. Another of Kafka's conditions that scholars have focused on relates to his feelings of shame and guilt, particularly in relation to his family. In his essay "Franz Kafka and Animals," Peter Stine suggests a connection between the use of animals—one prominent example being the dung beetle—and Kafka's veiled portrayal of his family.



8.6 LET US SUM UP

By this time, we have learnt that Kafka is one of the most powerful voices of literary modernism. Although Kafka hails from Germany, his far fletched influence on the literatures of other countries is worth mentioning. Very much shy and introvert by nature, Kafka was in need of friends and never wanted his works to be published. His friend Max Brod played the most significant role in rescuing him from oblivion and establishing him as one of the modernist writers of the world. However, it is difficult to place Kafka in a literary tradition. The various influences on him include Gustave Flaubert, Heinrich von Kleist, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Especially, it was Dostoevsky's *The Double* and *Brothers Karamazov*, which left their marks on his "The Metamorphosis" and *The Trial*. "The Metamorphosis" is the story of a man who, one morning, discovers that he has turned into an insect. This famous and shocking beginning indicates a total subversion of the 19th century realism in storytelling.



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8.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Throughout his life Kafka was haunted by his physical condition… …the rejection of his father and relationship with several women—all these influenced his writings greatly……he suffered from migraines, insomnia, constipation, boils and other ailments, all due to excessive stresses and strains… …he was never at ease with his father simply because of his masculinity, his success as a businessman, and his formidable influence on his mother.

Ans to Q 2: No… …his love relationships suffered because of his perverse attitude towards physical union.

Ans to Q 3: Most of his works were published posthumously by his friend and editor Max Brod… …he ignored Kafka's request to destroy them… …although he saved Kafka's works from oblivion, Brod also has been criticised in recent years for altering some of Kafka's texts in ways the author himself may not have intended.

Ans to Q 4: During his short lifetime, Kafka wrote three novels—*The Trial, The Castle, Amerika*, all of which remained incomplete… …he was also a prolific writer of short stories like —"The Metamorphosis", "The Hunger Artist", "The judgment", "The Country Doctor", "In the Penal Colony", "Investigations of a Dog" and so on… …Kafka's letters and diaries also have great literary value.

Ans to Q 5: *The Trial* revolves around Joseph K.'s guilt which lies in his inability and unwillingness to remember what this guilt really is… …the court in the vel symbolises the terror of the state apparatus where human beings seek for justice and freedom in vain... …*The Castle* presents a tussle between K. and the world, and the castle has become an incredible metaphor of a totalitarian world into which human beings are forever barred… … *Amerika* is a poignant portrayal of the pitiful conditions of the European immigrants in America.

Ans to Q 6: The thought of money proves most distressing for Gregor who cannot imagine anyone in his family capable of work… …this focuses

on the parasitic relationships that exist in the Samsa home… …first the family on Gregor, then Gregor on the family… …it is only through Gregor's metaphoric death are the members of his family finally liberated, each achieving a greater sense of vitality and independence… …but the readers are also told that Gregor's father hasn't worked in five years and has grown heavy, his mother has severe asthma, and his sister is only seventeen and has not done any serious work in her life.

Ans to Q 7: Gregor Samsa is confronted with an absurd fate in the form of a "gigantic insect"… …he is guilty of having cut himself off from his true self—long before his actual metamorphosis… …his situation of intensifying anxiety, being an unalterable fact, adds to the element of the absurd… …besides, the selection of an ordinary individual as victim heightens the impact of the absurd.

Ans to Q 8: Existentialism was in vogue since World War II through the works of Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Camus, Sartre, Jaspers, Heidegger… …Kafka remained fascinated with existentialist views on the difficulty of responsible commitment in the face of an absurd universe… …the guilt of the characters of Kafka, lies in their failure to choose and to commit themselves in the face of too many possibilities… …in "The Metamorphosis", Gregor is frustrated by his totally commercialised existence and yet does nothing about it, other than trying to escape.

Ans to Q 9: Gregor is reluctant to act, fearful of possible mishaps, prone to exaggerated contemplation, given to juvenile, surrogate dealings with sex… …but the question of Gregor's identity is central to the story… …the narrator brings up this problem of identity when he asks: "Was he an animal, that music had such an effect upon him?"… …since only humans respond to music, in the way the insect responds to Grete's playing the violin, we realize that he is indeed part human… …his identity cannot be established from his reactions because whenever Gregor is impaired as a human being, he reacts positively as an 'animal' and vice versa.

Ans to Q 10: Kafka's works encompass various trends like existentialism, absurd philosophy, magic realism, mysticism and expressionism… …his use of humour is dark and surreal… …his heroes are often portrayed as lonely, perplexed, and threatened in an alien world… …his ability to successfully join the fantastic and the real… …his concept of time which is expressed in rather general terms, such as "twilight" or "long evening."… …Freud's influence on Kafka… …his use of parables and symbols and so on



8.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: How will you explain the unnatural occurrences in Kafka's "The Metamorphosis"?

Q 2: What did Kafka actually try to re-present through the character of Gregor Samsa in his story "The Metamorphosis"?

Q 3: Is Gregor Samsa partly to blame for having incurred his fate? Discuss.

Q 4: Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis goes hand in hand with a description of the world around him as he find himself in a new state. Discuss.

Q 5: Explain why symbols and parables are better suited to deal with Kafka's fictional works.

Q 6: Would you like to consider Kafka an "existentialist"? Discuss with reference to the story "The Metamorphosis"?

Q 7: What do you mean by the term "Kafkaesque"? Does it really help in a serious and meaningful appraisal of Kafka?

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UNIT 9: FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY: *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE

9.1 Learning Objectives

9.2 Introduction

9.3 Fyodor Dostoevsky: The Novelist

9.3.1 His Life

9.3.2 His Works

9.4 Russian Fiction

9.5 The Storyline of the Novel

9.6 Critical Reception of Dostoevsky

9.7 Let us Sum up

9.8 Further Reading

9.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

9.10 Possible Questions

9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of the great Russian author Dostoevsky
- form an idea of Dostoevsky as a major exponent of Russian Fiction
- make a survey of the important aspects of Russian fiction
- provide a summary of the story of the novel *Crime and Punishments*
- discuss the critical reception of Dostoevsky as an important writer in world literature

9.2 INTRODUCTION

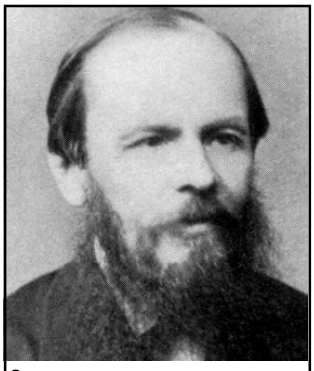
In this unit, we shall get an opportunity to read Fyodor Dostoevsky and his novel *Crime and Punishment.* Dostoevsky is one of the most important Russian novelists and his works had a profound influence on the intellectual thoughts and literatures of the 20th century. By the time you finish

reading this unit, you will be able to know that *Crime and Punishment* is an important novel in World Literature. *Crime and Punishment* is a novel loaded with multiple meanings, and it is not practically possible to discuss this novel in just around 7000 words. Hence, you should choose a good edition of the book—one of which is the Norton Edition.

9.3 FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY: THE FICTION WRITER

In the following subsections, we discuss the life and works of Dostoevsky in some detail.

9.3.1 His Life



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki

Dostoevsky was born in Moscow, into a middle class family of seven children. His father Mikhail Dostoevsky, was a retired military surgeon, and an alcoholic. He served at the Marinsky Hospital for the Poor in Moscow situated in an area surrounded by a cemetery for criminals, a lunatic asylum, and an orphanage for infants. This environment had a lasting impact on Dostoevsky. This can also be seen as the origin of his compassion for the poor, the oppressed and the tormented. After the death of his mother Maria in 1837, Dostoevsky and his brother were sent to the Military Engineering Academy at St. Petersburg. Besides, Mathematics, he also studied Shakespeare, Pascal, Victor Hugo, and E.T.A. Hoffmann. Since his childhood days, he had developed an interest in the works of Nikolai Gogol, E.T.A Hoffmann and Honore de Balzac.

In 1843, Dostoevsky translated Balzac's novel *Eugénie Grandet.* However, he started writing his own fiction in the later part of 1844. His first work *Poor Folk* was published in 1845 when he was only 24 years old. His next novel *The Double*, published in 1846, received negative reactions from Belinsky and many others. In 1849,

he was imprisoned for being a part of the "Petrachevsky Circle" which comprised of progressive-minded intellectuals consisting of writers, students, teachers, army officers, etc. The members of the group opposed the tsars and the serf system. Later, Petrachevsky was sentenced to four years of exile with hard labour at a Katorga prison camp in Omsk, Siberia.

In the year 1854, he was released from prison. Then, he spent the next five years as a lieutenant in the Seventh Line Battalion of the Siberian Regiment. This is where he met Maria Dmitrievna Isaeva whom he married in 1857. His experiences in the prison and the army changed his religious and political ideologies. Gradually, he got disillusioned by Western ideas, and instead turned toward traditional and rustic Russian values. The change in his writings was marked by the emergence of dark, complex story lines and situations, brooding and tortured characters and a constant conflict between traditional Russian culture and modern Western philosophy. In 1859, Dostoevsky returned to St. Petersburg. In 1863, he set out for his tour in Europe where he met Apollinaria Suslova—the model of "proud women" in his novels like *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov.*

The death of his wife in 1864 completely chattered him. His financial condition too started deteriorating. This led to a period of deep depression in life. He developed a compulsion for gambling, which left him penniless. It is stated that one of his most famous works *Crime and Punishment* was completed in great hurry, as he desperately needed money. *The Gambler* was also written under similar situations. To escape from his creditors, he travelled to Western Europe in 1867. From 1873 to 1881, he was engaged with *Writer's Diary*, a monthly journal of short stories, sketches, and articles on current events. The journal was an enormous success. On June 8, 1880, Dostoevsky gave his famous Pushkin speech at the unveiling of the Pushkin monument in Moscow. It was from this occasion that he came to be known as one of the most famous Russian writers.

Dostoevsky died On February 9, 1881 and was buried in Tikhvin Cemetery at Alexander Nevsky Monastry in St. Petersburg, Russia. His funeral was attended by forty thousand mourners. His epitaph is the epigraph of his final novel, *The Brothers Karamazov.*



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Why was Dostoevsky imprisoned in 1849?

Q 2: How did Dostoevsky's experience in prison change his writings?

9.3.2 His Works

His works give us a vivid picture of the political, social and spiritual situation of 19th-century Russia. His work consists of 15 novels, 17 short novels and many essays. In this section, we will briefly discuss some of the major fictional works of Dostoevsky. The period from 1866-1881 saw the creation of Dostoevsky's greatest works: *Notes from Underground* (1864), *The Gambler* (1867), *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1868), *The Possessed* (1872), *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

The first important fictional works of Dostoevsky is *Notes from Underground* (1864). Written in two parts, this book presents the confessions of an underground man. In the first part, the nameless man introduces himself as a sick and spiteful man, and criticises the notions of free will, rationalism and romanticism, and makes an attempt to explain his ideas of life and being. In the second part, the man talks about his difficulty in relating to other people. The man is unable to interact and identify with others in society at large. Thus, this novel portrays the conflict in the mind of the main character between the rational and the irrational. Dostoevsky's underground man became a common character type in many of the novels that followed.

Dostoevsky's next important novel *The Gambler* (1867) reflects his own addiction to gambling. The story is told from the

point of view of Alexei Ivanovich a young tutor who works for a Russian family living in the suit of a German hotel. He is also in love with Polina. He succumbs to her wishes, and places a bet for her in the town's casino. He wins at the roulette table. This is his first experience with gambling. It is important to note that he completed this novel, under great pressure, to pay off his gambling debts.

The Idiot (1868) is another most famous novel of Dostoevsky. In this novel, he tried to portray the idea of a good man through the main character of the novel called Myshkin. The novel begins with three strangers travelling to Petersburg in a train. Myshkin is portrayed as a simple, innocent, and not well educated; so people consider him to be an idiot. However, he is an honest, sympathetic and gracious person. It is due to his simplicity and honesty that he has to face many troubles in a world full of complexities.

The Brothers Karamazov (1880) is Dostoevsky's last novel. The story of the novel revolves around the brutal murder of a father by one of his three sons. Each of the three brothers is marked by a distinct personality—Dmitri, a passionate and violent man, is desperate for money, Ivan is an intellectual and an atheist, and Alyosha has love, faith and compassion for everyone. Critics believe that these traits are symbolic of Dostoevsky's own personality. Besides depicting the spiritual struggle between faith, doubt, reason, and free will, this novel explores the existence of God, the notion of forgiveness, and the nature of truth.

You should note that most of Dostoevsky's works deal with questions like the notion of good and evil, the existence of God, and the constant human struggle for survival in a complex world. Through his novels, he tries to grasp the true meaning of existence. Thus, his novels also have profound psychological implications. The recurring theme in two of his most famous works *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov* is murder and the psychological suffering following the murder. Thus, his novels can be considered as studies of the human self, trying to explain the various conflicts and contradictions of the human self.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Mention the important fictional works of Dostoyevsky?

Q 4: State the significance of Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

9.4 RUSSIAN FICTION

We shall note that the early history of Russia is one of migrating peoples and ancient kingdoms. In fact, ancient Russia was not exactly 'Russia', but a constellation of different cities gradually coalescing into an empire. Contemporary Russia emerged with the establishment of Moscow, one of its oldest cities, in the 14th century. As a sign of the city's importance, the patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church was transferred to the city, making it the spiritual capital of Russia. With the rapid changes in economic and political life that were taking place elsewhere in Europe, Russia was lagging behind till Peter the Great, a powerful king of the Romanov dynasty decided to change all of that. The various reforms that Peter the Great envisioned, however, failed to take root in Russia, and it was not until the reign of Catherine the Great that his desire to make Russia into a great European power was in fact achieved. The history took to dramatic speeds with Napoleon's Russian campaign, and the Revolution.

Side by side, the history of prose literature was also developing traits and features of its own. Evolving through centuries in three major strains—Romantic, Realistic and Modernist, Russian fiction was slowly emerging. Alexander Pushkin, who became the father of Russian literature in the 19th century, played an important role in the development of Russian literature. He introduced Russia to all the European literary genres as well as a great number of European writers. He brought natural speech and foreign influences to create modern poetic Russian. In his brief life, he left examples of nearly every literary genre of his day: lyric poetry, narrative poetry, the novel, the short story, the drama, the critical essay, and even the personal letter. His use of the Russian language formed the basis of the

style of novelists like Ivan Turgenev, Ivan Gonacharov and Leo Tolstoy. Nikolai Gogol did an important critical study of Pushkin's work, which retains much relevance.

In the post-Romantic age, a realistic strain in writing set in. This movement could be cited with the emergence of such titans of literature as Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. With this shift, poetry was taken over completely by fiction. The latter part of the 19th century could thus be roughly regarded as the age of Realism and the names to be noted in this regard are those of Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Other contemporaries include names like Ivan Turgenev, Leskov, Saltykov-Shchedrin and Gonachrov.

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) mostly remembered for the two famous works: *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace.* In their scope, breadth and realistic depiction of 19th century Russian life, these books stand at the peak of realist fiction. *War and Peace* (1869) is generally thought to be one of the greatest novels ever written, remarkable for its vast canvas including 580 characters; many of them historical, others fictional. *Anna Karenina* (1877), which Tolstoy regarded as his first true novel, was one of his most impeccably constructed and compositionally sophisticated works. It tells parallel stories of an adulterous woman trapped by the conventions and falsities of society, and of a philosophical landowner who works alongside the peasants in the fields and seeks to reform their lives.

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821–1881) was the other important figure in the literature of the period. Known for a seething psychological insight into the human psyche, he is considered one of those writers who pioneered Existentialist thoughts later in the 20th century Russia. His *Notes from Underground* (1864), written in the embittered voice of the anonymous "underground man", was named by Walter Kaufmann as the "best overture for existentialism ever written." Dostoevsky was arrested and imprisoned on April 23, 1849 for being a part of the Petrashevsky Circle—the liberal intellectual group. His experiences in prison and the army resulted in major changes in his political and religious convictions. Dostoevsky's post-prison fiction saw the appearance of dark, complex storylines and situations, often styled partly on Dostoevsky himself who

agonised over existential themes of spiritual torment, religious awakening, and the psychological confusion caused by the conflict between traditional Russian culture and the influx of modern, Western philosophy. With the publication of *Crime and Punishment* in 1866, Fyodor Dostoevsky became one of Russia's most prominent authors in the 19th century. Another of his great novels, *The Brothers Karamazov* was published in 1880.

The Sovietisation of Russia in 1917 brought about yet another group of writers and saw the emergence of modernist literature in Russia. Maxim Gorky, Nobel Prize winner Mikhail Sholokhov, Valentin Kataev, Aleksei Nikolaevich Tolstoi, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Ilf and Petrov came to prominence as part of this newly found Soviet literature. Whilst socialist realism gained official support in the Soviet Union, some of the writers—such as Mikhail Bulgakov, Boris Pasternak, Andrei Platonov, Osip Mandelstam, Yury Trifonov, Isaac Babel and Vasily Grossman—also continued the classical tradition of Russian literature, writing "into the desk", with no hope of publishing such works until after their deaths. Meanwhile, Russia had *émigré* writers such as Nobel Prize winner Ivan Alekseyevich Bunin, Alexander Kuprin, Andrey Bely, Marina Tsvetaeva and Vladimir Nabokov.

The modern writers from Russia focused on themes where an oppressive regime's lack of sensitivity curbs literary freedom. They also constantly experimented with various forms of narration. The most famous of these authors, Vladimir Nabokov, had a great command of English, and his language in the controversial masterpiece *Lolita* (1955) won many an acclaim from the English-speaking community. Writers such as Pasternak were highly disillusioned with the system, and wrote their pieces with no hopes of getting published and read. Mayakovsky gained a high place in the literati of contemporary Russia, but found it unbearable to cater to the political urges over his imagination. This poet is hailed as one of the best exponents of a school of poetry named 'futurism'.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What is the importance of Pushkin to the literary evolution of the novel in Russia?

Q 6: How did the Sovietisation of literature brought changed into Russian Literature?

9.5 THE STORYLINE OF THE NOVEL [adapted from Wikipedia]

Raskolnikov, who lives in a tiny, rented room in St. Petersburg, is undergoing tremendous mental conflict. He refuses all help from his friends, and devises a plan to murder and rob Alyona Ivanovna, an unpleasant elderly pawnbroker and moneylender. His motivation comes from the overwhelming sense that he is predetermined to kill the old woman by some power, which is not within his control. While still considering the plan, Raskolnikov befriends a drunkard Semyon Zakharovich Marmeladov, who recently squandered all the wealth of his family. Raskolnikov receives a letter from his sister and mother that they are visiting Saint Petersburg and his sister's sudden marriage plans which they plan to discuss upon their arrival.

After much deliberation, Raskolnikov enters Alyona Ivanovna's apartment, where he murders her with an axe. He also kills her half-sister Lizaveta, who happens to stumble upon the scene of the crime. Raskolnikov then flees and manages to leave undetected. After the murder, Raskolnikov falls into a feverish state and begins to worry obsessively over the consequences of the murder. He hides the items and purse that he stole from the Pawn broker, and tries desperately to clean his clothes of any blood or any evidence. He starts reacting strangely to whoever mentions the murder of the pawnbroker, which is now the most talked-about incident in the town. In his delirium, Raskolnikov starts wandering in St. Petersburg, drawing more and more attention to himself and his relation to the crime. In one of his walks through the city, he finds Marmeladov, who has been hit mortally by a carriage on the street. In order to help him out, Raskolnikov gives the remaining money to the man's teenage daughter Sonya, who has been forced to work as a prostitute to support her family.

Meanwhile, Raskolnikov's mother, Pulkheria Alexandrovna, and his sister, Avdotya Romanovna (or Dounia) arrive in the city. Avdotya had been working as a governess for the Svidrigaïlov family, but was forced out of her position by the head of the family, Arkady Ivanovich Svidrigaïlov, who despite being a married man was attracted toward Avdotya's physical beauty and her feminine qualities. He even offered her riches and elopement. Afraid Avdotya fled the family and lost her source of income. Luzhin, a man of modest income and rank, proposes to marry Avdotya, thereby securing her and her mother's financial safety, provided she accepts him quickly and without any question. It is for these very reasons that the two of them come to Saint Petersburg, both to meet Luzhin there and to obtain Raskolnikov's approval of the marriage. Raskolnikov, who is on a delirious state, dismisses Luzhin immediately as a potential husband for his sister, and realises that she only accepted him to find her family secured

As the novel progresses, Raskolnikov is introduced to the detective Porfiry, who begins to suspect him for the murder purely on psychological grounds. At the same time, a love relationship develops between Raskolnikov and Sonya. Sonya, though a prostitute, is full of Christian virtue and is only driven into the profession by poverty. Meanwhile, Raskolnikov manages to keep his sister away from continuing her relationship with Luzhin, whose true character is exposed to be cunning and base. At this point, Svidrigaïlov appears, having come from the province to Petersburg, only to seek out Avdotya. He reveals that his wife is dead, and that he is willing to pay Avdotya a vast sum of money in exchange for nothing. She, upon hearing the news, starts, suspecting him of treachery.

As Raskolnikov and Porfiry continue to meet, Raskolnikov's motives for the crime remains exposed. Porfiry too becomes increasingly certain Raskolnikov's guilt, but has no concrete evidence or witnesses with which to continue the search. However, Raskolnikov is constantly struggling with the idea of confessing, though he knows that he can never be truly convicted. He turns to Sonya for support and confesses the crime to her. By coincidence, one Svidrigaïlov has taken up residence in a room next to Sonya's and overhears the entire confession. When the two men meet

face to face, Svidrigaïlov acknowledges this fact, and suggests that he may use it against him if necessary. Svidrigaïlov also speaks of his own past, and Raskolnikov grows to suspect that the rumours about his having committed several murders are true.

Sonya urges Raskolnikov to confess, as Svidrigaïlov's testimony could potentially convict him. Furthermore, Porfiry confronts Raskolnikov with his suspicions, and assures him that confession would substantially lighten his sentence. Meantime, Svidrigaïlov attempts to seduce Avdotya, but when he realises that she will never love him, he gives up. In a state of utter confusion, he shoots himself in one morning. In the same morning, Raskolnikov goes to Sonya, who again urges him to confess and be free from his conscience. He makes his way to the police station, where he hears the news of Svidrigaïlov's suicide. He hesitates for a moment, thinking again that he might get away with a perfect crime, but is persuaded again by Sonya to confess.

The novel concludes with an epilogue in which the author gives an account of what happens afterwards in the life of Raskolnikov and his kin. Raskolnikov is sentenced to eight years of penal servitude in Siberia, where Sonya follows him. Dounia gets married to Razumihin and their mother dies soon afterwards, not being able to bear the grief of her son's departure, of which she knew the reason. Raskolnikov himself struggles in Siberia. It is only after some time in prison that his redemption and moral regeneration begin under Sonya's loving influence.

9.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF DOSTOEVSKY [Adapted From *Gale Encyclopaedia*]

Among the European writers of the 19th century, Fyodor Dostoevsky is the preeminent novelist of modernity. In his masterworks *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), he explored the far-ranging moral, religious, psychological, social, political, and artistic ramifications of the breakdown of traditional structures of authority and belief. He chronicled the rise and fall of the modern secular individual and traced the totalitarian potential of the new ideologies of his time, including socialism.

His personal and literary engagement with the ongoing political and social issues of his time makes his work particularly interesting from a historical perspective.

However, Dostoevsky's work is much more than a window into the world of 19th century Russia. Modern readers continue to find Dostoevsky's work compelling because of the way he examines, as no one had previously and few have since, the potential for violence and the abuse of power in all forms of human interaction. His perfectly drawn psychological portraits of common people in distress resonate with all readers who struggle to find meaning in the world.

Dostoevsky's work was generally well received by critics during his lifetime. *Poor Folk* was published in 1846 to great critical acclaim. The writer Dmitri Grigorovich, who shared an apartment with Dostoevsky, presented the manuscript to the writer and critic Nikolai Alekseevich Nekrasov, who spent all night reading it and the next morning told the critic Vissarion Belinsky that a new Gogol had appeared. Belinsky said that Dostoevsky had produced the first "social novel" in Russia and had made the truth accessible even to the most unthinking reader. Belinksy was not as impressed with Dostoevsky's next work, The Double, but later critics were intrigued by the philosophical and psychological theme of "double-ness" that Dostoevsky skilfully explored in his writing.

Dmitrii Chizhevsky, in an article first published in 1928, was among the first critics to expound on the significance of the double as a philosophical problem in Dostoevsky's works, including such later works as *The Possessed* (1872), *The Adolescent* (1875), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). Upon publication in 1866, *Crime and Punishment* was widely praised, primarily for the depth of its psychological analysis. In contrast, the radical critic Dmitrii Ivanovich Pisarev emphasised the depth of Dostoevsky's social economic analysis, arguing that Raskolnikov was driven by the "struggle for existence." Russian author Ivan Turgenev and Anatolii Fedorovich Koni, a leading jurist, both praised the work. Some radical critics charged that Dostoevsky had misrepresented the younger generation and its ideas. The symbolist poet Viacheslav Ivanovich Ivanov read *Crime and*

Punishment in a mythic-religious framework, comparing this and Dostoevsky's other works to ancient tragedy.

Twentieth-century author Andre´ Gide, whose own writing was influenced by *Crime and Punishment*, argues that Raskolnikov fails in his attempt to be more than ordinary, while another twentieth-century writer, Thomas Mann, called this work the greatest crime novel of all time. *Crime and Punishment* had a profound effect on the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who said that Dostoevsky was "the only psychologist from whom he had anything to learn." The Russian philosopher Nikolai Aleksandrovich Berdiaev saw in Raskolnikov's crime the crisis of modern, rational humanism with its glorification of the individual.

One of most productive sources of Dostoevsky criticism in general and *Crime and Punishment* in particular has been psychoanalysis and other forms of scientific psychology. R. D. Laing and Karen Horney are among the many professional psychologists who use Raskolnikov and other Dostoevskian heroes as examples of psychological phenomena. Alfred Bem, a Russian scholar, wrote a series of sophisticated literary studies published in the 1930s that traced the structure of the id and guilt in *Crime and Punishment* and in Dostoevsky's early fiction in general. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, critic Mikhail Bakhtin also emphasises the importance of Raskolnikov's consciousness, arguing that everything in the novel is "projected against him and dialogically reflected in him."

The impact of Dostoevsky's works can be felt throughout the world. One of the reasons for this is that his novels seem to be relevant even in our present times. Some critics have rightly claimed that Dostoevsky was an artist supremely representative, not only of his own age but also of ours. It is the philosophical, moral, psychological and political issues in his works that have interested readers. Dostoevsky's powerful literary depictions of the human condition had a profound influence on modern writers, such as Franz Kafka, who is one of the major German fiction writers of the 20th century. Dostoevsky's personal life experiences enabled him to portray, with deep sympathy, characters who are emotionally and spiritually downtrodden, and who in many cases epitomize the traditional Christian conflict between the body and the spirit.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: In what way are the works of Dostoevsky an window to the world of 19th Russia?

Q 8: The impact of Dostoevsky's works can be felt throughout the world. Why is it so?



9.7 LET US SUM UP

By this time, we have learnt that Dostoevsky, the author of the novel *Crime and Punishment*, is one of the most important Russian novelists and his works had a profound influence on the intellectual thoughts and literatures of the 20th century. The novel is based on Raskolnikov, a poor university student who makes a plan to kill an old woman, Alyona Ivanovna. Finally, he commits the crime in order to test his own ideas about the notion of conscience, morality and human nature. We have learnt the impact of Dostoevsky's works can be felt throughout the world. One of the reasons for this is that the philosophical, moral, psychological and political issues in his works are still relevant in our present times.



9.8 FURTHER READING

Bloom Harold. (Ed.). (2007). *Viva Modern Critical Interpretations: Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment*. New Delhi: Viva Books Private Ltd.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. (1989). *Crime and Punishment*: Norton Critical Edition. W. W. Norton & Company.

Hacht, Anne Marie & Dwayne D. Hayes. (Eds.). (2009). *Gale Contextual Encyclopaedia of World Literature.* Vol. 1.

Web Resources:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crime_and_Punishment

9.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: For being a part of the "Petrachevsky Circle" which comprised of progressive-minded intellectuals consisting of writers, students, teachers, army officers, etc. The members of the group opposed the tsars and the serf system.

Ans to Q 2: His experiences in the prison and the army changed his religious and political ideologies…he got disillusioned by Western ideas, and instead turned toward traditional and rustic Russian values… …the change in his writings was marked by the emergence of dark, complex story-lines and situations, brooding and tortured characters and a constant conflict between traditional Russian culture and modern Western philosophy.

Ans to Q 3: *Notes from Underground* (1864) presents the confessions of an underground man… …*The Gambler* (1867) reflects his own addiction to gambling… …*The Idiot* (1868) tried to portray the idea of a 'good man'… …*The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) revolves around the brutal murder of a father by one of his three sons… …*Crime and Punishment* deals with murder and the psychological suffering following the murder.

Ana to Q 4: It is Dostoevsky's last novel… …the story revolves around the brutal murder of a father by one of his three sons… …each son display a distinct personality—Dmitri, a passionate and violent man, Ivan is an intellectual and an atheist and Alyosha has love, faith and compassion for everyone… …these traits are viewed by critics as symbolic of Dostoevsky's own personality.

Ans to Q 5: Alexander Pushkin introduced Russia to all the European literary genres as well as the writers… …he brought natural speech and foreign influences to create modern poetic Russian… …he contributed to lyric poetry, narrative poetry, novel, short story, drama, critical essay, and even to personal letter… …his use of the Russian language formed the basis of the style of novelists like Ivan Turgenev, Ivan Gonacharov and Leo Tolstoy.

Ans to Q 6: The Sovietisation of Russia in 1917 brought modernist literature in Russia… … writers like Maxim Gorky, Mikhail Sholokhov, Valentin Kataev, Aleksei Nikolaevich Tolstoi, Vladimir Mayakovsky, came to prominence… …socialist realism gained official support… …writers such as Mikhail Bulgakov, Boris Pasternak, Andrei Platonov, Osip Mandelstam, Yury Trifonov, Isaac Babel and Vasily Grossman became important.

Ans to Q 7: Todays's readers find Dostoevsky's works compelling because of the way he examines, the potential for violence and the abuse of power in all forms of human interaction… …His psychological portraits of common people in distress resonate with all readers who struggle to find meaning in the world.

Ans to Q 8: Because his novels seem to be relevant even in our present times… …Dostoevsky was an artist supremely representative of his age… …his philosophical, moral, psychological and political issues ingrained in his works have interested the readers across the world… … his depictions of the human condition had a profound influence on modern writers, such as Franz Kafka.



9.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the history of Russian fiction with reference to the greatest stalwarts of Russian literature.

Q 2: Mention the important fictional works of Dostoevsky and discuss some of the important questions and issues raised in them.

Q 3: Discuss in detail the importance of Dostoevsky as a writer in the history of Russian literature.

Q 4: Describe the story of the novel *Crime and Punishment* in your own words.

Q 5: Write a note on the critical reception of Dostoevsky in the context of European literature.

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UNIT 10: FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY: *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

10.1 Learning Objectives

10.2 Introduction

10.3 Reading the Novel: *Crime and Punishment*

10.3.1 Major Themes

10.3.2 Major Characters

10.3.3 Dostoevsky's Narrative Style

10.4 Let us Sum up

10.5 Further Reading

10.6 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

10.7 Possible Questions

10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the important aspects of *Crime and Punishment* which are essential in order to understand the text
- identify the major themes and discuss them
- trace the important characters of the novel and discuss their role
- have some ideas on the narrative style of Dostoevsky as a writer
- make an assessment of the reception of the novel since its publication

10.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the last unit of Block 2 of the course on European Literature and this unit needs to be studied in connection with the previous unit. We shall, in this unit, discuss the novel *Crime and Punishment*, which was first, published in the literary journal *The Russian Messenger* in twelve monthly instalments during 1866. This is the second of Dostoyevsky's full-length novels following his return from ten years of exile in Siberia. The novel is based on Raskolnikov, a poor university student who makes a plan

to kill an old woman, Alyona Ivanovna—a pawnbroker. Finally, he commits the crime in order to test his own ideas about the notion of conscience, morality and human nature. Following the murder, Raskolnikov undergoes tremendous emotional turmoil, and his sense of guilt and self-doubt makes him confess and suffer the consequences. Meanwhile, he meets a prostitute named Sonia to whom Raskolnikov first confesses his crime. Sonia then encourages him to confess to the police. After confession, he is sentenced to eight years rigorous imprisonment in Siberia. Eventually, it is Sonia's intense love that resurrects Raskolnikov. As we finish reading this unit, we shall be able to discuss the novel in terms of its various vital aspects.

10.3 READING THE NOVEL: *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT*

Dostoevsky started working on *Crime and Punishment* in the summer of 1865. At this point in life, he was facing a major financial crisis as he squandered all his savings in gambling. This novel reflects certain aspects of Dostoevsky's own life. It can also be seen as the author's reaction to the political situation in St. Petersburg. The central debate raised in this novel is based on a crucial question: Who is a criminal?

10.3.1 Major Themes

The following are some of the important themes that you will find in this novel.

Criminal Psychology:

The moneylender Alyona Ivanovna, symbolises the "most noisome vermin" to Raskolnikov. In his attempt to rid society of such parasites, Raskolnikov commits the murder—a murder based entirely on the ideologies he has formulated while living at St. Petersburg. However, the murder of Lizaveta, Alyona's younger sister, is not pre-meditated, and therefore, renders a strong bearing on Raskolnikov's mind. It is known that Dostoevsky was well versed with criminal psychology, having closely aware of the cases of the most infamous criminals of his time. References can be made to

the **Lacenaire trial** of 1835, and the transcripts that were considered to be the most well documented insights into the criminal psyche. What was central to the Lacenaire case was the criminal's contention that he was a "victim" of society. Lacenaire claimed that all the people he had killed were pre-destined to die since society was his one and only enemy. Raskolnikov does not believe he has committed a crime, and continues to believe so. Raskolnikov's act has a lot to do with the intellectual thoughts he has been exposed to. As a student of law, he formulates a certain theory to explain crime. He divides man into two distinct categories – ordinary and extraordinary. Ordinary man is one who abides by judicial laws. Extraordinary man, on the other hand, is permitted to break the law *if* it aids him in the realisation of his idea. Ordinary man is content with the existing system. Extraordinary man, however, has the gift of the new word, and may commit crimes "in the name of what ought to exist". Herein lies a clear justification for Raskolnikov's crime. The murder of Alena Ivanovna is a right granted to extraordinary man. However, despite all such theories he cannot escape the resultant emotional turmoil. He was completely aware of the hesitation inside him. While he can find no reason to justify the murder of Lizaveta, he spends the entire novel trying to rationalize the murder of Alena Ivanovna. Thus, the psychology of crime is an integral theme in the novel *Crime and Punishment.*

From the very beginning of *Crime and Punishment*, we witness certain unease in Raskolnikov's character. Although he has come to the decision that Alena Ivanovna must be murdered, he questions the execution of the act. Raskolnikov wishes to create a better world that comprises superior human beings such as himself. When he *does* commit the double murder, Raskolnikov goes into a state of delirium, precisely because unlike Napoleon he cannot separate his conscience from his actions. Although initially, the desire to give himself up is strong, he gradually decides that there is no need to atone for something he does not consider a crime.

Dostoevsky truly captures the hellish state of an individual torn between annihilation, since he can only truly destroy himself after having embarked upon the path he has taken, and redemption. Raskolnikov himself declares, "It was myself I killed!" In a way, one might say that Raskolnikov's conscience prevails as he is exiled to Siberia for eight years. The ritual with the crosses performed by Sonya before the confession is testament to his desire for redemption. His decision to confess is driven greatly by his desire to live rather than to repent. In the Epilogue, Raskolnikov seems to display barely any remorse for the crime he has committed, although Dostoevsky suggests that the boy is ready for a renewal. What we *can* be sure of is Raskolnikov's divided conscience and a chance to start anew.

Nihilism:

Many critics have called Crime and Punishment an anti-nihilist work. It is a condemnation of the "new ideas" prevalent during Dostoevsky's time among the young, educated middle-class people. We see the parody of such new ideas in Raskolnikov, Lebezyatnikov, Luzhin and many other characters. The philosophy of nihilism attempts to solve societal problems like poverty and injustice through the destruction of all accepted social codes. Raskolnikov is a nihilist in the sense that he advocates the dismantling of laws and regulations for an elite class of 'extraordinary people'. Nihilism, however, blindly discards both the harmful and helpful aspects of tradition, and suggests no coherent model from which to rebuild the destroyed society and bring about the realisation of ideas of justice and peace. Dostoevsky, alerts us about the violence inherent in such a solution.

The Issue of Justice:

The problematic notion of legality and justice is explored in detail in the novel. For one, there are intensive descriptions of police procedures and other methods of investigation of crime, and at the

end, the readers get to know about the results of Raskolnikov's trial. One problem the novel raises is whether all people are equally culpable for crime. Raskolnikov's initial view is that there are exceptional people who may overstep legal (and even moral) bounds and still remain blameless. The old woman whom he murders is seen as just a louse and harmful to society. However, the novel shows u, at the end, that legality and justice must be blind; that the degree of punishment must not vary along class lines or, indeed, any such arbitrary category. All individuals are responsible for crimes to the same degree, regardless of background or intellect. Raskolnikov is given a lenient sentence because of his earlier good—courageous and selfless—deeds.

Retribution:

Retribution, as a theme, is closely linked to the themes of imprisonment, justice and suffering. Stylistically, one can inquire whether the novel delivers poetic justice, that is, if the characters meet appropriate ends, with the good triumphing and the evil characters being punished for their crimes. The novel, being an exercise in realism, does not deliver this kind of false poetic justice. The good characters suffer much more intensely than the bad, and the bad characters sometimes triumph or receive hardly any punishment at all. Dostoevsky is again negating the idea of fate, and showing that punishment comes out of the natural consequences of one's actions. Svidrigailov goes mad and kills himself because of his evil actions, and the rejection by the morally upright Dounia. Luzhin is humiliated because of his malignant victimisation of Sonya. However, they do not receive the type of punishment that the title of the novel refers to: a spiritual punishment brought about the soul of the evil-doer himself, such as Raskolnikov experiences. Retribution denotes punishment, but connotes the idea of vengeance or payback for a crime. Raskolnikov finally goes to prison for his actions, but the imprisonment itself is not as important as the suffering he undergoes in his own mind. Dostoevsky clearly

shows that a man who commits murder can still be reformed once he has experienced great suffering, such as in the system of imprisonment. His idea of justice is not so much empty, meaningless and vengeful retribution as the criminal understanding the gravity of his crime, repenting, and then being offered a chance to reform his life. He shows that this is naturally brought out through the conscience of the evildoer, and negates the idea that the state can induce justice through its laws and systems of incarceration.

LET US KNOW



The 'anti-hero' is a term, which denotes a protagonist who displays the typical qualities of a villain, or subverts our idea of what is heroic. Anti-heroes have had a long history in literature, especially the *picaro*, or the 'rogue' character type such as exemplified by Miguel Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Anti-heroes are generally used to make a satirical comment on society. While heroes usually lead society, anti-heroes stay on the margins of society, and even overtly fight against it. They can be more clear-sighted about the failings of society, being outside it, and thus can offer critical assessments of it. Raskolnikov is a peculiar type of anti-hero.

Existentialism:

Existentialism as a philosophy only came into being in the 20th century, and really flourished in the 40s and 50s. You perhaps know that existentialism sees man as a rational, thinking creature responsible for each of his actions, and believes, that 'existence precedes essence'. This is in contrast with the Christian theological idea of pre-ordained fate and original sin. An existentialist reading of Dostoyevsky would, therefore, not see Raskolnikov's character as inherently flawed from birth, but call him a murderer simply because he has committed a murder. In this reading, we would not take into account the historical and socio-economic context around Raskolnikov or around any of the other characters. As an existential

figure, he is a failure, because he constantly tries to evade responsibility for his actions, and because he succumbs to the lure of social normality.

Family Ties:

How important is family to Raskolnikov? It seems that Raskolnikov is held in high regard by both his mother and his sister. He is an educated man and overviews all decisions of the family. The decision that Dounia and Luzhin should wed is the only one that is taken without the consultation of Raskolnikov. Being a sharp young law student, Raskolnikov immediately catches the superficiality of Luzhin. After the murder, Raskolnikov develops an aversion towards his family, precisely because they do not know the truth. The fact that he is a murderer torments Raskolnikov to the effect that he harbours antagonistic feelings towards anyone who showers him with love. However, the strain between his sister and him is less than the strain between his mother and him. Perhaps, this is because the bond between mother and son runs deep, and perhaps also because Pulkheria is more vocal about her feelings than Dounia ever is. Raskolnikov decides that the only way he can ease his family's suffering and so also his, is by disappearing without ever telling them that he is a killer. When Dounia learns the truth from Sonya, all that she wishes is that her brother is still alive. It is strange how brother and sister slip into a sort of ease while they discuss the murder, and appear to be closer to each other than they ever have been in the novel. Raskolnikov's parting words to his sister are that she should not forsake their mother. All these clearly show that Raskolnikov is also conscious of their family.

Critique of Contemporary Russian Society:

After his arrest in 1849, Dostoevsky focused on the changing milieu he found himself in. He was an exponent of *pochvenichestvo* (from *pochva* meaning "[one's native] soil") which sought to combine growing Western thought with traditional Russian culture. The

importance of one's native culture was on the decline after the rule of Peter I. In addition, most importantly, Dostoevsky attempts to examine in *Crime and Punishment* the midway between the *westernizers* and the *slavophiles.* Raskolnikov and Luzhin are products of the western schools of thought that were gaining rapid significance in Russia. Despite their education, they fail to successfully combine their newfound knowledge with the traditions of Russia. Dostoevsky is obviously pointing to a weakness in this mode of thinking. His idea of Christianity differed from the Orthodox sect, and he criticised the modern educated Russian for turning away from the Church. This is exemplified by Raskolnikov, and his inability to commit to any form of penitence—although he finally agrees to confess and gain salvation.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Do you think Raskolnikov can be called a 'nihilist'?

Q 2: How does Dostoevsky deal with criminal psychology in the novel?

Q 3: State the important themes of the novel *Crime and Punishment?*

Q 4: How is the theme of Retribution dealt with in this novel?

10.3.2 Major Characters

The following are the important characters of the novel *Crime and Punishment*.

Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov:

Raskolnikov is the protagonist of the novel Crime and Punishment which is discussed from his perspective. He is perhaps one of the most discussed and critically acclaimed characters in world fiction. A 23-year-old man and former student of law, now a destitute, Raskolnikov is described as "exceptionally handsome, above the average in height, slim, well built, with beautiful dark eyes

and dark brown hair." Perhaps the most striking feature of Raskolnikov is his dual personality. On the one hand, he is cold, apathetic, and antisocial; on the other, he can be surprisingly warm and compassionate. His chaotic interaction with the external world and his nihilistic worldview might be seen as the cause of his social alienation or the consequence of it. Despite its name, the novel does not so much deal with the crime and its formal punishment, as with Raskolnikov's internal struggle (the book shows that his punishment results more from his conscience than from the law). Believing society would be better for it, Raskolnikov commits murder with the idea that he possessed enough intellectual and emotional fortitude to deal with the ramifications, [based on his paper/thesis, "On Crime", that he is a Napoleon], but his sense of guilt soon overwhelms him to the point of psychological and somatic illness. It is only in the epilogue that he realises his formal punishment, having decided to confess and end his alienation from society.

The popularity that Raskolnikov has enjoyed among the literary circles owes perhaps to his complex psychology that renders him an interesting and intriguing character. Raskolnikov invents his own theory of crime, but is not for a moment spared of doubt regarding the justice of his action. Raskolnikov's capacity for love and passionate desire is revealed in his exceptional relationship with Sonia. Raskolnikov is thus a man of manifold dimensions, and it is precisely this multiplicity of his character that had carved for him a permanent niche in the arenas of world literature.

Sofya Semyonovna Marmeladov or Sonia:

Sonya is an example of female subjugation due to circumstances. Following her family's extreme poverty and her father's alcoholism, she is forced into prostitution by her stepmother Katerina Ivanovna. Her similarities to Dounia are emphasised when they are both preyed upon by the same man—Luzhin tries to malign her reputation further by falsely accusing her of being a thief. Sonia is perhaps one of the most complex female characters in world

literature. She later walks willingly into the tragedies of life in Siberia, because of her incessant love for Raskolnikov. She does not for a moment try to justify her position, and submits to the rebuffs of life and all the curses and blames that are dispensed on her.

Avdotya Romanovna Raskolnikov or Dounia:

Dounia is the sister of Raskolnikov. Her love for her family is unconditional, as is evident from the fact that she is quick in forgiving her brother. The magnitude of her self-respect is revealed when she unthinkingly calls off her engagement to Luzhin the moment she detects insolence on his part. She is a strong woman who single-handedly resists the advances of a lascivious Svidrigailov, and also a dutiful daughter who stands by her mother in all her moments of woe. She tries to be financially independent by taking on a job as a governess, rather than marrying for money, since she realises that she will have to be subservient to her husband. She is an educated, proud woman with great dignity, despite her poverty. By the end, she marries Razumikhin, her equal in intelligence and moral strength.

Pulcheria Alexandrovna Raskolnikov:

Pulcheria Alexandrovna is the devoted mother of Raskolnikov and Dounia. She is a modest woman, who, despite her frailty, struggles to make both ends meet in her family. Pulcheria Alexandrovna lives solely for her family, is completely dependent on them for her emotional stability, and breaks down when catastrophe befalls the life of her son.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Comment on the character of Raskolnikov?

10.3.3 Dostoevsky's Narrative Style

In his study of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Mikhail Bakhtin refers to the concept of polyphony or "multiple voices". This narrative technique does not allow a singular interpretation to

overshadow the text. Although a greater part of the novel focuses on Raskolnikov and his inner struggles, the reader is given an understanding of the events from other characters' points of view. We know that in all probability Raskolnikov is not delirious when he thinks that Porfiry is trying to trap him. A voice is affected by the language and speech particular to each speaker. We will see that in order for Dostoevsky's imaginative world to be peopled by multiple voices, wordplay is highly important. Polyphony, by its very nature, prevents an autonomous "monophonic" voice, or any authorial intrusions. Porfiry, for example, consistently mirrors Raskolnikov's language so as to psychologically trap him. Bakhtin also talks about a type of discourse he calls *erlebte Rede* or "double discourse", wherein one's speech comes deceptively close to another's. The use of the *erlebte Rede* allows for the third-person omniscient point of view where the narrator's conscious and unconscious maybe more distinctly separated. A first-person point of view blurs the boundaries between these two states of consciousness. The omniscient third-person point of view, however, effectively traces the stream of consciousness of Raskolnikov, and makes it possible for the reader to identify the wordplay and double meaning at work in Dostoevsky's novel. The use of *erlebte Rede* by other characters acts as an externalisation of Raskolnikov's conscience; it is this that makes their speech so threatening. Characters often do not realize they are interacting through this discourse. The man who says to Raskolnikov "thou art the murderer" later apologises for his unusual outburst. The emphasis he places on the word 'thou' has nothing to do with Raskolnikov. However, this "man from the earth", like other characters, is unaware of Raskolnikov's "reading" of his speech. It is Raskolnikov alone who knows that the man's accusation is not wrong.

You will note that Dostoevsky makes use of the devices of dream to represent the inner self of Raskolnikov. Some of the most important imagery in *Crime and Punishment* comes in the form of

dreams. Four dreams in particular are significant to the action and themes of the novel:

The first is Raskolnikov's dream about the horse, in which he dreams he is a young boy, and he is walking with his father past a tavern to a cemetery to place flowers on the graves of his grandmother and baby brother. They stop to witness a violent scene in which a crowd is gathered around an old weak mare who enrages her master by her inability to pull the enormous load on his cart. The master proceeds to beat the horse to death, egged on by the crowd. The little boy, Raskolnikov, feels immense pity and sympathy for the murdered horse— He tries to protect her with his own body and weeps for her.

The second is Raskolnikov's dream re-enacting the murder of the old woman. In it, he strikes her with the axe, but she does not move. When he bends down to take a closer look, he notices that "she is laughing, shaking with noiseless laughter". Every time he frenziedly strikes her with the axe, she continues laughing until he finally runs away and notices that all around him are a crowd of laughing people. Mikhail Bakhtin points out the carnivalesque nature of this scene – the elements of crowd, laughter and chaotic disturbance of order being emphasised. Many other aspects such as sacrifice, dismemberment and carnivalesque contrasts and antitheses are present throughout the novel.

The third is a dream that occurs near the end, in which Raskolnikov dreams about a unique new plague, which infects all of humanity except a chosen few. This plague represents—the 'new ideas' of individualism and moral relativism that are taking hold of young people. The chosen few are those who have regained or retained their faith and spiritual freedom in the face of the moral freedom, which these new ideas advocate.

The fourth is a dream by Svidrigailov on the night before his suicide. He (along with the reader) confuses the dream with reality, unaware that he is dreaming until he wakes. He dreams of

walking out of his room at the hotel and meeting a little girl who is cold and crying, complaining of having been beaten by her mother.

It is impossible to examine dreams without referring to the ideas of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Freud believed that our repressed desires get articulated in our dreams in the form of symbols— often expressed as an articulation of the conflict between the id, ego and superego. Jung formulated the idea of the collective unconscious, in which many 'archetypal' images and patterns exist and work together in the dream to provide a unified, coherent vision of the world.



10.4 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, we have learnt that the novel *Crime and Punishment* is the second of Dostoyevsky's full-length novels following his return from ten years of exile in Siberia. The novel is based on Raskolnikov, a poor university student who makes a plan to kill an old woman, Alyona Ivanovna. Finally, he commits the crime in order to test his own ideas about the notion of conscience, morality and human nature. Following the murder, Raskolnikov undergoes tremendous emotional turmoil, and his sense of guilt and self-doubt makes him confess and suffer the consequences. We have also learnt that *Crime and Punishment* is a novel loaded with multiple meanings. This novel is significant for its beautiful rendering of the criminal Psychology, the philosophy of existentialism and nihilism, the issue of Justice, the importance of Family Ties and most importantly the critique of contemporary Russian society. The ideas we have gained from this unit, shall help us to read the text of the novel even better.



10.5 FURTHER READING

Bloom Harold. (Ed.). (2007). *Viva Modern Critical Interpretations: Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment*. New Delhi: Viva Books Private Ltd.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. (1989). *Crime and Punishment*: Norton Critical Edition. W. W. Norton & Company.

Hacht, Anne Marie & Dwayne D. Hayes. (Eds.). (2009). *Gale Contextual Encyclopaedia of World Literature.* Vol.1.



10.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Both yes and no… …*Crime and Punishment* has been called an anti-nihilist work by many critics… …Raskolnikov is a nihilist in the sense that he advocates the dismantling of laws and regulations for an elite class of 'extraordinary people'… … Dostoevsky, alerts us about the violence inherent in such a solution.

Ans to Q 2: As a law student, Raskolnikov formulates a certain theory to explain crime… …he divides man into two distinct categories – ordinary and extraordinary… … ordinary man is one who abides by judicial laws… … extraordinary man is permitted to break the law *if* it aids him in the realisation of his idea… …here lies a clear justification for Raskolnikov's crime… …the murder of Alena Ivanovna is a right granted to extraordinary man… … but when he commits the double murder, Raskolnikov goes into a state of delirium, precisely because he cannot separate his conscience from his actions.

Ans to Q 3: Criminal Psychology… …Nihilism… …The Issue of Justice… …Retribution… …Existential Dilemma… …Family Ties… …Critique of Contemporary Russian Society and so on.

Ans to Q 4: Retribution, as a theme, is closely linked to the themes of imprisonment, justice and suffering… …one can inquire whether the novel delivers poetic justice, that is, if the characters meet appropriate ends, with the good triumphing and the evil characters being punished for their crimes… … Dostoevsky is again negating the idea of fate, and showing that punishment comes out of the natural consequences of one's actions.

Ans to Q 5: Raskolnikov is the protagonist of the novel *Crime and Punishment… …*the most striking feature of Raskolnikov is his dual personality… …on the one hand, he is cold, apathetic, and antisocial but surprisingly warm and compassionate… …in order to better his society, Raskolnikov commits murder with the idea that he possessed enough intellectual and emotional fortitude to deal with the ramifications… …Raskolnikov invents his own theory of crime.



10.7 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What are the thoughts that occur to Raskolnikov soon after the crime? Comment on Dostoevsky's exploration of the criminal mind in the novel *Crime and Punishment*.

Q 2: In what ways, does Dostoevsky, critique the contemporary Russian society in his novel *Crime and Punishment*?

Q 3: Do you think that family ties are important to Raskolnikov? Discuss with reference to Raskolnikov's attachment with his mother and sister.

Q 4: Discuss the role played by various important characters in the development of the plot of the novel *Crime and Punishment.*

Q 5: Discuss how the novel *Crime and Punishment* has been critically received since its publication?

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UNIT 11: BERTOLT BRECHT: *MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.1 Learning Objectives

11.2 Introduction

11.3 The German Dramatic Tradition

11.4 Bertolt Brecht: The Playwright

11.4.1 His Life

11.4.2 His Dramatic Career

11.5 Sources of the Play *Mother Courage and Her Children*

11.6 Critical Reception of Brecht

11.7 Let us Sum up

11.8 Further Reading

11.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

11.10 Possible Questions

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- acquaint you with the background of German drama
- discuss the life and works of the great German dramatist Bertolt Brecht
- relate Brecht to the traditions of German drama and outline some of his innovations
- connect Brecht's philosophy with the various aspects presented in the play *Mother Courage and Her Children*

11.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of Block 3 of the course on Modern European Literature. In this unit, we shall read about Bertolt Brecht who is a familiar name in 20th century drama. Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) was a German poet, playwright, theatre director. As a theatre practitioner of 20th century, Brecht contributed to dramaturgy and theatrical production, through his tour,

along with his wife Helene Weigel by the Berliner Ensemble–a post-war theatre company. Due to his inclination towards Marxism, Brecht is often considered a 'Marxist' playwright who put 'ideology' into dramatic form. As we finish reading the unit, we shall be able to reflect on the life and works of Bertolt Brecht with particular reference to his play *Mother Courage and Her Children.*

11.3 THE GERMAN DRAMATIC TRADITION

It is important to note that German drama actually evolved out of the fragmentary Easter plays of Muri and the St. Gall Passion Plays, which led to the subsequent popularity of the morality and miracle plays. By the beginning of the 15th century, there began to appear popular drama, mostly farcical comedies, for secular entertainment in the form of carnival plays, which gained tremendous popularity in the subsequent periods. However, by the 16th century, there could be seen a noticeable shift towards tragedy as farcical episodes were integrated into tragedies. Comic interludes were made into regular under-plots subsequently. Besides, drastic changes were taking place in the choice of subjects too. For example, secular topics were given more importance, and ancient myths and Roman, medieval and modern stories were sought to be dramatised. Simultaneously, there developed various types of characters such as parasites, braggarts, soldiers, peasants and witches. The subsequent interest in medicine and psychology also led to the representation of various temperaments like that of the melancholy man. Though all these apply more immediately to Latin dramas, yet the changes in these exercised an influence on German plays also.

One interesting feature of German drama was its indebtedness to Saxon and Norman mimes from which German actors learned a variety of tricks and traditions. Henceforth, Hans Wurst, the familiar boorish clown who was imported to Germany, became an indispensable character in every play designed to gratify the low demands of the vulgar. However, the prevailing grossness and ribaldry, the tastes and sympathies of the educated classes held them aloof from the theatre. This continued until the outbreak of the 'Thirty Years' War' (1628-1648) and the stage was left to the guardianship

of marionettes. Consequently, the development which had begun in German drama was interrupted at its most promising phase. All the hopes cherished with regard to German drama were wrecked by the war and also by the lack of an appreciative and artistic audience.

The conditions and prospects of German drama became even worse than as the higher classes came to despise their native tongue. As they had formerly considered Latin as the proper language of scholars and the only fit medium of discourse on important subjects, they now considered the use of French as the distinguishing mark of modern elegance and culture. Thus, it is pertinent to say that unlike the traditions of English drama, German drama has a peculiar historical background. In order to discuss the socio-historical context of German drama, you can turn to 15thcentury humanism, which cast its influence in the field of drama and revitalised the dramatic tradition. In contrast to the courtly Renaissance, there existed a new humanist element in German literature after 1450. German humanism took a different turn after 1480 as a strong patriotic and political strain was evinced in the cultural history of Germany. A lively dramatic tradition was even established as part of the university courses. Roman comedies and Latin plays were used as moral instruction. Such plays were a direct contrast to the medieval dramatic types resulting in the proliferation of German drama in and after the 16th century. Later, this Latin drama was turned to the service of the Reformation.

The 16th century, on the other hand, was more influenced by Martin Luther's 'Reformation' and drama was used more as the vehicle of Lutheran teaching. However, during the early part of the 17th century there could be seen a noticeable change in vernacular drama. In the first half of this century, vernacular drama was relatively uninspired. However, notable amongst the works of this period were those of Jacob Bidermann and Gryphius. While Biederman's Jesuit dramas expressed the themes of mutability, vanity and urgency of salvation, Gryphius's tragedies and comedies sought to explore the problems of stoicism and personal integrity. Thus, the 17th century German dramas collectively sought to express the acuteness of intellectual perception on the one hand and the excesses of feelings on the other.

You will note that German literature in general, began to take its actual shape through the various processes like—Enlightenment, Neo-

classicism, and Romanticism. However, Neoclassicism and Romanticism are often considered to be the greatest epochs of German literature because, during that age, Jonathan Wolfgang von Goethe went beyond the Enlightenment's substitution of science for religion, and insisted on the value of 'feeling' in place of 'reason.' Although we do not find any major literary trend before the 19th century Germany, the trends of the 19th century can be traced in the form of Realism, Regionalism and Naturalism. Similarly, the 20th century Germany saw the rise of Impressionism, Expressionism, Post-expressionism and Social-Realism (You are advised to read about such isms from any good glossary of literary terms). You will also note that Georg Kaiser (1878–1945), Arnolt Bronnen (1895–1959), Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), Fritz Hochwälder (1911–86), Tankred Dorst (1925–), Günter Grass (1927–), Volker Braun (1939-) are some of the most significant German playwrights of the 19th and 20th century who you should study in later times.



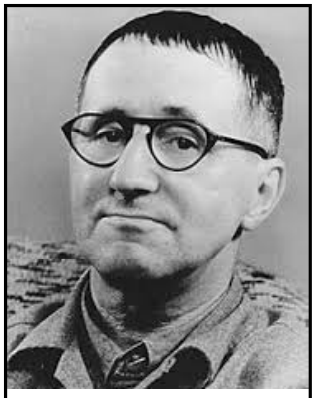
CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Briefly sketch the major periods in the history of German drama.

11.4 BERTOLT BRECHT: THE PLAYWRIGHT

In the following subsections, we shall read about the life and works of Bertolt Brecht.

11.4.1 His Life



Source:
www.google.co.in

Brecht was born in Augsburg, Bavaria, which is about 80 km North-west of Munich, to a devout Protestant mother and a Catholic father. His father worked in a paper mill, and became its manager in 1914. It was however, his mother that he received inspiration for writing. From her, he learnt to portray the "dangerous image of the self-denying woman" that

recurs in his drama. At school in Augsburg, he met Caspar Neher, with whom he formed a lifelong creative partnership. Neher designed many of the sets for Brecht's dramas and helped to forge the distinctive visual iconography of their epic theatre. When he was only 16, the World War I broke out, and Brecht had a direct experience of his classmates joining the army. On his father's recommendation, Brecht registered for a medical course at Munich University. There he studied drama with Arthur Kutscher, who inspired towards the work of the iconoclastic dramatist and cabaret-star Frank Wedekind.

From July 1916, Brecht's newspaper articles began appearing under the new name "Bert Brecht". His first theatre criticism for the *Augsburger Volkswille* appeared in 1919. His first full-length play *Baal* (written 1918), arose in response to an argument in one of Kutscher's drama seminars. Brecht completed his second major play, *Drums in the Night*, in February 1919. In 1922, Brecht came to the attention of an influential Berlin critic, Herbert Ihering In November, it was announced that Brecht had been awarded the prestigious Kleist Prize, which is probably Germany's most significant literary award until 1932, for his first three plays (*Baal*, *Drums in the Night*, and *In the Jungle*, although at that point only *Drums* had been produced).

In 1924, Brecht worked with the novelist and playwright Lion Feuchtwanger, whom he had met in 1919, on an adaptation of Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* that proved to be a milestone in Brecht's early theatrical and dramaturgical development. Brecht's *Edward II* constituted his first attempt at collaborative writing and was the first of many classic texts he was to adapt. He later credited it as the germ of his conception of "epic theatre".

In 1925 in Mannheim, the artistic exhibition *Neue Sachlichkeit* ("New Objectivity") had given its name to the new post-Expressionist movement in the German arts. Brecht began to develop his *Man Equals Man* project, which was to become the

first product of "the 'Brecht collective'—that shifting group of friends and collaborators on whom he henceforward depended." This collaborative approach mark Brecht's work from this period as part of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement. In the same year, he saw two films that had a significant influence on him: Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* and Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*. In 1926, a series of short stories was published under Brecht's name, though Hauptmann was closely associated with writing them.

In 1927, Brecht became part of the "dramaturgical collective" of Erwin Piscator's first company. The Piscator productions influenced Brecht's ideas about staging and design, and alerted him to the radical potentials offered to the "epic" playwright by the development of stage technology (particularly projections). The year 1927 also saw the first collaboration between Brecht and the young composer Kurt Weill. Together they began to develop Brecht's *Mahagonny* project. Subsequently, they produced *The Little Mahagonny* for a music festival in July. From that point on Caspar Neher became an integral part of the collaborative effort, with words, music and visuals conceived in relation to one another from the start. The model for their mutual articulation laid in Brecht's newly formulated principle of the "separation of the elements", which he first outlined in "The Modern Theatre Is the Epic Theatre" (1930). The principle, a variety of montage, proposed by passing the "great struggle for supremacy between words, music and production" as Brecht put it, by showing each as self-contained, independent works of art that adopt attitudes towards one another.

In 1930, Brecht married Helene Weigel. By February 1933, Brecht's work was eclipsed by the rise of Nazi rule in Germany. Fearing persecution, Brecht left Germany in February 1933, when Hitler took power. After brief spells in Prague, Zurich and Paris, he and Weigel accepted an invitation from journalist and author Karin Michaëlis to move to Denmark, where they settled in a house in Svendborg on the island of Funen. This became the residence of

the Brecht family for the next six years, and there they started receiving important guests like—Walter Benjamin, Hanns Eisler, and Ruth Berlau. During this period, Brecht also travelled frequently to Copenhagen, Paris, Moscow, New York and London for various projects and collaborations.

When World War II seemed imminent in April 1939, he moved to Stockholm, Sweden, where he remained for a year. Then Hitler invaded Norway and Denmark, and Brecht was forced to leave Sweden for Helsinki in Finland. During the war years, Brecht became a prominent writer of the Exilliteratur. He expressed his opposition to the National Socialist and Fascist movements in his most famous plays: *Life of Galileo*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, and many others.

Brecht died on 14th August 1956 of a heart attack at the age of 58. He is buried in the Dorotheenstädtischer cemetery of Berlin.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 2: What does Brecht's newly formulated principle of the "separation of the elements" suggest?

11.4.2 His Dramatic Career

In the previous section, we have already read about some of the dramatic works of Brecht. As we already know, *Baal* (1918) and *Drums in the Night* (1919) are Brecht's first successful plays. In 1921, his new play *In the Jungle of the Cities* was accepted for production. His winning of the prestigious Kleist Prize at the same time, established him as the best young dramatist in Germany of his time.

Brecht's foray into his 'epic theatre' was through the adaption of Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* in 1924. Now, Brecht moved to

Berlin where he met the great actress, Helene Weigel, and also Max Reinhardt, the eminent producer. There he wrote an article, "How to apply the principles of good sports promotion to the theatre". His play *Man is Man* was produced in 1926. Erwin Piscator, who was famous in Berlin theatre and had much experience of the left-wing 'agitprop' (agitation + propaganda) productions, was Brecht's collaborator in *The Good Soldier Schweik* (1927) which is based on the anti-military novel by Jaroslav Hašek.

Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* was an instant success when it was premiered in 1928. The stage design was by Caspar Neher while Kurt Weill set the music. The play shows both Brecht's increasingly Marxist convictions as well as his distinctive style of 'epic' theatre, which included slogans on placards, sub-titles, projections, half-curtains, visible lighting, and songs. It was a satirical attack on bourgeois society. In his later play, *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, he exposed capitalist society's lust for money. Against his experiences of the rising Nazism, Brecht devised his "learning plays" (or *Lehrstücke*). Yet another Marxist play, *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, came out in 1931, followed by Gorky's *The Mother* in 1932. Among the political plays were *Badener LehrstØck* (1929) and *The Measure* (1930) meant for amateur proletarian groups and schoolchildren.

Brecht had to flee from Germany during Hitler's rise. Travelling in Europe and then in America, Brecht produced the ballet *The Seven Deadly Sins of the Petite Bourgeoisie* (1933) in Paris together with Kurt Weill. At home, the Nazis burnt Brecht's books and stripped him of German citizenship in 1935. *Seòora Carrar's Rifles* (1937) came of his support in the Spanish Civil War while his experiences with the stage got recorded as *The Messingkauf Dialogues*. His most remarkable plays of the later periods are: *The Life of Galileo* (1938), *Mother Courage and her Children* (1939), *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (1940) and *Mr. Puntila and His Man Matti* (1941), *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1944) and so on.

As Daniel Burt has stated, as both a playwright and dramatic theorist, Bertolt Brecht's influence on the modern stage is immense. An Aristotelian describes the accepted dramatic conventions in operation for the last 2,500 years; while a Brechtian indicates a challenge—a radical re-conception of theater's essential principles. Rejecting the mimetic tradition that had dominated Western art, Brecht famously declared, "Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it." Brecht widened the focus of drama from the concerns of an individual to the historical, social, and economic context surrounding identity, motive, and action. Embracing the role of artist as provocateur and reformer, Brecht mounted a sustained critique of the historical moment and modern life while the universal principles he uncovered have sustained his work with a persistent relevance. The famous drama critic Martin Esslin argues that "Brecht's importance...transcends his significance as a dramatist, poet, or amusing personality. He is above all an epitome of his times: most of the cross-currents and contradictions, moral and political dilemmas, artistic and literary trends of our times are focused and exemplified in Brecht's life and its vicissitudes." An oversised figure of great contradictions and contentiousness, Brecht remains a force to be reckoned with whose writing challenges the very foundations of our understanding of the way of the world and the purposes of art.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: How did Erwin Piscator influence Brecht?

Q 4: Name some of the important plays of Brecht.

Q 5: Discuss briefly Brecht's foray into 'epic' theatre.

Q 6: What is Brecht's specific contribution to modern drama?

11.5 SOURCES OF THE PLAY *MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN*

Survival, its costs and consequences, has been one of the most significant theme of Bertolt Brecht's play *Mutter Courage und Ihre Kinder* (*Mother Courage and Her Children*, 1941) which is also one of the most powerful antiwar dramas of the world. Set in 17th century Thirty Years' War, the play follows the experiences of a canteen woman called Anna Fierling, nicknamed Mother Courage, who tries to make her living selling her wares from her cart to the soldiers. As a character, Mother Courage is a woman of enormous strength. She is cunning but the war gradually takes the lives of her three children. However, her trade that depends on the war and her cupidity make her a collaborator in the destruction of her own family. The play makes explicit the conjunction between war and capitalism with greed and exploitation making Mother Courage a "hyena of the battlefield." The play *Mother Courage* justifies the techniques of the epic drama by creating a stage experience that is simultaneously a moving human story, a brilliant meditation on the nature of war and commerce, and a terrifying modern fable. However, it is important for us to know the background of the play.

Between 1618 and 1648, the 30 Years' War migrated across Central Europe from the original place of rebellion in Bohemia to its conclusion in Westphalia. It had left a lasting impression on Bertolt Brecht since he decided to set his play *Mother Courage and Her Children* during this conflict, nearly 400 years after the event when the whole was going to experience the havocs of World War II. However, Brecht claimed to have written the play before World War II began. According to Eric Bentley, the name of the protagonist was taken from a 16th century work *The Life of the Arch-Imposter and Adventuress Courage* by Hans Jacob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen. Another source of inspiration may also have been Grimmelshausen's picaresque novel, *Simplicissimus* (1669). As the work of a man who had himself served in the Thirty Years' War, this novel remains a grim testimony to the horrific experiences of the times.

Perhaps, the most devastating period in Germany before the World Wars is the "Thirty Years' War" (1618-48) whose impact on the life and culture of German is worth mentioning. It was one of the most destructive conflicts in the history of Europe. The war was fought primarily in Germany and at various points involved most of the countries of Europe. Initially the war was fought largely as a religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics in the Holy Roman Empire. Gradually, it developed into a more general conflict involving most of the European powers. A major impact of the War, fought mostly by mercenary armies, was the extensive destruction of entire regions, denuded by the foraging armies. The subsequent famine and disease significantly decreased the populace of the German states and the Low Countries. Some of the quarrels that provoked the war went unresolved for a much longer time. The War was ended with the Treaty of Münster, a part of the wider Peace of Westphalia. As has been mentioned above, Bertolt Brecht makes use of this War as the background of one of his most popular plays *Mother Courage*.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: What are some of the sources of the play *Mother Courage*?

11.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF BRECHT

Early studies of Brecht and his works, as you can find in Berthold Viertel's essay entitled "Bertolt Brecht, Dramatist" (1945), are based on the assessments of Brecht's use of the old and the new, and the significance of the new idiom that he was creating in those years. Brecht's idea of the Epic Theatre was another important topic of discussion for many critics. Henry Goodman, writing in 1952, commented on Brecht's relation to traditional modes of dramatic presentation and found that in the deepest sense he was "traditional" since he worked on the premise that a play had to be written well. This position has found favour with many critics who find deep connections between Brechtian theatre and older classical forms of

dramatic art. Moreover, the definition and description of 'Epic Theatre' continued to be the focus of commentary on Brecht's works. Another aspect, connected with Brecht's challenge to conventional drama, was the departure from and the redefinition of realism. You should note that the influence of Ibsen and realistic theatre prevailed till well into the 20th century.

In 1953, Martin Esslin published *Brecht*: *The Man and His Work* in which we find the reference to an issue central to all discussions of Brecht– his allegiance to Marxism and his differences from the official Communist party line of thought. Another aspect of Brechtian theatre is the didacticism of Brecht's plays. He was aware of the purpose that gave to his work their wider significance: the purpose of arousing the critical attitudes of his audiences. From this standpoint, the origins of Brecht's "Alienation-Effects" have come in for discussion among critics.

Discussions of *Mother Courage and Her Three Children* have turned very often on Brecht's conception of the protagonist. In an interesting study by Angela Curran in 2001, Brecht's turning away from Aristotelian methods of characterisation which draw upon the spectators' empathy, the figure of Mother Courage is analysed to show that Brecht took seriously the idea of the "gest" – the gesture or action that shows the larger social context of the character(s) depicted. In this sense, the 'gest' works on the idea that the actions of the individual are often the outcome of the wider economic and political context and which can be directed through human conducted. In other words, this larger context is not to be understood as a given (which Aristotelian drama assumes) but as the plane of existence which is susceptible of human motivation. With the influence of feminism, Brecht's portrayal of women characters in his plays is also open to criticism. This means that Brecht seemed to take sexual politics very seriously and attempted to extend his portrayal of women beyond the initial dependence on traditional notions. Interestingly, Brecht often used the figure of the mother in many of his plays.

Eric Bentley in his "Preface" (1962) to *Mother Courage and her Children* sated: "As we look back today upon the career of Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) two periods of maximum creativity define themselves…Brecht

had written some of his finest poetry, dramatic and otherwise, before he was twenty-five. The second came when he had perforce to withdraw from the hectic political activity of the Depression Years and lead the life of an exile during the later thirties and earlier forties. This is the period of *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, *The Life of Galileo Galilei*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and of what many regard as his masterpiece, *Mother Courage and her Children.* In this play, and *Galileo*, Brecht withdrew, not only from Nazi Germany, but from the 20th century, and it is not without interest that the century he took in exchange was, in both instances, the 17th. It is the century of greatness, a century that opens with William Shakespeare and closes with Isaac Newton. Brecht finds in that century the roots of his own philosophy of life, scientific humanism."



11.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have gone through the background of German drama and have also read about Brecht's contributions as a playwright. His plays, what can be called Epic Theatre, provide a reading of Marxist philosophy as a powerful form that gets beautifully reflected in his play *Mother Courage.* This play is set in Europe during the Thirty Years' War. Mother Courage, a canteen woman, pulls her cart with her three children (Eilif, Kattrin, and Swiss Cheese) in the wake of the army, trading with the soldiers and attempting to make profit from the war. The information we have gained about Bertolt Brecht and his oeuvre shall help us to read the following unit.



11.8 FURTHER READING

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Web Resources:

http://www.theatrehistory.com/german/holocaust001.html

http://www.theatrehistory.com/german/bates002.html

http://www.theatrehistory.com/german/bates003.html

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bertolt_Brecht

11.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: The 15th century saw the development of popular drama, mostly farcical comedies for secular entertainment… …the 16th century, farcical episodes were integrated into tragedies… …in 17th century there developed vernacular drama… …German literature then began to take its actual shape through the various processes like—Enlightenment, Neo-classicism, and Romanticism leading to Realism, Regionalism and Naturalism in the 19th century… …the 20th century Germany saw the rise of Impressionism, Expressionism, Post-expressionism and Social-Realism.

Ans to Q 2: The principle suggests a variety of montage, proposed by passing the "great struggle for supremacy between words, music

and production"… …Brecht wanted to show each as self-contained independent works of art that adopt attitudes towards one another.

Ans to Q 3: In 1927, Brecht became part of the "dramaturgical collective" of Erwin Piscator's first company… …Piscator influenced Brecht's ideas about staging and design, and alerted him to the radical potentials offered to the "epic" playwright by the development of stage technology. .. … he was Brecht's collaborator in *The Good Soldier Schweik* (1927).

Ans to Q 4: *Life of Galileo*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich and so on*.

Ans to Q 5: Brecht's foray into his 'epic theatre' was through the adaption of Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* in 1924… …his *Threepenny Opera* (1928), a satirical attack on bourgeois society, shows both Brecht's increasingly Marxist convictions as well as his distinctive style of 'epic' theatre… …this play included slogans on placards, sub-titles, projections, half-curtains, visible lighting, and songs… ...in his later play, *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, he exposed capitalist society's lust for money… …against his experiences of the rising Nazism, Brecht devised his "learning plays" (or *Lehrstücke*).

Ans to Q 6: Rejecting the mimetic tradition in Western art, Brecht declared, "Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it."… …he widened the focus of drama from the individual to the historical, social, and economic contexts surrounding identity, motive, and action… …he embraced the role of artist as provocateur and reformer.

Ans to Q 7: Eric Bentley states that the name of the protagonist Mother Courage was taken from a 16th century work *The Life of the Arch-Imposter and Adventuress Courage… …* Grimmelshausen's picaresque novel, *Simplicissimus* (1669)… …however, the most important sources has been the horrific experience of the Thirty Years' War.



11.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the contributions of Bertolt Brecht to European literature in general.

Q 2: How far do you find Brecht's setting of the Thirty Years' War relevant to the your discussion of the play Mother Courage?

Q 3: How has Bertolt Brecht been received in the dramatic world? Discuss in detail.

Q 4: Write a note on the sources of the play *Mother Courage and Her Children.*

Q 5: What are some of the important dramatic works of Bertolt Brecht? Discuss how they reflect Brecht's idea of epic theatre.

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UNIT 12: BERTOLT BRECHT: *MOTHER COURAGE* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 Introduction

12.3 Reading the Play *Mother Courage and Her Children*

12.3.1 Act Wise Summary of the Play

12.3.2 Critical Commentary on the Play

12.3.3 Major Themes

12.3.4 Major Characters

12.4 Let us Sum up

12.5 Further Reading

12.6 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

12.7 Possible Questions

12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- identify the major themes and characters of the play
- make act wise summary of the play
- provide a critical comment on the play and its various aspects
- appreciate the play in its nuanced totality

12.2 INTRODUCTION

The unit is to be read as part of the previous unit where we have discussed the life and works of Bertolt Brecht. In this unit, we shall discuss Brecht's play *Mother Courage and her Children* (*Mutter Courage Und Ihrekinder* was first produced in Zurich Schauspielhaus, 19 April 1941) which, we all know by now, is an anti-war socio-political play set during the Thirty Years' War of the 17th century. It shows a mother who tries to gain profit from the war in order to help her family, but loses her children in that attempt. Thus, in this unit, we shall get an opportunity to read about this wonderful play, which is also an excellent example of Brechtian epic theatre.

12.3 READING THE PLAY *MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN*

In the following subsections, you will get to read about the play in terms of its various aspects.

12.3.1 Act Wise Summary of the Play

Scene 1

From the narrative at the beginning of the play, it is assumed that the year is 1624, and the place is Dalarna—a peaceful province of Sweden. The Chancellor, who had taken over the command of the troops after the death of King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden, is preparing for a campaign in Poland. The Recruiting officer is discussing with the Sergeant who is assigned with the job of gathering enough soldiers for four platoons. Gradually, the protagonist Mother Courage is introduced. Mother Courage's weakness for profit is brought to the forefront although she hopes to save her children from the war. She outwits the Recruiting officer and the Sergeant through the game of prediction with blanks and crosses. However, the first loss for Mother Courage is through Eiliff's recruitment and this is going to be a recurrent pattern throughout the play as each of her children are sacrificed one by one by the Mother. Brecht shows us the central conflict in the terms of this clash between the maternal instinct and the profit motive.

Scene 2

The year is 1625. Mother Courage has travelled with "the baggage train of the Swedish army" in course of the Polish campaign of the Swedish army. The "Thunder of cannon" is heard in the background. This is another phase of the war. The Cook of the Swedish commander is quarrelling with Mother Courage who is trying to sell him a capon for sixty hellers. The price gets lowered to thirty hellers and one gilder finally. The commander is happy with Eiliff's cunning defeat of enemy peasants and brings him over to

dine with him. Note that there is a siege on as the Swedish army has laid siege to the enemy town. In this scene, we see Mother Courage doing business with her well-practiced skills of striking the right bargain at the right moment. The Cook buys her capon at the price she decides. The song Eilif sings reunites mother and son although we are also constantly made aware of the possible destruction of the war.

LET US KNOW



The Thirty Years' War:

"From 1618-48, in European history, a series of wars fought by various nations for various reasons, including religious, dynastic, territorial, and commercial rivalries. Its destructive campaigns and battles occurred over most of Europe, and, when it ended with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the map of Europe had been irrevocably changed."

"The principal battlefield for all these intermittent conflicts was the towns and principalities of Germany, which suffered severely. During the Thirty Years' War, many of the contending armies were mercenaries, many of whom could not collect their pay. This threw them on the countryside for their supplies, and thus began the "wolf-strategy" that typified this war. The armies of both sides plundered as they marched, leaving cities, towns, villages, and farms ravaged. When the contending powers finally met in the German province of Westphalia to end the bloodshed, the balance of power in Europe had been radically changed. Spain had lost not only the Netherlands but also its dominant position in Western Europe. France was now the chief Western power. Sweden had control of the Baltic. The United Netherlands was recognised as an independent republic. The member states of the Holy Roman Empire were granted full sovereignty. The ancient notion of a Roman Catholic empire of Europe, headed spiritually by a pope and temporally by an emperor, was

permanently abandoned, and the essential structure of modern Europe as a community of sovereign states was established." [Quoted from *Encyclopædia Britannica*]

Scene 3:

The time is now 1629. You should note that this is an example of a "chronicle", a historical narrative that will make you sensitive to Brecht's innovations in dramaturgy. A variety of things in this scene is shown which emphasises Brecht's breaking the tradition of theatre as 'illusion'. The presence of Yvette a prostitute in this scene is a reminder of the moral depravity during war. Thus, Brecht shows the underlying businesses of war. The officers are as unscrupulous as their commanders. Mother Courage is a hard-headed business woman who can beat the corrupt officers at their own game of driving hard bargains. There are three stages of the 'action' in this scene. In the first part, we meet Yvette, who is a woman doing another kind of business. The second part of the 'action' begins with the entry of the cook and the chaplain who appeared in the last scene. The third part of the scene's 'action' shows the actual process of war in the way random destruction takes place. The presence of the 'one-eyed spy' symbolises the dangerous manoeuvrings of war. The sudden development of war sends the characters on stage into a state of frenzy.



LET US KNOW

"Epic theatre" and "The narrative mode":

Largely because of his experience of working with Erwin Piscator, whose concept of 'epic theatre' or, a political theatre revolutionised drama in the late 1920s, Brecht attempted to forge a new dramatic idiom, which was radically different from the conventional 'well-made play' with tight structure and a proper ending. While Piscator tried to make theatre more scientific in keeping with the temper of a new scientific society, Brecht was

also influenced by Japanese Noh theatre, and rejected the illusionist ‘’realism’ promoted by the Russian theatre director, Stanislavsky. Towards the end of his life, Brecht summed up his dramatic work with an allusion to Marx: “I wanted to take the principle that it was not just a matter of interpreting the world but of changing it, and apply that to the theatre”. The influence of Marxist ideology is well embedded in Brechtian drama, which is seen partly in the manner in which the audience is encouraged to a critical understanding of the characters and their situation and actions.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How did Marx influence Brecht the playwright?

Q 2: In what way, did Brecht approach the epic form in this play?

Q 3: Why does Brecht use the setting of the “Thirty Years’ War”?

Scene 4:

It is a scene that seems to be disconnected, as it does not seem to build upon the action of the previous scenes. Mother Courage is waiting to file a complaint with an officer about a soldiers’ spoilage and vandalising of her canteen together with a fine slapped on her on the suspicion of her relations with the dead Swiss Cheese.

Scene 5:

The scene is set two years later, in 1631. The canteen has travelled a long way as the war has also spread over a wide territory. This scene presents a tussle between business and human instincts. Mother Courage is a contrast to her daughter, Kattrin, but she has to survive and feed her mute daughter.

The sound of the military band is suggestive of the celebration of General Tilly’s victory. The two soldiers, who drink brandy at Mother Courage’s canteen, cannot pay as they lost their chance to plunder the town. The first soldier calls it “a swindle” meaning that the soldiers

were not given enough of a chance to carry off loot; they were given only one hour to rob and plunder. Mother Courage loses some valuable linen in the rescue of the injured. Compassion and kindness, as Mother Courage so fully makes explicit, do not make for gain. Thus, the scene is designed to bring out the meaning of 'victory' for the common people. We see the hard-headed business of Mother Courage who is forced to part with some of her best wares –shirts of fine linen for officers, and has to sell brandy to soldiers who cannot pay.

Scene 6:

The year is now 1632. In the previous scene, we saw Tilly's victory. Now it is one year after Magdeburg and Tilly have died. One common topic of discussion among the scrivener, the chaplain and Mother Courage is the possibility of peace, and whether it will be of any help to people. Peace and further war are both possibilities, and for the moment, Mother Courage and her counterparts consider their own prospects in the light of that. Brecht's idea is to show how we can consider war objectively and critically.

Scene 7:

In this scene, the discussion of the benefits and losses of war is resumed. Listen to the song that Mother Courage sings. This scene does not contribute much to the "action" of the play but offers interesting critiques of the situation through the device of the song.

Scene 8:

The year is in 1632. The opening caption of the scene shows poor prospects for Mother Courage: "THE PEACE THREATENS". The peace that had been talked about in Scene 6 is now temporarily here. Peace is welcomed by some and feared by others. Yvette reappears, having made a good business during the war. Eilif appears, under arrest, with permission to visit his mother for the last time. Mother Courage yet again loses her son while she is busy doing business. She remains unaware of the real situation in which

Eilif is condemned to death. Thus, a temporary peace poses many problems for Mother Courage.

Scene 9:

It is now the autumn of 1634. After sixteen years of prolonged war, there began in 1618, have worsened general conditions of people who have taken recourse to desperate steps to survive. The Cook confronts Mother Courage with a choice that can actually relieve her: leave behind Kattrin and set up a good life with the Cook in Utrecht, or continue with her existing means but without the aid of the Cook. The narration at the beginning of the scene is a graphic description of the ravages of the war. Even more telling is the fact that the Cook and Mother Courage have now started begging. As Mother Courage tells us, people are unable to pay for their purchases, and "Nothing grows any more, only thorn bushes".

Perhaps Courage's horrific visions are expressive of her dilemma: anyhow, the business must pick up so that she can survive and feed her family. However, her very mode of survival is fraught with fear, acute uncertainty, risks and danger. Thus, her little speech is driven with despair and paradox: "Sometimes I see myself driving through hell with this wagon and selling brimstone. And sometimes I'm driving through heaven handing our provisions to wandering souls! If only we could find a place where there's no shooting, me and my children — what's left of 'em – we might rest a while." The Song of Solomon, that is sung, embodies commentary on the fact that an immoral world endangers the virtuous.

Scene 10:

The socio-political situations have worsened. Mother Courage and Kattrin pull the wagon along roads, which have already been traversed by "ever more tattered armies". The scene plays out a brief moment on the highway showing an unnameable desire in the hearts of the two characters. "The Song of the Shelter" sung by a voice off stage, brings out the contrast between the plight of

Mother Courage and Kattrin. The duo now belongs to a different world. The song functions like chorus in classical drama. The unknown singer of the 'song' brings out the critical distance between what is visible to the eye and what can be an alternative state of existence.

Scenes 11 & 12:

Scene 11 shows the climax of the play as it plays out to its logical conclusion what has been seen so far. It is now 1635, the year following the time of the last scene. The town of Halle is about to be attacked by the Catholics, in the middle of the night. The action in this scene is gripping as Kattrin is shown to be determined in her chosen path to martyrdom. Throughout the play, Mother Courage loses her children one by one while she was doing her business. She has gone into town to buy up her goods at low rates thus being absent when the climax of the play takes place. Kattrin, as the epitome of courage, brings an ultimate ironic contrast to Mother Courage. In the penultimate scene, Scene 12, she saves the town of Halle by raising an alarm with beating the drum, which she had brought in Scene 6. She is immune to the threats and the tricks of the soldiers and is finally killed for her deed. Mother Courage, in her last embrace of the dead Kattrin, is unable to recognise what her daughter has done.

12.3.2 Critical Commentary on the Play

Mother Courage and her Children stands as one of the most famous anti-war plays of the 20th century. Brecht noted, while referring to the play, that the Thirty Years' War was one of the first large-scale wars waged on capitalism over Europe in the name of a war of religion. You will however note that besides his views of war, this play gives more place to the question of economic conditions, money, commerce and material production. From Brecht's Marxist viewpoint, the war resulted from the economic exploitation of capitalist societies, which use war to conduct 'business by other

means'. Yet, the Thirty Years' War had been proclaimed to be a war of religion by those who sought to justify it.

In 1940, Brecht left Europe for America and in the following year, he staged his *Mother Courage and her Children*. This was to be the play with which the *Berliner Ensemble* opened in 1948. It provides an excellent example of 'epic theatre', that form of theatre which eschews Aristotelian forms of drama and concentrates instead upon a tale which narrates and offers a nucleus for possible discussion. The use of 'alienation' is explicit here in the choice of historical subject, in the encouragement to the actors to 'imitate' and 'represent' their parts, rather than empathising with them, and in the use of songs to interrupt the action and drive the several points home. Each of the twelve scenes is supposed to stand as a self-contained unit. At the climax of Brecht's creativity, characters are brought to life through performance. (*A Companion to Twentieth Century German Literature*, Page 43)



LET US KNOW

Please look at the distinction between Dramatic Theatre and Epic Theatre in the following:

Dramatic Theatre	**Epic Theatre**
Plot	Narrative
Implicates the spectator in a stage situation	Turns the spectator into an observer
Wears down his capacity for action	Arouses his capacity for action
Provides him with sensations	Forces him to take decisions
Experience	Picture of the world
The spectator is involved in something	He is made to confront something
Suggestion	Argument
Instinctive feelings are preserved	Brought to the point of recognition

The spectator is in the thick of it, shares the experience	The spectator stands outside, studies
The human being is taken for granted	The human being is the object of inquiry
He is unalterable	He is alterable and able to alter
Eyes on the finish	Eyes on the course
One scene makes another	Each scene for itself
Growth	Montage
Linear development	In curves
Evolutionary determinism	Jumps, leaps
Man as a fixed point	Man as a process
Thought determines being	Social being determines thought
Feeling	Reason

You must pay attention to the fact that in Brechtian theatre, themes and dramatic techniques are dialectically presented to produce the final message of the play. His epic drama comes closer to a modern exploitation of the episodic plot technique. The traditional cause and effect plot with its pattern of exposition, conflict, climax and resolution is generally ignored. As mentioned already, the twelve separate scenes are presented in ***Mother Courage and her Children***; each of which is thematically related to one another. At this point of 'thematic unity', the ideas and the techniques are manipulated and interwoven with each other. The whole play is regarded as a product of corruption of war and how human values are profoundly tainted by the circumstances of such deadly business. Each scene presents a variation on this theme but it does not cause the next. In short, the twelve scenes of ***Mother Courage and her Children*** share the same war theme although they are presented through fragmentary incidents and different characters.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What is the significance of the play *Mother Courage*?

Q 5: Mention the different events and incidents in the play *Mother Courage.*

Q 6: What are the differences between Traditional Theatre and Epic Theatre?

12.3.3 Major Themes

The following are some of the important themes of the play *Mother Courage and Her Children.*

The Plight of the Lower Classes during Wartime:

Brecht's play sets its focus firmly on the lower classes affected by wars. This is obvious from the portrayal at the very beginning of a nameless Sergeant and Recruiting officer freezing in a field. Mother Courage, her family, and her companions are all the "little people" and it is their story, which Brecht finds interesting to explore. These people usually are unable to extract any benefit from the war. You will note that the minor characters in the play are presented in terms of a profession or a description rather than a proper name, following which we have peasants, numerous soldiers, generals, clerks, captains, officers, and even chaplains and so on.

Courage:

The idea of Courage in the play is tinged with irony. The play suggests that the courage of Mother Courage is as questionable as her motherhood. You must have noticed that she gets her nickname from driving loaves through the bombardment of Riga. However, one might consider this recklessness rather than true bravery. Mother Courage finally learns that real courage requires persistence enough to make a significant, life-threatening change, as Kattrin does at the end of Scene 11.

Motherhood:

There is a contrast between Mother Courage's role as a 'mother' and her professional role as a 'canteen woman'. Despite her claims that she is working only to support her children, her recklessness becomes the cause of their deaths. She never seems to have loved anyone of the three different 'fathers' of the three children. Her mute daughter Kattrin is a contrast to her as she hopes to get married and have children. However, the readers get the impression that her maternal instincts are not completely lost as she risks her life to save a baby from a collapsing house.

War as Capitalism

This play provides an important view regarding war. War in the context of the novel can be seen as a profitable business for a select few. You perhaps know that the idea of war being a part of the capitalist system is very common. This theme also hints at the philosophy of Brecht who was a life-long socialist. From this point of view, Brecht's purpose of writing the play was to show that during wartime "you need a big pair of scissors in order to get your cut."

Religion:

According to Brecht, religion is of little help, and rather becomes a hindrance, during wartime. Religion in this play is portrayed through the hypocritical figure of the Chaplain who changes his allegiances at the drop of a hat. When peace is declared, he removes his vestment and prepares to go back to his part activities. However, again he changes views when war breaks out again. At the end of the play, when the Catholic army is marching to attack a sleeping town, the people pray for God's help. But, it is Kattrin, who climbs the rooftop, to alert the people by beating her drum.

Silence and Dumbness:

You will note that Kattrin's dumbness in the play is highly symbolic—that is real virtue and goodness are silenced at the time of war. Brecht even makes clear that Kattrin's dumbness is due directly to the war: "a soldier stuck something in her mouth when

she was small." The play itself deals similarly with several significant silences: Mother Courage's refusal to complain after the Song of the Great Capitulation, the chaplain's denial of his own faith when the Catholics arrive in Scene 3 ("All good Catholics here!"), and the way Mother Courage denies her own son at the end of the scene, first in life and then in death. An antithesis to dumbness is eloquence, and Kattrin's death (itself conducted through loud noises, and answered by the noises from the town after she has died) is perhaps the single most eloquent act in the play.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: Mention some of the important themes of the play *Mother Courage*.

12.3.4 Major Characters

As you are informed already, the following are the important characters in the play.

Mother Courage

Mother Courage is an entrepreneur. Her real name is Anna Fierling. She follows the Army with her canteen wagon of foods and other stuffs. She earned her name Mother Courage in Riga when she ran through a bombardment in order to sell her loaves of bread. She has three children—by different lovers Eilif, Swiss Cheese and Kattrin, whom she tries to take care of and protect throughout the play. However, she loses all three of them while following the war around Europe. The war finally ruins her and she fails to learn anything by the end of the play. You will find that Mother Courage is a contradictory character: courageous, forthright, and intelligent, yet unable to protect her children. Brecht attempts, by the end of the play, to make her seem deeply unsympathetic.

Kattrin

Kattrin is the mute teen-aged daughter of Mother Courage. She hopes to get married and have her own children. Initially she is

promised that she can have a husband in peacetime, though she dies while warning the villagers of an impending assault. She resembles one of Brecht's favourite sayings: "silence sometimes makes the most noise.

Eilif

Eilif is Mother Courage's eldest and most favourite son. He is something of a hooligan, though she thinks him to be dashing and brave. He is recruited by the Recruiting Officer in the first scene. Much praised by the General in Scene 2, for slaughtering peasants and stealing their livestock, Eilif is executed in Scene 6 during temporary peace. Mother Courage never knows of his death

Swiss Cheese

He is the younger son of Mother Courage. He is stupid but honest. He takes the job as paymaster of the Second Finnish Regiment, and attempts to hide its cashbox so that he can return it to his general after the Catholics have gained power. He is caught and executed.

The Cook

The cook works for the Swedish General. He first appears when Mother Courage negotiates with him over the price of a capon, and he becomes her sexual partner later in the play. His name, rather aptly chosen, is "Lamb," which bears out his treatment in Scene 2. When the food runs out, he quickly leaves. He is very cynical. He later offers Mother Courage a chance to get settled and run an inn.

The Chaplain

An army chaplain and a personification of Brecht's view that religion which is of no use when it comes to war. He is a total coward and a hypocrite, switching religious allegiance with the twirl of a clerical robe. He complains throughout the play that his clerical talents are going to waste, and no one appreciates his talents.

Yvette Pottier

She is a prostitute in the army and follows the army after falling in love with the Cook. After the Catholics arrest Swiss Cheese, she picks up a colonel and convinces him to give her money with which to buy Mother Courage's wagon. She reappears later in the play, having married the same colonel's brother. She is the only person who gains from the war. Her beauty is her future.



12.4 LET US SUM UP

As we finish reading the unit, we have learnt that the play is set in Europe during the Thirty Years' War. Mother Courage who is a canteen woman, pulls her cart with her three children Eilif, Kattrin, and Swiss Cheese in the wake of the army, trading with the soldiers and attempting to make profit from the war. This play is considered by many to be the greatest play of the 20th century and perhaps also the greatest anti-war play in the history of literature.



12.5 FURTHER READING

Bentley, Eric. (Ed.). (1990). *The Theory of the Modern Stage*. Penguin Books: London. .

Willett, John. (1998). *Brecht in Context*. Mathuen: London.

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Lichte, Erika Fischer. (2002). *History of European Drama and Theatre.* (Trans. Jo Riley.) Routledge: London.

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Chopes, Karl H. (1977). *Bertolt Brecht.* New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company.



12.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Towards the end of his life, Brecht summed up his dramatic work with an allusion to Marx, "I wanted to take the principle that it was not just a matter of interpreting the world but of changing it, and apply that to the theatre"… …in Brechtian drama the audience is encouraged to a critical understanding of the characters and their situation and actions.

Ans to Q 2: The 'distance' between (subject) audience and object/ character… …the audience had to adopt a more critical view of the events presented… …this was the crux of the 'epic' theatre because events appeared in the form of a story or 'chronicle' which had occurred in the past… …Brecht's approach was to reflect life in a special way.

Ans to Q 3: From 1618-48, in European history, a series of wars were fought by various nations for various reasons like—religious, dynastic, territorial, and commercial rivalries… …its destructive campaigns and battles occurred over most of Europe, and, when it ended with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the map of Europe had been irrevocably changed… ..the play *Mother Courage and Her Children* during this conflict, nearly 400 years after the event when the whole was going to experience the havocs of World War II… …Brecht used this background to show the horrific experiences of any war.

Ans to Q 4: Besides the views on war, this play gives more place to the question of economics, money, commerce and material production. From Brecht's Marxist viewpoint, the war can be seen as the result of the economic exploitation of capitalist societies, which use war to conduct 'business by other means'.

Ans to Q 5: Read section 12.3.1 carefully.

Ans to Q 6: Read section 12.3.2 again and write your answer.

Ans to Q 7: The Plight of the Lower Classes during artime… …Idea of Courage… …Sense of Motherhood… …War as Capitalism… …Religion… …Silence and Dumbness and so on.



12.7 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Brecht called the play *Mother Courage* a "Chronicle of the Thirty Years' War". Do you think that the term 'Chronicle' is appropriate to Brecht's intentions?

Q 2: Write a character study of Mother Courage, commenting on the way she conducts her business even during wartime.

Q 3: Would you like to consider *Mother Courage and Her Children* a tragedy? Discuss.

Q 4: Explore the role of Kattrin in the play with particular reference to her dumbness.

Q 5: "All good Catholics here" (Chaplain, Scene 3). What is the role of religion within the religious war in which the play is set?

Q 6: How good a mother is Mother Courage? Is she really courageous? State the major differences between traditional theatre and epic theatre, and discuss how Brecht has used some of the elements of epic theatre in the play *Mother Courage*.

Q 7: Brecht's first intention was to force his audience to critically analyse his characters and their decisions, the audience's emotional involvement was not so important. Discuss.

Q 8: What do you mean by the term "epic theatre"? Comment on the songs and their role within the play.

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UNIT 13: HENRIK IBSEN *THE WILD DUCK* (PART 1)

UNIT STRUCTURE

13.1 Learning Objectives

13.2 Introduction

13.3 Henrik Ibsen the Playwright

13.3.1 His Life

13.3.2 His Plays

13.4 Sources of the Play *The Wild Duck*

13.5 Critical Reception of Ibsen

13.6 Let us Sum up

13.7 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

13.8 Further Reading

13.9 Possible Questions

13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen
- locate Ibsen within the tradition of European Drama
- trace the sources of the play *The Wild Duck*
- understand Ibsen as an important figure in the development of European naturalism and realism

13.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit seeks to acquaint you with the works of one of the most important figures of European Drama, the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. After a brief discussion of his life, we shall talk at length about his dramatic oeuvre and the important place he occupies in the world of European literature and his contribution towards the movements of *modernism* and *realism.* Since this unit deals with the background to Ibsen, we may expect questions based on general theatrical conventions, styles and what shaped Ibsen the playwright. Questions relating to the different

phases of Ibsen's career, ideas of Realism and Modernism are also to be expected. A general knowledge of the plots of some of his other plays is also important to know to realise Ibsen's thought. The unit, which shall provide an introduction to Ibsen and his works, shall also help you to discuss the play *The Wild Duck* in detail in the following unit.

13.3 HENRIK IBSEN THE PLAYWRIGHT

The following subsections will help you to discuss the life and works of Henrik Ibsen in some detail.

13.3.1 His Life



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org

Henrik Ibsen was born on the 20th of March 1828 in Skien, Norway. When Ibsen was eight, his father's merchant company fell into misfortune and the family had to live in a farm on the outskirts of town. The bustling port city of his birth and the early misfortunes in life had a profound impact on Ibsen. He stopped school at the age of 15 and started an apprenticeship with a chemist in Grimstad. It was around this time that Ibsen started writing satires and poetry mostly inspired by the European revolutions of 1848 before going to Christiania (Oslo) to study medicine at the university. Although he passed his exams, Ibsen opted to pursue a career as a playwright. He wrote his first play in verse in 1850 called *Catiline,* a tragedy inspired by Shakespeare. Although this play was never performed, it was his second play *The Burial Mound* that made its way to the stage. Ibsen also wrote a considerable amount of poetry in these early formative years. It was around this time that Ibsen met with violinist and theatre manager Ole Bull that changed the course of his career. Bull offered Ibsen a job as a writer and manager for the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen and this position helped Ibsen develop as a dramatist

acquainting him with the nuances of stagecraft. By mid- 20s, Ibsen had a few successful productions under his belt.

The year 1857 in a way marks the beginning of Ibsen's period in exile although he didn't leave his native country until 1864. He left Bergen in 1857 and moved back to Christania to become the artistic director of the Norwegian Theatre there which went bankrupt in 1862. Ibsen had very radical social and political views and he wore his heart on his sleeve. He was an iconoclast through and through and the society he lived in was highly repressive. It was a protestant society that didn't accept atheists like him. He was a republican living under monarchy and he was anti-patriarchy in a highly patriarchal societal set-up. His disillusionment and unhappiness with his own condition and also the repressive culture of Norway found expression in his plays. Its repressive and unmeaning traditions and values and the lack of societal, religious and political freedom were aptly voiced through his plays. His period of apprenticeship at the Bergen theatre, where he learned much about drama and stagecraft, were still unhappy years for him. It was during this time that a feeling of bitterness towards his country started to develop that never really left him. His initial years as a writer too were unsuccessful and all these reasons combined compelled him to leave Norway with his family, imposing upon himself a 27-year long exile.

Ibsen first stayed in Italy and then moved to Germany and it was in between these two countries that Ibsen wrote his best works. These twenty-seven years in exile earned him fame throughout Europe and he became the most well known Norwegian playwright of the modern period although many of his plays received severe criticism and his financial struggles continued. Ibsen wrote perhaps his most famous play *A Doll's House* in 1879 which was an intensely realist piece of work. He persevered this realistic vein for the next decade achieving widespread acclaim with his plays translated and performed across Europe.



The protagonist of Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt* (1867), is witty, imaginative, and vigorous, but is incapable of self-analysis. This play takes on universal significance following Ibsen's use of fantasy, parable, and symbolism. This play is often described as a sociological analysis of the Norwegian people.

Ibsen returned to Norway in 1891 around the time he quit Realism for a new style of writing, which was more symbolic. The first play that he wrote after his return was *The Master Builder* (1892). Ibsen suffered serious health problems starting in 1900 that led to a series of strokes over the next one year, which compelled him to stop writing. He died in his home at Christania on the 23rd of May 1906.

The most obvious impact of Ibsen as a playwright was social and political. His efforts to make drama and the theatre a means to open up discussions on socio-political issues of the age shocked and scandalised a society that regarded the theatre as a place of shallow amusement. Ibsen is also the only playwright to become the centre, in his life time, of what almost amounted to a political party—the Ibsenites, who in Germany and England, appeared as a faction of weirdly dressed social and political reformers, advocates of socialism, women's rights, and a new sexual morality. It is usually assumed that the shock caused by Ibsen, and the furiously hostile reaction his early plays provoked, were due to this political and social subversiveness. However, another important cause of the violent reaction by audiences and critics alike lay in the revolutionary nature of Ibsen's dramatic method and technique.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How did the theatre manager Ole Bull help Ibsen to emerge as a playwright?

Q 2: Comment on the significance of the year 1857 in Ibsen's life.

Q 3: How was the impact of Ibsen as a playwright?

13.3.2 His Plays

A tripartite division of Ibsen's career as a playwright would look like this:

In the first phase, his plays were mostly written in verse form and drew inspiration from romantic historical tragedy and Norse sagas. *Catiline* (1850), *The Burial Mound* (1850), *Love's Comedy* (1862) and *The Pretenders* (1863), as well as *Brand* (1865) and *Peer Gynt* (1867) belong to this initial phase. The period between 1864 and 1875 saw the creation of plays that did not concern themselves with the condemnation of social ills- a trademark of Ibsen's later realistic plays. During his exile, the dramatist wrote *Brand* about the life of an over-zealous clergyman and his misfortunes. Success in Scandinavia prompted him to produce *Peer Gynt*, a fantastical verse drama that incorporated Norwegian fairy tales. Social satire soon came to be a favourite with him and Ibsen produced more drama: *Emperor and Galilean* (1873) and *The League of Youth* (1869).

The second phase of the dramatist's career from 1877 to 1882 is often called his Realist Cycle. The four plays written during this period call so-called respectable Victorian society into question and beg to be read in the chronological order that Ibsen penned them in, given that they are linked to one another. *The Pillars of Society* and its performance in Munich was the making of him. He abandoned romantic influences and French techniques after this play, which was soon followed by arguably his best-known work, *A Doll's House* in 1879. The play questions the traditional roles of wife and mother that women find themselves bound by in society, through the character of Nora Helmer. Her desire for self-exploration and final action at the end of the play managed to ruffle quite a lot of feathers.

Ghosts followed two years later, creating further controversy through uncomfortable subjects like incest and venereal disease; general outcry delayed the performance of the play by a couple of years. *An Enemy of the People* tells the story of a man at odds with his community, much like the playwright's own life. Hedda Gabler followed in 1890, with the titular character drawing as much

attention to be dubbed a female Hamlet. Ibsen's portrayal of strong women tied down by the social constraints of their time live on through his unforgettable characters like Nora Helmer, Hedda Gabler and Mrs. Alving.

Self-reflection marked the plays that were written after Ibsen's return to Norway in 1891. This quality had already started showing in his earlier plays like *The Wild Duck* (1884), *Rosmersholm* (1886) and *The Lady from the Sea* (1888). The dramatist's later plays have mature characters who retrospect on their choices in life and their results. No play ends on a lighter note.

After his return to Norway, the first play that Ibsen was *The Master Builder*. The play is about how the titular character meets a woman he knew before, who makes him hold up on a promise made. The 1899 *We Dead Awaken* is about an ageing sculptor who tries to restart his creativity after meeting a former model of his. This would be his final play. The work seems to be an echo of his own creative life. It depicts Professor Rubek—a well-known sculptor, ruminating on how his successful career has failed to bring much personal happiness.

Ibsen's later writings depict many more of Rubek-like ruminations. *The Master Builder*, for example, strives to be regarded as an "artist" in his craft, at the cost of his family, while Hedda Gabler seeks independence at the cost of other people's fates. Such grim portrayals make up Ibsen's writings in the last decade of his career. The "demons" or "trolls" that were Ibsen's words for such debilitating negatively charged feelings highlight the deep psychological nuances of his writing. These are evidenced by the many complex characters he created.



LET US KNOW

Problem Plays or Plays of Ideas

The term, "problem plays" refers to a special genre of drama that emerged during the 19th century as part of the

wider movement of realism in the arts in the context of Europe. It deals with contentious social issues through debates between the characters on stage, who typically represent conflicting viewpoints within a realistic social context. We should note that Ibsen's plays revolve around human predicaments and situation caused by decisions made at the wrong moments that further affect the smooth functioning of life. As a pioneer of social plays, Henrik Ibsen introduced and dealt with problems of education, marriage, society and most specifically human relationship. In almost all his significant plays, Ibsen deals with a specific issue or problem as can be seen in some of his important plays.

In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen introduced the concept of the 'New Woman'. In this play, a simple housewife called Nora learns that the her family is based on a false foundation. The illusory world of happiness, peace and tranquillity begins to crumble, and Nora takes a difficult decision of walking out of the house of deceit and falsehood and embrace the reality of life.

In *An Enemy of the People*, Ibsen explores the individual lives of people on the social plane, against social sanction or social propriety. Dr. Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People* fights a lonely battle against the evils of the society and conventional social norms. His decision to go against the public opinion, represented by his brother, the mayor of the city and also other fellow beings who are afraid to raise their voices against the corruption in society, clearly represents his stand: "The strongest man is he who can fight alone."

Ibsen's other plays namely–*The Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts* etc. probe the dichotomy between the ideal and practical prevailing in both official and private lives of the individual. In fact, most of the plays tend to reveal a facade masking a murkier reality underneath. This is what makes Ibsen's plays significant.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What is a problem play? How do Ibsen's plays add to the idea of a problem play?

Q 5: Why is *Peer Gynt* important?

Q 6: Comment on the style of Ibsen's plays after his return from exile.

13.4 SOURCES OF THE PLAY *THE WILD DUCK*

Written between April-June 1884, Ibsen's play *The Wild Duck* was inspired by the poem "Søfuglen" (translated into English as *The Seabird*) by Johan Sebastian, who was also Scandinavian. The plot of the poem revolves around a wild duck that jumps into the water to die alone after being shot by a hunter. This figure would resonate through many characters in Ibsen's play set in the attic, most particularly with that of Hedvig.

The autobiographical elements and sources in the play are worth mentioning, as the play is full of them. The character of Old Ekdal is heavily drawn from Ibsen's own father who had been a lieutenant and also a hunter. The inspiration for the character Hedvig was a girl Ibsen met in Germany when he was writing a play around 1884 and Hedvig was also his sister's name, who was extremely close to Ibsen. Another striking similarity between Ibsen's personal life and the action in the play was the fact that Ibsen, at the age of eighteen, was involved with one of his maids, which resulted in an illegitimate pregnancy; much like Mr. Werle getting his maid Gina pregnant with Hedvig.

Another important autobiographical element that made its way to the play was an event that caused quite a bit of hullabaloo during Ibsen's younger days. A legal trial (during the time Ibsen was a student) involved an army officer accused of cheating and embezzlement who tried to shoot himself seems to have captured Ibsen's imagination and this was portrayed through the characters of Ekdal and Werle which finally resulted in Hedvig shooting herself.

Ibsen sent the manuscript of the play to his publisher F. Hegel in September, 1884; around three months after completing it. He sent a letter

along with the script that reveals Ibsen's initial views regarding the writing of the play. A few lines from the letter are quoted here:

"The people in this play, despite their multifarious defects, have nevertheless become dear to me during my long daily association with them, but I have hopes that they will find well-disposed friends in the great reading public and not least among actors and actresses, for without exception they offer rewarding parts. However, the study and rendering of these people will not be easy. This new play in some ways has a place of its own in my dramatic production; the method diverges in several respects from my earlier work. However, I do not wish to say more on this. The critics will, I hope, find these points, and will anyhow find various things to dispute and interpret. In this way I think that *The Wild Duck* might lure some of our younger dramatists into new ways, and that I consider desirable."

The Wild Duck with its intense symbolism was definitely a new kind of play in Ibsen's overall oeuvre and it also dramatically influenced subsequent European plays by other playwrights.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: What is the play *The Wild Duck* inspired by?

Q 8: Autobiography is an important element in the play *The Wild Duck*. Comment.

Q 9: Comment on the symbolism of the title of the play *The Wild Duck.*

13.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF IBSEN

Due to his heavy contribution towards the development of Modernism in theatre, Ibsen would be dubbed the "father of modern drama". Critics lauded him for his acute portrayal of human nature on the stage and for his conscious writing for a middle class audience. He resisted prevailing conventions of theatre and was a fore figure of a genuine intellectual lot in the European scene. Emerging from the shackles of French and Danish literary influences, Ibsen was part of the divergent Norwegian writing that moved away from the sensational comedies of the 18th century. Drawing from the rise of nationalistic sentiments of fellow writers who harked back

to the Norse sagas, Ibsen's initial writings were imbued with the same romanticism. Ibsen worked with the Det Norske Theatre for years, one that was established with the same spirit of nationalism. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, another important playwright, together with Ibsen, heralded a new Norwegian theatre wave in the 19th century.

Like the rest of European literature, Ibsen's writing too gradually moved away from romanticism towards realism; the shift occurred with his *Peer Gynt*. More than his popular romantic plays, it is his later realistic ones that made him a revolutionary figure in modern drama. Ibsen's exchanges through letters with the Danish literary critic, Georg Brandes during his stay in Germany would help usher in the modern movement into the Scandinavian dramatic scene. Much impressed by Brandes's call for a new form of writing that was socio-critical and realistic; Ibsen took to writing in prose form, instead of his earlier dependence on verse. Staving clear of the idealised stock characters of his times, the playwright invested a deep psychology into his characters who were unmistakably real and well rounded.

Henrik Ibsen's plays reveal a severe distrust of social institutions, those that valorise duty and sacrifice, paying little heed to individual desires and aspirations. Marriage, religion, the law- any and all institutions that the middle class despairingly held dear and yet were made miserable by, are held up for scrutiny and question in his drama. He created the neologism *livslÖgnen* (life-lie), often translated into English as 'illusion'. His bourgeois characters have their daily foundations shaken up by the threat of some remembered trauma or action. This destabilisation of social orders is interspersed with moments of self-realisation of his characters.

In *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* (2005), Emma Goldman calls him the 'uncompromising demolisher of all false idols and dynamiter of all social shams and hypocrisy'. Ibsen reverently upheld the institution of marriage- but one based on transparency between both partners- something rare in Ibsen's circles. It was an intellectual- not political- revolution that Ibsen wanted. The liberty that he sought was from the manacles of political authority, from the dogma of religion and other foundations that the middle-class society clung on to.

Ibsen and Realism

The 1870s witnessed the advent of realism in theatre, which marked the middle phase of Ibsen's career. The purpose was to be more faithful to real life through newer theatrical conventions. Like naturalism, realism focused on middle class life with all its daily nuances and linguistic specificities. The difference lay in how both dealt with characters—the first robbed individuals of choices—letting overarching faith govern them, while the latter emphasised on the individuals' abilities to decide for themselves. Strindberg, Chekhov and Ibsen would come to represent the force of realism-as adapted on stage. Ibsen would inspire later realist writers to a great extent.

Realism seeks to depict life as it is-without any dramatic embellishments. Though not confined to any particular times, 19th century France would best to represent the height of realism in the literary field, best forwarded by novelists like Balzac and Flaubert. Henry James popularised psychological realism by relying less on external social factors and more on the inner workings of the self. Others like Emile Zola focused more on the naturalistic influences of one's birth and environment. In his stride, Strindberg wrote his well-acclaimed play *Miss Julie*. Ibsen's four distinct plays published between1877-82 are characteristically realistic and reflect problems contemporary to his times (hence dubbed "problem dramas"). They include *Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts* and *An Enemy of the People.* They share an acute social critique, are set in contemporary settings and represent people and situations one encounters in everyday life. "Truth and freedom" would be the keywords for Ibsen and Georg Brandes and this is reflected in all four of these plays. Areas such as public vs. private life of the bourgeois class, property rights, and marriage were covered by Ibsen's plays.

Ibsen exposed the sham of the Victorian proper family and trimmed his social depictions of all its hypocrisies. In *Ghosts*, he exposes the facade of religion through Pastor Mendes and the Alvings. Taboos like incest, extra-marital love and euthanasia are dealt with deftly in his plays- making him the subject of much controversy in society. Linguistically, highbrow affectations were cast aside in favour of more natural, non-smooth flows of

speech. In a letter to August Lindberg (the theatre person who was responsible for the premiere of *Ghosts* in Europe), dated 1883, Ibsen had expressed how the expressions of characters must not be forced, how characters are distinctly unlike one another when they speak naturally. That is why he emphasised on constant revisions of the script lines till they sounded more believable in real life. The audience takes easily to such realism than convoluted speech patterns, he said.

The three-dimensional frame of Ibsen's stage sets help heighten the realism. Well-furnished and realistic living room or garden view backdrops were first introduced by him. The realistic props help transport the audiences to a slice of believable life- not diverting them to exotic, fantastic locations. This he achieved through distinctly specific stage props, with great detailing. The middle class's mundane and sparse worldly possessions were thus laid bare for the audience to ruminate upon- while also highlighting the class desire to accumulate things that can show their little wealth- a trait of the modern world. The rich detailing of Ibsen's drama scripts and stage directions render them the quality of a work of art- like a painting almost. The stage props are never there as meaningless ornamentation but serve specific purposes and reveal insights about the play and characters. The stage directions in the opening act of *Ghosts*, for instance, are distinctly detailed and remembered by many.

George Bernard Shaw in his *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* mentioned:

"The drama was born of old from the union of two desires: the desire to have a dance and the desire to hear story. The dance became a rant; the story became a situation. When Ibsen began to make plays, the art of the dramatist had shrunk into the art of contriving a situation. And it was held that the stranger the situation, the more interesting the play. Shakespeare had put ourselves on the stage but not our situations… …Ibsen supplies the want left by Shakespeare. He gives us not only ourselves, but ourselves in our situations…his plays…are capable of both hurting us cruelly and of filling us with excited hope of escape from idealistic tyrannies, and with visions of intenser life in the future."

As Daniel Burt remarks, it is a critical commonplace to assert that modern drama originates with Henrik Ibsen, even to mark the exact moment when the modern theatre began: December 4, 1879, with the publication of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Although the complexity and many crosscurrents of modern drama make the idea of a single source difficult to support, it is incontestable that Ibsen set in motion a revolution on the stage as distinctive in the history of the theatre as that in 5th-century B.C. Athens or Elizabethan London. Like Shakespeare and the great Athenian dramatists, Ibsen fundamentally redefined the drama and set a standard that later dramatists have had to absorb or challenge. The stage that he inherited had largely ceased to function as a serious medium. After Ibsen, drama was restored as an important vehicle for a comprehensive criticism of life. The momentum that propelled his artistic revolt was sustained primarily from his outsider status, as an exile both at home and abroad. His last word was "Tvertimod!" (On the contrary!), which serves as a fitting epitaph and description of his artistic stance.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 10: What are some of the terms used in favour of Ibsen as a playwright?

Q 11: What is Ibsen's most important contribution to World drama?



13.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit attempted to provide an introduction to the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen's life and writings, highlighting his immense contributions to Modern European Drama. We discussed the background to his writings, while briefly examining some of his major plays. The next unit will discuss *The Wild Duck* in greater detail. We shall now be able to approach the play from various perspectives given your familiarity now with the range of Ibsen's work. The artistic movements of Realism and Modernism and Ibsen's special association with these too shall help you appreciate the play better.



13.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Ole Bull changed the course of Ibsen's career… …Bull offered Ibsen a job as a writer and manager for the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen… …this assignment helped Ibsen to develop as a dramatist acquainting him with the nuances of stagecraft.

Ans to Q 2: The year 1857 in a way marks the beginning of Ibsen's period in exile although he didn't leave his native country until 1864. He left Bergen in 1857 and moved back to Christania to become the artistic director of the Norwegian Theatre there which went bankrupt in 1862.

Ans to Q 3: The most obvious impact was social and political… …he made drama and the theatre a means to open up discussions on socio-political issues of his age and he shocked those people who regarded the theatre as a place of shallow amusement… …the Ibsenites appeared as a faction of weirdly dressed social and political reformers, advocates of socialism, women's rights, and a new sexual morality.

Ans to Q 4: Problem plays refer to a special genre of drama that emerged during the 19th century… …Such plays deal with contentious social issues through debates between the characters on stage… …Ibsen's plays revolve around human predicaments and situation caused by decisions made at the wrong moments… …as a pioneer of social problem plays, Henrik Ibsen introduced problems of education, marriage, society and most specifically human relationship in his drama.

Ans to Q 5: *Peer Gynt* is a fantastical verse drama that incorporated Norwegian fairy tales… …the protagonist of *Peer Gynt* is witty, imaginative and vigorous, but is incapable of self-analysis…. …this play is often described as a sociological analysis of the Norwegian people.

Ans to Q 5: Marks a certain departure… …self-reflection marked the plays that were written after Ibsen's return to Norway in 1891 following his exile… …self-reflexivity gets reflected in the mature characters that retrospect on their earlier life's choices and their results… …none of the play ends on a light note.

Ans to Q 7: The play *The Wild Duck* was inspired by the poem "Søfuglen" (translated into English as *The Seabird*) by Johan Sebastian… …the poem revolves around a wild duck that jumps into the water to die alone after being shot by a hunter… …this figure would resonate through the character Hedvig set in the attic.

Ans to Q 8: The character of Old Ekdal is heavily drawn from Ibsen's own father… … Hedvig is modelled on a girl Ibsen met in Germany… …Hedvig is also the name of Ibsen's sister too close to Ibsen… …when Ibsen was only eighteen, he got involved with one of his maids resulting in an illegitimate pregnancy; much like Mr. Werle getting his maid Gina pregnant with Hedvig.

Ans to Q 9: *The Wild Duck* with its intense symbolism was definitely a new kind of play in Ibsen's overall oeuvre and it also dramatically influenced subsequent European plays by other playwrights.

Ans to Q 10: Due to his heavy contribution towards the development of Modernism in theatre, Ibsen would be dubbed the "father of modern drama"… … Emma Goldman in *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* calls him the 'uncompromising demolisher of all false idols and dynamiter of all social shams and hypocrisy'.

Ans to Q 11: Like Shakespeare and the great Athenian dramatists, Ibsen fundamentally redefined the drama and set a standard that later dramatists have had to absorb or challenge…. …After Ibsen, drama was restored as an important vehicle for a comprehensive criticism of life in modern times.



13.8 FURTHER READING

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13.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Why may we divide Ibsen's dramatic career into three parts? Discuss.

Q 2: Analyse the three phases of Ibsen's career as a dramatist. Comment on Ibsen's self-imposed exile.

Q 3: Why and when did Ibsen move from Realism towards Symbolism? Discuss.

Q 4: Romantic tragedies and Norse mythology shaped Ibsen's early plays. Comment.

Q 5: Analyse the actions of a few of Ibsen's Realist plays to arrive at a proper understanding of his Realism.

Q 6: Discuss the contributions of Ibsen to the field of European drama with particular reference to the play *The Wild Duck.*

Q 7: What do you mean by a "problem play"? Does Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* present the 'problem' of social morality? Discuss.

Q 8: Write in detail about the different sources of the play *The Wild Duck.*

Q 9: Henrik Ibsen's plays reveal a severe distrust of social institutions, those that valorise duty and sacrifice, paying little heed to individual desires and aspirations. Discuss.

Q 10: How is Ibsen received as a modern playwright? Discuss in detail.

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UNIT 14: HENRIK IBSEN *THE WILD DUCK* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

14.1 Learning Objectives

14.2 Introduction

14.3 Act-wise Summary of the Play

14.4 Critical Commentary on the Play

14.4.1 Major Themes

14.4.2 Major Characters

14.5 Let us Sum up

14.6 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

14.7 Further Reading

14.8 Possible Questions

14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the various aspects and concerns of the play *The Wild Duck*
- read the characters and the action of the play in relation to Ibsen's range of thought
- explain the major themes and other dramatic features of the play

14.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we have read about the life and works as well as the critical reception of of Henrik Ibsen. In this follow up unit, we shall discuss the play *The Wild Duck* in terms of its various aspects. After the publication of *Pillars of Society* in 1882, Ibsen continued in the realist vein with *The Wild Duck, which* was composed in the year 1884. It is one of Ibsen's more important works with a very complex narrative. The play is divided into five acts containing two stories. The first story is of Elder Ekdal and Old Werle and the business they started together which did not work out well at all. When things were at its worst, Werle put the entire blame on Ekdal and quit; leaving Ekdal to fend for himself. After this, Werle goes on

to amass massive wealth and becomes prosperous whereas Ekdal and his family became bankrupt and ruined after the business fallout. The second story begins in the first act and it narrates the trials and tribulations of the Ekdal family trying to adjust with the horrors of the past. By the end of the unit, we shall learn that the play is most well known for its unique use of symbolism and its focus on how an individual or a family attempts to merge with society.

14.3 ACT-WISE SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

The play takes its name from perhaps the most important element in the play, the wild duck in the attic. Ibsen was inspired by a poem written by another Scandinavian writer, Johan Sebastian Welhaven in which a wild duck is shot and it dives into the water to die and avoid being caught and forced to live a life in captivity. In a symbolic sense, the Ekdal family is a wild duck that was injured, but the Ekdals continued to live their life, pretending to be something they are not and pretending that everything is right. This family lived around a lie, and the idea of living a lie is a central motif in the play. Before we read through a brief summary, it would be helpful to be acquainted with the characters in the play

- Håkon Werle: A wholesale merchant
- Gregers Werle: His son
- Old Ekdal: Former business partner of Håkon Werle
- Hjalmar Ekdal: Old Ekdal's son, a photographer
- Gina Ekdal: His wife
- Hedvig: Their daughter, aged fourteen
- Mrs. Sørby: Housekeeper and fiancée of Håkon Werle
- Relling: A doctor, lives below the Ekdals.
- Molvik: Formerly a student of theology, lives below the Ekdals
- Pettersen: Servant to Håkon Werle
- Jensen: A hired waiter

- Mr. Balle: A dinner guest
- Mr. Flor: A dinner guest

The following is the act wise summary of the play

Act I:

The play opens with a party at Mr. Werle's in honour of his son Gregers' homecoming. The guests include a host of politically important friends and also Hjalmar Ekdal, and old school friend of Gregers who feels out of place in the present company. Werle mentions to Gregers and hopes that nobody notices that there were thirteen people at the table; and Gregers feeling even more isolated and alienated than Ekdal calls himself "the thirteenth guest".

Old Ekdal meanwhile enters the office after the servants reluctantly let him in as he had some papers to collect from the bookkeeper while Gregers finds out from Hjalmar that he has married Gina, Werle's maidservant from years ago. Hjalmar boasts that Gina is not "without culture" and staying with him has "refined her".

Lively chatter can be heard and Mrs. Sorby wittily impresses one and all. Hjalmar makes people laugh in an attempt to join in the conversation with his lack of knowledge about wines when the guests see a shabby old man, Lieutenant Ekdal walk out with the bookkeeper to the front door. Hjalmar averts his gaze and pretends not to know his father and later claims he "did not see him". Gregers is shocked to see Old Ekdal and more shocked at Hjalmar's reaction.

The first private conversation between Werle and Gregers shows Gregers' deep sense of disillusionment and bitterness with his father. He accuses Werle of deceiving Hjalmar and marrying Gina off to him and blames his father's lascivious nature that resulted in his mother's death and then finally accuses his father of ruining Ekdal's life by blaming him entirely for their government swindle. Werle denies running anybody's life and asks Gregers to forget the past and approve of the upcoming marriage with Mrs. Sorby as they are well suited to each other and it would be unfair for her to be in any way associated with any scandal. Gregers laughs it off saying there was never any family feeling in this house and now he needs

to pretend and feign familial love for the sake of Mrs. Sorby. He also pities Hjalmar who has based his life upon a lie. Gregers promises to leave the house forever and says he has found his "life's mission".

Act II:

This scene opens in Ekdal's studio with Gina and her daughter Hedvig talking half-heartedly about the cost of groceries revealing their very frugal existence; almost all their savings going towards Hjalmar's expenses. Hedvig wishes her father to return soon as he had promised her something special from the party. Lieutenant Ekdal returns and goes to his room with his cognac. Hjalmar appears and everyone, including his father emerges to greet him and the little incident at the party is totally papered over. Everyone wants to know about the party and Hjalmar gets carried away by his descriptions and portrays himself as the most sophisticated and entertaining person in the party.

Hedvig finally asks her father what he brought for her from the party and Hjalmar confesses to having forgotten all about it but he had the menu of the evening's dishes and that he would read out to her and describe in detail all the delicacies. Seeing Hedvig almost in tears, he starts a rant about what absurd things a father has to do and how he is treated with bitter faces any time he forgets some small thing.

Gregers enters the scene and talks to the Gina and Hjalmar. Hjalmar informs Gregers of a curious hereditary malady, which is causing her to lose her eyesight. Gina interrupts and says that Ekdal's mother had poor eyes. Gregers then speaks to Old Ekdal and asks him how he manages to live boxed up in a place like this when he used to be a hunter and an outdoors man. Old Ekdal takes Gregers up and shows him the moonlit attic with some rabbits, pigeons and a prized possession, a wild duck. Old Ekdal mentions that the wild duck was given to the Ekdals by Werle.

Ekdal says the wild duck manages well in the garret but he is careful of her not getting a glimpse of the moonlit open sky and the sea for then she would pine for her former freedom.

Gregers surprises everyone by asking if he may rent their spare room although Hjalmar agrees and Gregers bids them goodnight, proposing to move in the next morning.

Act III:

Next morning, Gina narrates to Hjalmar the trouble Gregers has caused by flooding the entire floor in order to put the stove out. Hjalmar mentions that he has invited Gregers and Molvik and Relling for lunch. She leaves her husband to work on restoring old photographs but Hjalmar is constantly interrupted by his father to do small chores up in the garret for their pets and poultry. These seem to interest Hjalmar much more than his touching up of old photographs and seeing this, Hedvig offers to do the retouching for him, even though it might strain her eyes. Handing over his tools to Hedvig, he joins his father up in the loft.

Gregers enters the scene and speaks to Hedvig, learning of the wild duck in the attic and other mundane affairs of their household. She also mentions her failing eyesight and how her eyes are now too weak for her to attend school and how her father has given her his word to read with her at home, though he hardly ever seems to have the time. Gregers' pointed questions are also directed later at Gina from whom he realises that she had been carrying on most of the business for her husband having learned how to touch-up old photographs and also clicking them.

At lunch, Hjalmar tells Gregers how he leaves day-to-day matters to Gina as he is busy thinking about an invention that is to change the very nature of photography that will make it both "an art and a science." When asked, he says he cannot reveal anything about the invention at the moment and that he spends almost all of his time thinking about it and that such things need work and time and patience. He says he's doing all this not for himself but for his family and also to restore his father's reputation by "restoring the name of Ekdal to honour and dignity." In this exchange, Gregers finally remarks "I almost think you have something of the wild duck in you," "You have strayed into a "poisonous marsh" and now that "insidious disease has taken hold of you, you have sunk down to die in the dark."

Relling and Molvik arrive just in time for lunch. Hjalmar introduces them to Gregers but the physician Reling already knew Gregers from the Höidal works. Relling asks Gregers if he still carries the "claim of the ideal" in his pocket trying to persuade people to honour this claim and wonders if

Gregers has become less idealistic over the years. Gregers replies saying he still does "when he has a true man to deal with". Relling cheerfully attempts to change the topic of conversation by mentioning how Molvik was "demonic" and passed out drunk just the night before; stating that demonic natures are not made to saunter through life but that they must necessarily meander through the course of their life.

As they dine, Relling calls Hjalmar a lucky man who has a purpose in life and a good wife who takes care of all his needs. Hjalmar agrees and calls Gina "a good helpmate on the path of life" and then proceeds to make an insipid little speech about his love for Hedvig. Relling remarks to Gregers how lovely it is to sit and eat at the table of a happy family to which Gregers replies saying, "I don't thrive in marsh vapours". This insults Gina and she says that she cleans the house everyday. Gregers responds saying that no amount of cleaning would get that stench out to which he is referring as he leaves the table.

Suddenly, there is a knock on the door and it is Old Werle who steps into the apartment when the door is opened. He asks to speak to his son and everyone else leaves the room to give them some space. Old Werle tells his son that now with his wedding, Gregers' share of the property becomes his with immediate effect to which Gregers responds by saying that he is not interested in the money but only wants to fulfil his "purpose" and cut all ties with his father.

Gregers says he wishes to speak to Hjalmar about something important and he and Hjalmar then go for a walk after Old Werle leaves the scene. After they have left, Gina wonders if Werle is mad and Dr. Relling says aloud that Werle is suffering from a disease, which is nothing but an "over-inflammation of the conscience".

Act IV:

Gina and Hedvig wait for Hjalmar to return from the walk and they start to get worried as it was past dinner time and dinner being late at their household was an unusual occurrence. When he finally returns, Gina wonders if he is ill as he looks extremely tired and haggard and refuses to

eat on top of that. He then goes on to say how he is going to take all matters of work in his own hands from now on. Gina asks what will happen of his invention while Hedvig says how the wild duck and the rabbits and the rest need his attention too. He replies saying that he would never set foot in the garret again and he wishes to “wring the neck of the infernal duck”. Hedvig is horrified and makes her father promise that he would do nothing to harm her duck. She then goes out for a walk and husband and wife finally get some space to talk openly.

Hjalmar proceeds to question Gina and compels her to own up to her affair wih Old Werle before their marriage. She admits it saying she was scared to reveal this to him before for fear of him changing his mind and now that they have a happy cozy life together; it is best to forget the happenings of the past she says. Hjalmar responds saying that their home is enmeshed in a “swamp of deceit” and that his “whole dream has vanished.”

Gregers then enters the scene expecting to see Hjalmar and Gina basking in the light of truth but what he sees instead is gloomy sadness. Relling intervenes when Gregers heightens the situation emotionally referring to his high purposes of establishing truth. When asked about his intentions of coming here, Gregers says he wanted to establish a true marriage between Hjalmar and Gina by establishing past truth. Relling tells him that the couple are free to lead their lives the way they want but for the sake of the child, Hedvig, he could have spared them. Relling says Hedvig is at that crucial age where her mind is full of “erratic ideas”. Hjalmar vows to protect Hedvig as long as he is living.

Mrs Sorby unexpectedly pays them a sort of farewell visit as she is about to leave for the Hoidal works where she and Old Werle are to be married. Relling, it is revealed, had a thing with Mrs Sorby once and Gregers says he would tell his father of their old entanglement, to which Mrs Sorby says that there are no secrets between them. Besides, she says, this marriage is not entirely based on unequal power relations, as Old Werle needs someone trustworthy by his side now that he is going blind. Hjalmar is startled at this piece of information while Mrs Sorby affectionately says goodbye to Gina.

Hedvig returns from her walk and shows a letter given to her by Mrs Sorby as a present for her birthday tomorrow. The letter contains Old Werle's writing which states that Old Ekdal would receive a hundred crowns every month which will pass on to Hedvig for lifetime after his death. Hjalmar suddenly sees an uncanny link between Werle's affection for Hedvig and their common blindness and asks Gina if hedvig actually belongs to him to which Gina pleads innocence. He cries out saying he has no child and sends Hedvig away when she rushes to embrace her father; claiming he could not bear to see her anymore. He rushes out of the house followed by Gina leaving a sobbing Hedvig and Gregers alone on the stage.

Gregers tells Hedvig that sacrificing the wild duck, "the dearest treasure she holds in this world" will prove her love for her father. This free will offering of her dearest possession will provide Hjalmar proof of Hedvig's devotion. Hedvig is hopeful and says she will ask her grandfather to shoot the bird for her. The curtain drops with Gina onstage trying to comfort her sobbing daughter.

Act V

It is the next morning and Hjamar has not yet returned when Relling informs everyone that he is asleep at his place. Gregers says Hjalmar requires this rest after the spiritual turmoil his soul has been through in the last twenty-four hours. Relling, though, disagrees, saying that he witnessed no such turmoil in Hjalmar. Gregers goes on to say how Hjalmar has a superior mind and personality but Relling disagrees saying Hjalmar is just an average type of guy elevated to a higher status by his own circle when he did not have any such personality or greatness of character. Relling tells Gregers that he is suffering from an inflamed conscience and falsely hero-worships Hjalmar when he deserves no such importance.

Relling and Gregers argue for a while about their own ideals and views and finally Gregers vows to rest only after he has freed Hjalmar from the doctor's clutches. "Rob the average man of his life illusion and you rob him of his happiness at the same stroke," warns Relling before he goes. With a final word to Hedvig to remind her that the "fearless spirit of sacrifice" would recall her father, Gregers also exits.

Hedvig asks her grandfather how one may shoot a duck and Old Ekdal says in the breast against the feathers. Hedvig cautiously takes the double-barrelled gun from the shelves but keeps it back when Gina enters who asks Hedvig to make a breakfast tray for her father. Hjalmar enters around the same time to Hedvig's joy but Hjlamar asks Gina to keep Hedvig away from him. Disappointed, Hedvig leaves without saying anything.

Hjalmar intends to pack up and leave with his father and cruelly asks Hedvig to leave her room and says that he wishes to be spared from "interlopers" in the last few moments in his house. Hedvig is then seen alone on stage with tears building up in her eyes. She quietly takes the gun and heads up to the garret.

Hjalmar in the meantime rails on about the how tiring it is to do the necessary preparations for leaving and sits down to have his coffee and bread with copious amounts of butter. He finally decides to put off leaving for a few days when Gina says how difficult it will be to find a place that has enough space for the birds and animals for his father.

Hjalmar realises he had no right to tear up the letter as it really belonged to his father and Gregers enters to find Hjalmar gluing the torn pieces of the letter together. He is sad to know that Hjamar has decided to leave the house and Gregers reminds him of his invention to which Hjalmar bitterly responds by saying there never was any invention and that it was all Relling's idea who persisted with the lie since it made Hedvig happy. He professes his love for Hedvig but bitterly says that Hedvig must have never truly loved him. Sounds of the duck quacking from the garret reach both of them and Hjalmar thinks it's his father hunting in there but Gregers smiles and says that Hjalmar may actually find proof of Hedvig's love for him.

They hear the sound of a shot fired in the garret and Gregers explains to Hjalmar that Hedvig had her grandfather shoot the duck to prove her love for him as the duck was her most prized possession. However, when Old Ekdal emerges from his own room, they all have a bad feeling and rush up to the garret. Hjalmar and Gregers carry Hedvig downstairs and Relling pronounces her dead.

Relling looks at Gregers and accusingly says the death was no accident and Gregers responds saying Hedvig's death was not in vain. "Did you not see how sorrow set free what was noble in Hjalmar?" That is only temporary, answers Relling. Within a year, Hedvig "will be nothing to him but a pretty theme for declamation." Hjalmar shall soon steep himself in "syrup of sentiment and self-admiration and self-pity," Relling tells the shocked Gregers. If you are right, then life is not worth living, the young man tells him: Life would be quite tolerable after all [says Relling] "if only we could get rid of the confounded duns that keep pestering us in our poverty with the claims of the ideal." In that case, says Gregers as he prepares to go, I am glad for my destiny — "to be thirteenth at table." "The devil it is," mutters Relling as the curtains come down.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What is your idea of Hjalmar Ekdal from the action of Act 1?

Q 2: What is the significance and importance of the garret at the Ekdals' home?

Q 3: What does Hjalmar claim regarding his invention?

Q 4: What advice does Gregers give Hedvig?

Q 5: Comment on your sense of what the conversations between Gregers and Relling imply.

Q 6: How is the title *The Wild Duck* symbolic?

14.4 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE PLAY

The first act is a short one but Ibsen skilfully sets up all the important relationships in the play as he develops the history of his characters and shows some as "realistic" (old Werle and Mrs. Sorby) and the others as tainted with "idealism" to mask their shortcomings (Gregers and Hjalmar Ekdal).

Mrs. Sorby, although of unequal rank, treats her influential guests well and with frankness and compassion whereas Hjalmar exposes his

concern for keeping up social appearances. While mourning his father's relegated position in society; he, at the same time, does not publicly accept that he is anyhow related to the shabby looking man that interrupts the party. Insisting that his wife is "not without education" Hjalmar exposes his status-seeking aspirations and proves that he has an inflated and conceited sense of self.

The introduction of Old Ekdal at the party reveals to the audience his naiveté and lack of self-consciousness. He appears as a character from another world who stumbles blindly through the social spheres which include the chamberlains, Mr. Werle, and Mrs. Sorby.

"According to this scheme, Gregers and Hjalmar, who each suspect themselves of being "thirteenth at table," inhabit a peripheral sphere which lies somewhere between the worlds of old Ekdal and old Werle."

The first act provides a description of the world of Werle. The transition to the second scene provides interesting contrast with the wealthy industrialist's circle, but it also establishes that Hjalmar Ekdal's household is a product of Old Werle's achievements. The Ekdal household is possible only because Werle discounted Ekdal's professional training, provided Hjalmar with a wife (Gina) and child (Hedvig), and even presented the precious wild duck.

"This relationship between the two worlds — that of old Werle and that of Hjalmar — is significant for it underscores the imitative nature of Hjalmar Ekdal's life."

Perhaps the most important feeling that the audience experiences in this act about Hjalmar's character is his relationship to his daughter. Hedvig's deep love for her father makes her believe that he is the great man he pretends to be. However, Hjalmar's selfish nature makes him unable to reciprocate this love.

His pathetic attempt to alleviate Hedvig's disappointment by presenting her with the menu of the party instead of a promised delicacy actually exposes Hjalmar's entire way of life.

"The menu as a substitute for the food represents how Ekdal substitutes high-sounding phrases for a depth of feeling he cannot achieve."

We are next introduced to the central motif of the play, the wild duck in the attic of the Ekdal household; it is a symbol which gains in complexity as the drama develops. Primarily, the wild duck stands for the fantastical world created by both the Ekdals to keep their minds off the drab and murky lives they lead.

"She is the final touch, which, like a work of art that requires at least one realistic detail to make it appear real, brings their hunting ground in the garret to a state of perfection."

Gregers, however, believes that the bird symbolically portrays the entire Ekdal family who will drown in the swamps of self-delusional fantasy and he feels it is his responsibility to rescue them from this calamity, in the same way his father's dog rescued the duck when it was entangled in seaweed.

The points of opposition established between Relling and Gregers is a significantly important aspect of the play. Both characters feel responsible for what happens in the lives of others although their methods are different and contrary to one another.

"Ibsen shows that the realist (Relling) is the one who encourages self-deception as a technique of facing life's disappointments while the idealist (Gregers) encourages truthfulness as a way to self-fulfillment."

Having disclosed the truth about Hjalmar's family, Gregers believes his mission is fulfilled and he looks forward to seeing the change in his friend and his 'process of purification'. The result though is highly unexpected and ironic as Hjalmar in his self-conceited way plays the martyr and decides to abandon his family. He even rejects Hedvig when he learns she is Old Werle's daughter and then goes on a drinking binge with Molvik and Relling, escaping from the inner turmoil that begins to gnaw at him.

Still convinced that his friend can yet change and take on a new course of life, he now shifts his focus to Hedvig with his "claim of the ideal". He believes if Hedvig sacrifices the wild duck to show her love, Hjalamar will come to realise how strong family ties are. He further believes that with the destruction of the wild duck; the Ekdals will finally be free of their delusion and fantasy and escape the shadow of Werle.

"By this train of thought Gregers unwittingly commits the same logical error he tries to make Hjalmar avoid: He acts on the belief that if the symbol of fantasy is effaced, then the Ekdals' lives will be devoted to a truthful acceptance of their lot."

Life would be quite tolerable, Relling says as he expresses the keynote of the play, if imperfect souls do not destroy themselves by trying to meet the claims of the ideal. Unable to accept this doctrine as an acceptable standard of life, Gregers chooses to be "thirteenth at table" — to remain outside the circle of the normal human condition. Hjalmar, on the other hand, lacking personal integrity, will survive because he can easily build up a new series of self-deceptions to overcome temporary disillusion. He and Gina will continue their life together, sustaining their sense of personal worth with fresh fantasies.

14.4.1 Major Themes

The following are the important themes of the play *The Wild Duck*. We shall do well if we read some of the books in the reference list to understand the themes in detail.

Concealing Vs Revealing the Truth:

Gregers Werle, due to his extreme idealism, believes in championing the truth at any cost. His polar opposite, the extremely pragmatist Doctor Relling believes in concealing it whenever it may seem to cause harm. While revealing the truth about the Ekdal's and his father, Gregers fails to realise his own truth—that he is a prying and vindictive soul. And, equally ironically, striving to conceal the truth, Relling lays bare the complete naked truth to Werle.

Delusion:

Gregers sees himself as a noble and truthful man of character, whose mission is to champion truth and fix all faults related to the lack of it. Hjalmar believes he is a good husband, and father and even an inventor. To themselves, they seem ideal, like heroes. But neither realise their failings and sees the truth. Besides them, other realities are equally deluded like Lieutenant Ekdal's, who

hunts amongst old Christmas trees in the loft. He retreats to an imaginary world instead of facing the truth. Even someone like Molvik continuously deludes himself into thinking alcohol is the answer to all problems.

Revenge:

Although Gregers claims that his idealism drives him to reveal the truth about his father, it becomes evident that his actual aim is revenge against his father. His hostility towards his father was well known since he was young, when he sided with his mother against Werle in a terrible feud. The following lines from Act 1 reveal this

Gregers: My poor unhappy mother told me; and that the very last time I saw her.

Werle: Your mother! I might have known as much! You and she — you always held together. It was she who turned you against me, from the first.

Extremism:

Gregers' extreme zeal for the truth leads him to destroying lives ruin, even young Hedvig's. In his attempt to genuinely help, Relling is wrong to say that Ekdal, Hjalmar, and Molvik are right in chasing the illusions that shield them from the bitter truth. Gregers and Relling are polar opposites. The only person who walks the middle path is Gina who sees both sides of every argument and does not stray into extremes.

Shame:

A sense of shame permeates the actions of most characters in the play, especially Hjalmar. He avoids recognising his disgraced father at the opening party and later depicts his wife to Gregers as "by no means without culture," equating her with genteel society although Gina's lack of sophistication is well known. Even when he returns home after the party, he is embarrassed to admit he was humiliated by a guest due to his lack of knowledge of wines and instead pretends he educated the gathering about vintage wines.

14.4.2 Major Characters

Gregers Werle:

Gregers Werle, the son of Old Werle, spends fifteen years away avoiding his father and he returns only to avenge his father's crimes against the Ekdals. "In this sense, his appearance in the Ekdal household figures as a "returned of the repressed." He is impassioned and idealistic and is labelled a "spiritual quack" by Relling, his ideological counterpart in the play. He makes it his life's mission to preach the truth and purity of soul whenever he can and he takes it upon himself to unmask Hjalmar's family life. In the course of the play, Ibsen establishes that, because he is so unattractive in appearance, Gregers has abandoned the hope of settling down with his own family; his long brooding solitude has prevented him, furthermore, from understanding his father. In the events of The Wild Duck, Gregers plays a major role of proving to others the virtues of the "claim of the ideal." His destiny is to be the "thirteenth at the table," or the guest outside the circle of diners. His number of course recalls the figure of Judas at the Last Supper; Relling also identifies him as the devil or Antichrist. Gregers's insistence on the ideal condemns him to a false gospel that drives him to the betrayal of his friends and ruin to their houses.

Hjalmar Ekdal:

Dramatic and fiery, the character of Hjalmar is unmasked in the conversation that takes place between Gregers and Relling in Act V. As Relling states Hjalmar's handsomeness, "superficially emotional temperament," and "sympathetic voice," makes him look like the "great light of the future" among his friends. The play of course thoroughly exposes this delusion throughout beginning with his embarrassment in the banquet in the very first act.

Hjalmar believes he is a great father and inventor, the provider for his family and the redeemer of the family line. The revelation of both his continued debt to Old Werle and the reasons



Ibsen's plays explored extreme character types whose dilemmas emerge in neurotic behaviour, orchestrated by means of symbolism as a dramatic agent. In *The Wild Duck,* for example, the killing of the bird in the play comes to symbolize the escape from reality that makes Ibsen's thematic point, in dramatizing the disintegration of the Ekdal family, that only illusion, or the "life-lie," makes most existences bearable.

for his marriage to Gina leads him to abandon his family and home. However, his need for comfort and a place to continue playing out his fantasies makes him return home soon. "Hjalmar's dismissal of the petty concerns in life and dawdling in the garret while he awaits the necessary inspiration for his invention is certainly a parody of romantic notions of creation and creativity."

Hedvig Ekdal

Hedvig is the daughter of Gina and Hjalmar possibly fathered by Old Werle and passed onto Hjalmar in marriage perhaps designed to avoid public scandal. She is the most closely connected to the idea of the wild duck. "Hedvig, like the duck, she is no longer certain of her origins and has been adopted into a second home. Her inherited disease (blindness) is the legacy of crimes past, crimes of which she is again innocent. Her blindness also symbolizes the predominance "life-illusion" in the Ekdal household."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: The play is concerned with the self-delusions of both Hjalmar and Gregers. Comment.

Q 8: Is Gregers a character full of inner contradictions? Or does he stand for unmitigated evil?

Q 9: Discuss the themes of illusion and reality in the play.

Q 10: Discuss *The Wild Duck* as a tragic-comedy.



14.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have read about the different important aspects of the play *The Wild Duck* such as the plot, its important themes and characterisation. The critical commentary on the play *The Wild Duck* shall enable us to appreciate the play from various viewpoints and discuss the important aspects of the play in sufficient detail. However, many issues remain untouched and we are expected to read up more on those areas after having read the entire text of the play.

14.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Analyse his actions and behavior in the banquet and at home.

Ans to Q 2: Holding onto the past.

Ans to Q 3: Exaggerated wishful thinking.

Ans to Q 4: Sacrifice as proof.

Ans to Q 5: Opposed worldviews.

Ans to Q 6: Answer in relation to the similarities of the characteristics of the duck with the character of Hedvik.

Ans to Q 7: Analyse the actions individually

Ans to Q 8: Idealistic vs delusional.

Ans to Q 9: Characters of Hjalmar, his father and Gregers.

Ans to Q 10: Look for the elements of tragic comedy and try to answer.

14.7 FURTHER READING

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14.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Explore the symbolism of the wild duck used by Ibsen in the play *The Wild Duck*.

Q 2: Evaluate those aspects of *The Wild Duck* that align it with the movement of 'modernism' in Europe in the late 19th century.

Q 3: How would you understand the descriptive phrase, "problem play"? Does *The Wild Duck* present the 'problem' of social morality in its first Act?

Q 4: Write about the important themes of the play *The Wild Duck*.

Q 5: Who are the important characters in the play *The Wild Duck* and what role do they play?

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UNIT 15: EUGENE IONESCO: *THE CHAIRS* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE

15.1 Learning Objectives

15.2 Introduction

15.3 Eugene Ionesco: The Playwright

15.3.1 His Life

15.3.2 His Dramatic Career

15.4 Sources of the Play *The Chairs*

15.5 Critical Reception of Ionesco

15.6 Let us Sum up

15.7 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

15.8 Further Reading

15.9 Possible Questions

15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- acquaint yourself with Eugene Ionesco as an important postmodern playwright.
- have a glimpse into Ionesco's life and dramatic career
- learn about Ionesco's style of writing through some of his well-known works.
- learn about the "Theatre of the Absurd" that arose in the 20th century and which is said to have been inaugurated by Eugene Ionesco.

15.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall discuss the life and works of Eugene Ionesco, a Romanian French playwright who is also one of the foremost playwrights of the French Avant-garde theatre of the 1950s. Writing in the second half of the 20th century, Ionesco is credited with having inspired a revolution in the post-war theatre with his first play *La Cantatrice Chauve* or *The Bald Soprano* (1948), where he introduced his innovative technique of the 'anti-

play', using things or words in order to stress upon the absurdity of human existence. Like his contemporary Samuel Beckett, Ionesco replaces customary plots, structure, and language with fragmentary, contradictory, and often nonsensical dialogue and surreal images in order to present a world of chaos that mocks established institutions and conformity. As we finish reading the unit, we shall be able to appreciate Eugene Ionesco as one of the greatest European dramatists.

15.3 EUGENE IONESCO: THE PLAYWRIGHT

In the following subsections, we shall try to read about the life and works of the playwright Eugene Ionesco in some length.

15.3.1 His Life:



Source:
https://commons.wikimedia.org

Eugene Ionesco (1909–1994) was born in Slatina, Romania to a French mother and a Romanian father. His growing up years is characterised by frequent change of homes and movements between Romania and France. In 1916, the father went away to Bucharest leaving the family behind in Paris where the mother worked in a factory, and returned in 1917 for a brief stay. It was perhaps during this period that Ionesco found the first inspiration for his career as a dramatist, as he regularly watched the puppet theatre in "Jardin du Luxembourg". In 1917, Ionesco's mother sent him along with his younger sister Marilina to La Chapelle Anthenaise due to his poor health. This period has been described by Ionesco in his diary as the most peaceful and happy time of his life. Thérèse Icard, Ionesco's mother took the family back to Bucharest in 1925 only to discover that she had been divorced by her husband and he had taken a new wife. She was forced to return to Paris leaving behind her children with the father. The father's maltreatment of his mother and his

refusal to give her alimony as well as his tendency to always be on the side of those in power contributed to a long-lasting hatred that Ionesco harboured for his father.



LET US KNOW

Avant-Garde Theatre: Avant-Garde literally translates to 'advanced guard', which refers to the newest and the most radical ideas or people often-promoting radical social changes. In theatre, the term has been often attached to the various kinds of experimental plays that were written and performed since the late 19th century beginning with Alfred Jarry's Ubu trilogy. **It** emerged as a reaction against a perceived general cultural crisis and rejected **bourgeois values and conventions**. This fresh concept tried to introduce a different application of language and body in order to **change perception** and create **a more active relationship** with the audience.

Ionesco attended Saint Sava National College in Bucharest and went on to study French literature at the University of Bucharest from 1928 to 1933. He also briefly taught French at a lyceum in Bucharest. In 1936, he married Rodicia Burileanu, with whom he had a daughter. He lost his mother in the same year. Two years later, he acquired a fellowship from the Romanian Government to carry out his doctoral research on French poetry, and moved his family to France. By this time, he had seen the rise of Fascism in the streets of Bucharest. In France, during World War II, Ionesco had to join the military service while his family lived in Marseilles. After the war, they relocated to Paris and Ionesco took up a job in the production department of a law-publishing house. He never wrote his doctoral thesis on French poetry. He worked as a proofreader and a translator in the publishing house and was also inspired to learn English around the same time. It was around this time that Ionesco decided to learn the English language.

His attempt to learn English resulted in his first one-act play titled *La Cantatrice Chauve* or *The Bald Soprano* in 1948. This was followed by other remarkable plays such as *The Lesson*, *The Chairs* and *The Rhinoceros*, that established him as an important absurdist playwright. Ionesco also wrote a number of theoretical works on theatre some of which appear in his *Notes and Counter-notes.* He was elected to the Académie Française in 1970 and continued to explore the meaninglessness of human existence in numerous plays. As a prominent proponent of the absurdist theatre, Ionesco wrote twenty-eight plays over the course of his dramatic career. In the 1980s and the years before his death, Ionesco is said to have stopped writing and focussed on his love for painting. He lived on till the age of 84 and died on March 29, 1994. He is buried in the Cimetière du Montparnasse, in Paris.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What is an anti-play?

Q 2: Where can we place Eugene Ionesco as a playwright?

Q 3: What do you think are the major influences that shape Ionesco's outlook towards life?

Q 4: What led to the composition of *The Bald Soprano*?

15.3.2 His Dramatic Career

Though he produced a number of written works during his student days at the University of Bucharest, the closest Eugene Ionesco had come to theatre was by writing some 'dialogues' and establishing himself as a dramatic critic. His first essay appeared in 1930 in the *Zodiac Review*. A volume of poetry, *Elegy of Miniscule Beings*, was published in 1931, followed by a collection of essays titled *No!* in 1934, where he attacked popular Romanian writers such as the novelist Camil Petrescu and the poets Tudor Arghezi and Ion Barbuspark.

Eugene Ionesco wrote his first play *The Bald Soprano* only in 1948. His attempt to master the English language at the age of 40, had, according to his own account in "The Tragedy of Language: How an English Primer Became My First Play", resulted in the play. Considered to be the manifesto for Ionesco's anti-play or anti-theatre, *The Bald Soprano* rejects the method of the well-established traditional drama, as it contains no logical plot or character development. It moves in a circular manner and ends where it had begun; in the conversation between a couple belonging to the bourgeoisie class. It begins with Mr and Mrs Smith talking about regular and yet unconnected events while awaiting the Martins whom they had invited for dinner. During the course of the conversation, the Martins realise that they are married and have a daughter. While the two couples wait for something to happen, they tell nonsensical stories to each other, speak in truisms, they argue about issues that never get resolved and as this progresses, we realise the dissipation of language itself and the failure of communication. The characters repeat themselves and seem to be involved in a conversation, which is shallow and empty of psychological depth, highlighting Ionesco's belief that language is full of empty clichés and meaningless expressions. The play highlighted the failure of language to establish logical and rational communication. Staged at the Théâtre des Noctambules on May 11, 1950, this first play of Ionesco's was hardly noticed till a few well-established writers like Jean Anouilh and Raymond Queneau stumbled upon it and praised it. *The Bald Soprano* soon saw success and what followed was a decade of one after another critically acclaimed 'anti-plays' concerning the absurdity and meaninglessness of life.



LET US KNOW

Ionesco's anti-plays reject the established conventions of theatre that follow Realism or Naturalism. While Naturalism or Realism is based

on the premise that life or the world is knowable, Ionesco's anti-plays were based on the belief that life is unknowable and the search for its meaning would end only in further confusion and disorientation. As he would have us believe, the true condition of human existence is not knowable in the conventional theatre, but in the kind of anti-plays written by him to shock the audience out of their complacent 'suspension of disbelief' and awaken to the true condition of human life which is often untellable or unexplainable. His audience are not allowed to walk away after seeing his plays, with a sense of having achieved a meaning, for his plays do not provide one. His plays end with neither a climax nor a resolution, and language itself proves to be an incompetent medium of communication. This may be attributed to Ionesco's own distrust of all forms of ideology and institutions. While there is stark absence of character or plot, what is so common in an Ionesco play, is the absurd multiplication or proliferation of objects on stage that overwhelms the actors as well as the audience into the realisation of an absurd existence. Such proliferation of objects on stage is seen in *The Rhinoceros (*1958*)* and *The Chairs (*1952*)*.

Ionesco's second play *The Lesson* performed in 1951 is considered to be an important absurdist drama. In this play, a professor gets so agitated in his attempt to teach his young pupil that it leads to his killing of the pupil. This second play takes forward Ionesco's preoccupation with the insufficiency of language as a tool of communication, which was an important theme in *The Bald Soprano*. While the repetition in *The Bald Soprano*, is of empty expressions and words, in the *The Lesson*, the repetition is of the professor killing his pupils in his attempt to impose upon them his perspective on subjects like mathematics, language and geography. Like the first play, *The Lesson* too moves in a circular motion as we get to know from the maid's comment that he has been killing pupils every day. Since 1957, it has been in permanent showing at the Théâtre de la Huchette in Paris, along with *The Bald Soprano*.

The *Lesson* was followed by other remarkable plays such as *The Chairs* (1952), *Amédée* (1954), *Jack or The Submission* (1955), *The New Tenant* (1955), *The Killer* (1958) and *Rhinoceros* (1959), his break-through play, and the one that actually made him internationally famous . In *The Chairs*, Ionesco carries forward his technique of repetition as we see the Old Man and the Old Woman welcoming one after another guest, giving them chairs to sit on, as they gather to listen to the Old Man's profound message to the world. However, the guests are invisible to the audience, and all that they can see on the stage is the old couple amidst numerous empty chairs. With this, Ionesco introduces another one of his signature technique, which is the multiplication of objects on the stage. In *Amédée*, we see the prototype of Berenger in the title character who is a playwright. While Amédée and his wife converse in a manner reminiscent of the Old Man and the Old Woman of *The Chairs*, their discussion let the audience know about the multiplying size of a corpse of unknown origin in the other room. A similar multiplication of objects in seen in *The New Tenant*, where two movers continuously bring in furniture belonging to the new tenant with whom the caretaker is trying to have a conversation.

With *The Killer* (1958), Ionesco's technique of anti-theatre becomes more approachable in terms of character and plot. *The Killer* is the first of the playwright's Berenger cycle, *The Rhinoceros* (1959), *Exit the King* (1962) and *A Stroll in the Air* (1963) being the others, in each of which, apart from the character Berenger, there appears to be a plot. In the above-mentioned plays, Berenger, the everyman protagonist is seen confronting various circumstances such as, a killer in 'Radiant City', the disease of 'rhinoceritis' in a small provincial town, the depletion of his power and grandeur as a terribly aged king, and gaining the capacity to fly and witness strange things beyond the clouds. In *The Killer*, Berenger, a middle-aged man arrives at 'Radiant City' hoping to move here, and as he is shown around by the Architect, he is enraptured by the perfection of

the city. It dawns upon him only gradually that 'Radiant City' is deserted. Stones are pelted upon him and the Architect by some unknown person, and later on he is told by the Architect about a killer who lures people with one or another thing towards the edge of a pool and then pushes them into the pool, thus killing them. In *The Rhinoceros*, Berenger is an easy-going and laid-back man who unlike his friends does not want to follow the regular routine of going to work every morning. When everyone around him turns into rhinoceroses for various reasons, Berenger continues to remain human refusing to follow others. Through *The Rhinoceros*, Ionesco reveals his dislike for totalitarianism as well as all other forms of homogenising ideology. Berenger's struggle to remain human is equivalent to Ionesco's own struggle to maintain his individual identity in the face of growing fascism in the 1930s Bucharest.

By 1960, Eugene Ionesco's reputation as an excellent playwright had been firmly established. He became one of the most important playwrights in Paris, whose plays were quickly picked up for performance by the 'avant-garde' theatre practitioners. Between the 1950s till the end of his dramatic career, he wrote twenty-eight plays concerning the absurdity of the human condition. His plays were mostly performed in small theatres fully packed with audience from the intellectual and artistic elite of Paris.

Ionesco's constant preoccupation with man's isolation in a meaningless world and hence his existential crisis has resonance with the kind of concerns that playwrights like Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet or Samuel Beckett presented in their works. Using their own techniques to present the absurdity of life, all the above playwrights were contributing towards and participating in a new development in the Parisian theatre of the times. Martin Esslin has identified the above-mentioned playwrights as absurdist in his 1962 work, *Theatre of the Absurd*.



LET US KNOW

Perhaps you all remember from your previous Semester that 'Theatre of Absurd' is a term coined by Martin Esslin in his 1962 book by the same name to refer to a kind of theatre practised by playwrights like Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, and Samuel Beckett in the 1950s and 1960s. The above-mentioned playwrights shared a pessimistic vision of humanity struggling vainly to find a purpose and to control its fate, and the post-war mood of disillusionment and scepticism. Their perspective of the human condition is derived from Albert Camus's 1942 essay "The Myth of Sisyphus", which highlights the purposelessness and absurd nature of human existence. Absurdist playwrights did away with most of the logical structures of traditional theatre. There is little conventional dramatic action in their plays, and the characters, however frantically they perform, their busyness serves to underscore the fact that nothing happens to change their existence. Language in this plays therefore; seem to serve no purpose of communication since it is either dislocated, full of clichés or repetitions.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Which play is considered Ionesco's manifesto for anti-play or anti-theatre? Why?

Q 6: What are the similarities between *The Bald Soprano*, *The Lesson*, *The Chairs* and *Amédée*?

Q 7: What changes does Ionesco introduce in his three-act plays?

Q 8: Briefly discuss the plays of the Berenger cycle.

15.4 SOURCES OF THE PLAY *THE CHAIRS*

In *The Chairs*, an old man in his 90s who live in an isolated house in an island along with his equally old wife, has discovered the great meaning

of life and wishes to deliver the message to the world. The old couple is seen arranging chairs in order to accommodate an ever-increasing number of guests who have been invited to come and hear the Old Man's message. As the gathering grows, the old couple get lost among their guests and they have to shout at the top of their voices to communicate with each other. They try to accommodate the growing number of guests by providing chairs for them, and play the role of good hosts by making small talk with them. With the stifling proliferation of empty chairs on the stage, Ionesco introduces his technique of multiplying objects on the stage in order to highlight the overwhelming question of man's existence. The play ends with the old couple committing suicide relegating the responsibility of passing on the message to the world upon the trusted Orator. The Orator, however, fails to deliver the message as he can only produce meaningless and incomprehensible sounds, thus putting forward Ionesco's main concerns that language is not a competent tool of communication, and that life or the world is unknowable.

In the programme for the original production of *The Chairs* in 1952, Ionesco is reported to have said, "As the world is incomprehensible to me, I am waiting for someone to explain it". He also is reported to have written to Sylvian Dhomme, the first director of the play, as, "The theme of the play is nothingness". If we have to look for sources that may have inspired *The Chairs*, we will surely find it in the two sentences above. The modern man's effort to find meaning in his existence is the source for many of Ionesco's plays including *The Chairs*. However, like many of the absurdist playwrights writing during the 1950s and 1960s, Ionesco's inspiration lies in the philosophy of Existentialism which states that human beings are inherently alone in an incomprehensible and unknowable world, thus proving man's search for meaning as futile.

In *The Chairs*, we see the Old Man who seems to know the meaning of the world and is ready to share it with others who seem to eagerly gather to hear it. The arrival of so many guests at the gathering, all eager to know the meaning of the world, and the ultimate failure of the Orator to deliver the message highlight Ionesco's belief that while the entire human race struggle to know life's meaning, it remains ever elusive. The stage shows us how isolated and alien the Old Man and his wife are even amidst their audience, absent from the audience's view, and surrounded by only chairs.

The Chairs got a lukewarm reception when it was performed for the first time in Paris, on April 22, 1952. Due to its seeming incomprehensibility, it remained unperformed till 1956 when it was revived at Studio des Champs Elysées under the direction of Jacques Mauclair. The 1956 performance of the play was lauded for its profound sense of humour and its unique staging using his signature technique of the anti-play in order to paint a comic portrait of human folly and mankind's ever-lasting quest for meaning in his existence.



LET US KNOW

Existentialism is a philosophy concerned with finding the self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. As a philosophy, it became popular in the post WWII years and influenced disciplines like art, literature, drama, philosophy, psychology and theology. Soren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, Heidegger, and Albert Camus are some important names associated with Existentialism. Albert Camus's existential work *The Myth of Sisyphus* that speaks about man's futile search for meaning and clarity in an incomprehensible world devoid of God is the foundational influence behind the 'theatre of the absurd'.

15.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF IONESCO

When *The Chairs* was performed for the first time in Paris on April 22, 1952, Eugene Ionesco was still a struggling playwright. As had been the case with the first reception of his first play *The Bald Soprano*, written in 1948 and performed in 1950, the audience of *The Chairs* did not know what to make of it. Due to its seeming incomprehensibility, *The Chairs* remained unperformed until 1956, by which time, theatregoers and critics in Paris might already have been familiar with absurdist plays of Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett. The 1956 performance of the play was lauded for its profound sense of humour and its unique staging using a kind of 'zero degree' style. This style, also known as 'anti-theatre', had of course been established among his audience as Ionesco's signature style of theatre

with the subsequent success of his *The Bald Soprano*, subtitled 'An Anti-Play', with which, it is often said, that Ionesco inaugurated the "Theatre of the Absurd".

LET US KNOW



Roland Barthes used the term 'le degrè zero de l'écriture' or 'writing at zero degree' in 1953 to refer to a style of writing that offers itself as an absence of style. In drama, the term refers to those plays which have no plots or characters. Playwrights writing at zero degree presented on stage, characters with no character and endowed them with meaningless movements that highlight the impossibility of finding meaning in human existence.

Ionesco's anti-plays reject the established conventions of theatre that follow Realism or Naturalism. While Naturalism or Realism is based on the premise that life or the world is knowable, Ionesco's anti-plays were based on the belief that life is unknowable and the search for its meaning would end only in further confusion and disorientation. As he would have us believe, the true condition of human existence is not knowable in the conventional theatre, but in the kind of anti-plays written by him to shock the audience out of their complacent 'suspension of disbelief' and awaken to the true condition of human life which is often untellable or unexplainable. His audience are not allowed to walk away after seeing his plays, with a sense of having achieved a meaning, for his plays do not provide one. His plays end with neither a climax nor a resolution, and language itself proves to be an incompetent medium of communication. This may be attributed to Ionesco's own distrust of all forms of ideology and institutions. While there is stark absence of character or plot, what is so common in an Ionesco play, is the absurd multiplication or proliferation of objects on stage that overwhelms the actors as well as the audience into the realisation of an absurd existence. Such proliferation of objects on stage is seen in *The Rhinoceros (*1958*)* and *The Chairs (*1952*)*.

The Bald Soprano (1950) was meant to be a tragedy, but in performance, it had the effect of a farce. This is how, according to David Bradby, Ionesco stumbled upon his signature formula of the tragic-farce. Ionesco's accidental discovery of his signature formula probably hints at the shock and surprise element his first audience may have found in his plays. The majority of critics received *The Bald Soprano* with dismissive reviews and was not well attended. It was closed only after twenty-five performances at the tiny Theatre des Noctambules, and replaced by one of Bertolt Brecht's plays. *The Bald Soprano*, Ionesco's first play became a success only after a few established writers and critics such as Andre Breton, Arthur Adamov, Queneau, and Mircea Eliade stood in support of him. The first audience of *The Chairs* had similarly not known how to interpret it till 1956 when it was revived after Jean Anouilh's open letter in *Le Figaro*, supporting the play.

By 1958, Ionesco was an established playwright writing one tragic-farce after another. The Théâtre de la Huchette in Paris had begun a permanent show of Ionesco double-bill in 1957 with *The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson*. He had gained fame and international acclaim. The stir Ionesco and his plays caused can be gauzed by the English theatre critic Kenneth Tynan's preoccupation with him and the ensuing public debate, some of which were printed in *Notes and Counter-notes*. In the summer of 1958, Kenneth Tynan attacked Ionesco in an essay published in the *London Observer*, as the 'messiah' of the enemies of realism in theatre. This accusation was made in response to Ionesco's essay "Experience of the Theatre" where he differentiated between realistic theatre and theatre that evoked 'imaginative truth', and where he also expressed his distrust of realistic theatre as a medium of expressing the true picture of life. Tynan's accusation that his plays had no message or no contact with reality compelled Ionesco to respond in a series of to and fro articles that his plays indeed have an impact on reality. In what came to be known as "the London Controversy", Ionesco was forced to defend and thereby define the art and aims of his theatre by responding to Tynan's criticism.



Like Berenger in *The Rhinoceros*, Ionesco always sought to maintain his individuality, as an independent thinker and never part of a category. In opposition to "theatre of the absurd", he preferred to call his work "theatre of derision".

The defining moment of Ionesco's dramatic career perhaps came when Martin Esslin described him as the foremost playwright of the 'Theatre of the Absurd' and counted him one with Beckett, Adamov and Genet, though Ionesco himself never wanted to be put in a category. Martin Esslin hailed Ionesco's theatre as a far more effective illustration of Albert Camus's concept of the absurd. In his view, Ionesco presents on the stage the absurd in its purest form, truer to life than realism itself.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: What is the "London Controversy"? Discuss.

Q 10: What is the defining moment in Ionesco's dramatic career? Discuss.



15.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have learned that Eugene Ionesco was a French playwright of Romanian origin, who wrote between 1950s and 1970s. He gained fame in the Paris theatre circle as an avant-garde playwright writing absurd plays, which came to be recognised as tragic-farce. He began with one-act plays that have no logical plot or character development to three-act plays, which had some semblance of plot and character. Some of his well-known plays are *The Bald Soprano*, *The Lesson*, *The Chairs*, *The Killer* and *The Rhinoceros* through which he presented his concern about the predicament of modern man and the breakdown of language. In his plays, Ionesco shows us the modern man in his loneliness and isolation, in his attempt to find meaning and purpose in life and in his inability to use language for communication. His signature techniques are the use of repetitions, nonsensical conversation between characters that are filled with clichés, and multiplication or proliferation of objects on stage. As explained by Ionesco in one of his responses to Kenneth Tynan, he attempts to "exteriorize, by using objects, the anguish of (his) characters, to make the set speak and the action on the stage more visual, to translate into concrete images terror,

regret or remorse, and estrangement ... " He preferred to call his theatre the "theatre of derision" precisely because of the kind of overwhelming effect such techniques would have on his audience. Though Ionesco never wanted to belong to a group or be part of a herd, Martin Esslin, in his 1962 work *The Theatre of the Absurd,* counted Ionesco as the foremost absurdist playwright among established playwrights of 1950s and 1960s such as Arthur Adamov, Samuel Beckett, and Jean Genet.

15.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Ionesco's anti-plays reject the established conventions of theatre… ...life is incomprehensible... …it is not possible to interpret it neither in reality nor on the stage... …the search for life's meaning would end only in further confusion and disorientation.

Ans to Q 2: A foremost playwright among the French avant-garde... …brought about a revolution in post-war theatre… ...credited with having founded the theatre of the absurd with his *The Balcony*... …He refuses to be held within a category.

Ans to Q 3: Ionesco regularly watched the puppet theatre at one point of his childhood... …His stay at La Chapelle Anthenaise due to his poor health... …Constant changing of homes and moving to and fro between France and Bucharest... …his father's politics... …rising Fascism in Bucharest.

Ans to Q 4: Ionesco's attempts to learn the English language... …reading an English primer... …his realisation of the disjointed nature of language.

Ans to Q 5: Ionesco's first play...disjointed language... …language as insufficient tool for communication... …confusion and uncertainty in the play.

Ans to Q 6: One-act plays... …claustrophobic environment...sense of being trapped... …failure of communication and multiplication of objects.

Ans to Q 7: There is a sense of plot, which seems to develop in the three acts... …they become more approachable in terms of character and plot... …the conclusion appears to be free of uncertainty.

Ans to Q 8: *The Killer* (1958), *The Rhinoceros* (1959), *Exit the King* (1962) and *A Stroll in the Air* (1963) belong to Ionesco's Berenger cycle... ...Berenger is an everyman facing the world in various circumstances...He may be a type of the existential hero.

Ans to Q 9: Kenneth Tynan's criticism of Ionesco... …Ionesco's responses to him.

Ans to Q 10: Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*.



15.8 FURTHER READING

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___ (1997). *The Chairs.* Translated by Martin Crimp. Faber and Faber Limited.



15.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Which is Ionesco first play? When was it performed? Write a detailed note on the plays of Eugene Ionesco.

Q 2: When was *The Chairs* written? What is the play about? Discuss.

Q 3: What is the 'zero degree' style of theatre? Elaborate with reference to Ionesco's plays.

Q 4: What is 'Theatre of the absurd'? Who coined the term? Discuss some absurdist playwrights with reference to their important works.

Q 5: What kind of theatre practitioners were attracted by Ionesco's plays? Elaborate.

Q 6: When was *The Chairs* revived and who was instrumental for it? Write in detail about the reception of *The Chairs* following its first staging.

Q 7: Why was Ionesco attacked by Kenneth Tynan in the *London Observer*?

Q 8: What can be termed as the defining moment of Ionesco's dramatic career? What does Ionesco prefer to call his dramatic work?

Q 10: Discuss the thematic concerns of Ionesco's plays.

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UNIT 16: EUGENE IONESCO: *THE CHAIRS* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

16.1 Learning Objectives

16.2 Introduction

16.3 Act wise Summary of the Play *The Chairs*

16.4 Critical Commentary on *The Chairs*

16.4.1 Major Themes

16.4.2 Major Characters

16.5 Let us Sum up

16.6 Further Reading

16.7 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

16.8 Possible Questions

16.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- make an act wise summary of the play *The Chairs*
- discuss the major themes of the play
- identify the major character and discuss their role in the play
- appreciate the play *The Chairs*, through a critical analysis of the play

16.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, which is also the last unit of Block as well as of the Course, we shall discuss in length the different aspects of the play *The Chairs*. This play was written and performed for the first time in 1952. In *The Chairs*, an absurdist tragic-farce, an old couple is seen arranging chairs in order to accommodate an ever-increasing gathering of guests who have come to hear the Old Man's message to the world. As the invited guests arrive, the Old Man and the Old Woman are seen bringing in onto the stage more and more chairs, frantically trying to accommodate the ever-increasing number of invisible guests. The room/stage is filled with chairs and the old couple move around among the guests making conversations. The audience

can hear numerous voices, and see several chairs on the stage, yet it is starkly empty of people. The stifling proliferation of empty chairs on the stage and the fact that the couple lives in a house surrounded by water on all sides succeeds to highlight the old couple's utter isolation. The play ends with the old couple committing suicide confident that their message will be delivered through the trusted Orator. The Orator, however, turns out to be deaf and mute, who fails to deliver the message of the Old Man to the world, thus putting forward Ionesco's main concerns that language is not a competent tool of communication, and that life or the world is unknowable. With *The Chairs*, Ionesco continued with his one-act absurd tragic farce, a style of theatre he had begun with his *The Bald Soprano* in 1950. As we finish reading the unit, we shall be able to offer our critical appreciation of the play as one of the forerunners of the Theatre of the Absurd.

16.3 ACT WISE SUMMARY OF *THE CHAIRS*

The Chairs, an one-act play begins with the Old Man standing on a ladder and leaning out of the window, while the Old Woman is lighting the gas-lamp indicating that it must be some time after sunset. The woman requests the old man to close the window as he is letting in the stench of the water and the mosquitoes inside. She tells him to come away from the window and sit down, warning him that he might fall into the water and reminding him about Henry the Seventh. The old man protests at the woman's reference to Tudor history as her constant historical references make him sick to death. He tells her that he likes looking out and observing the little boats. She reminds him that there are no boats outside and even if there were, he wouldn't see them, as it is dark outside. When the man insists on looking outside and leans further, the woman is frightened and drags him away from the window. While the man allows the woman to drag him away from the window, he continues to protest. He tells her he wanted to watch outside and he loves watching the water. To this, the woman expresses her discomfort in the house on that island surrounded by water on all sides. She says she would never get used to the situation and the very thought of water makes her head spin. She drags the man over to the

chairs and he sits down on her lap. Sitting comfortably on the woman's lap the man begins to talk about a past when darkness fell much later than the present, and how things have changed. The woman praises his memory and intellect, and says that he could have had a powerful occupation that would equal his intellect, if only he had any ambition. He declares that his having a better occupation would have changed nothing and life wouldn't have improved. Moreover, he is still very good at his job, for he is "Master of the mop and bucket". The woman strokes the man as if he were her child. The man complains of boredom, at which, the woman suggests that he should 'be' something to cheer them both. The man asks the woman to 'be' something instead as it was her turn. From playing a role, or trying to do so, the couple move on to story telling.

The woman wants the man to tell the story that begins "the two of us came". The man expresses his boredom with the story as he has been telling it to her every night of the seventy- five years they have been married. He protests that she has been making him tell the same stories, impersonate the same characters and be the same months every evening of their married life without exception. She tells him that she never finds the stories tedious as they are about his life, and forgets them as soon as they are told. Therefore, she remembers nothing and every evening the stories return to her as new. The man is soon convinced and begins the story "the two of us came", with the woman repeating phrases after him. The story that unravels is of the two arriving at a metal gate enclosing a garden, or a place called Paris, soaked to their bones in rain and freezing in cold; wanting to enter the garden, but being prevented from doing so. The woman points out that there never had been any place called Paris, to which the man responds by saying that Paris was the city of light, but now is in ruins, and what remains of it is only a lullaby, "Paris will always be Paris". As the old man talks about the ruin of Paris, he appears to be lost in dream, while the woman praises his intellect again.

After a momentary silence, the man resumes his story, while Sémiramis, the woman starts laughing. She is seen laughing with soft senility initially. Then she laughs with more abandon as the man joins her. The

man's story continues amidst laughter with the woman repeating phrases after him. Then the two laugh and speak at the same time. The woman praises the man again and begins to speak about how he could have achieved something great. The man questions her if they cannot be happy with what little they have. At this the woman asks, "But what if you've missed your true calling", sending man into an infantile state of tears, crying out for his mother. While the man cries for his mother, the woman strokes him lovingly and reminds him of her presence. She cuddles him and tries to calm him down when she sobs like a baby with mouth wide open. The woman tells him, "I'm your wife. I'm your mummy now." He calms down at last after the woman repeats his phrases like a lullaby: "Little lost orphan, last little orphan, diddle diddle darling..." She reminds him that he is a special person as he has a message, and the guests would be arriving soon. This reminder seems to awake the man from his infantile state and he gets off from his wife's lap and takes short strides like a marching soldier off on a mission, his mission being the message that he has to share with the whole of humanity. He agrees with his wife that he truly must be a gifted man as he has ideals, and he has done his duty as a janitor honourably. We get a glimpse into the man's past when his wife points out that their life would have been more tolerably if only he had been less intolerant. His intolerant nature, we get to know has caused them the loss of great many friends including the man's own brother.

The talk about the past sends the man and woman into a long silence. They sit on their respective chairs, stiff and motionless, and then quiet naturally return to the story about Paris. The man speaks as if in a dream, trying to recall what lay beyond the gates. When he fails to do so and begins to get agitated, the woman tells him to rest his mind. The man speaks about how hard it is for him to put things into words, and yet it is utterly necessary to speak everything. The woman reminds him that to reveal the message is his sacred duty. "Mankind is waiting. The universe hangs on your lips", she tells him. The man, who seemed to hesitate earlier, agrees to reveal his message and the woman expresses her pride in him, and tells him that probably once they begin to speak they will rediscover the city and

the garden that they find so difficult to remember. At this, the man reveals that he has hired a professional Orator who would speak on his behalf. The wife is delighted to know that the man would reveal his message that very night, and at last, it is truly happening. She excitedly runs through all the people such as the property developers, the chemists, violinists, politicians, miners, artists, bankers, post-Marxist, neo-Nazis, the popular press, the Pope, fundamentalists, and environmentalists, and wants to know if he has invited everyone. As the woman runs through the list, and the man assures her of having invited them, he begins to grow agitated. This agitation grows when the woman wants to know if he is sure about tonight, and he begins to pace round the woman taking small uncertain steps. The woman's question puts him in doubt that he begins to wonder if the revelation of the message would be too tiring for him. However, he soon concludes that it is too late to cancel, as the guests must be already on their way.

Soon the first guest arrives and the old couple nervously head for the door. As the man hurries towards the door, the woman limps behind fidgeting with her hair and dress. The door is hidden from the audience's view and it can hear only the sound of the door opening, the man greeting the guest and introducing his wife. They appear to exchange pleasantries and the woman praises the guest's coat and suit. From their conversation, it appears that the guest is a lady. However, as the old man and his old wife reappear on stage and scramble to give her a chair, we realise that the guest is invisible. The invisible lady is seated in between the couple who tell her things about their lives and listen to her or laugh at what she is telling them, and responds to her queries. In between there are moments of silence when they seem to listen to the lady intently. As this goes on, the doorbell rings and the man rush to open the door ordering Sémiramis to quickly get some more chairs.

The second guest is a Field Marshal, on seeing whom, the old man freezes respectfully and then fumbles with words to welcome him. When the woman sees the Field Marshal, she is filled with wonder at his fine uniform. He is seated next to the lady after the initial introductions and the old couple stand behind their chairs. The invisible Field Marshal appears to

be having a conversation with the lady while the old couple listens. We get a hint of something unacceptable happening between the two with the look of concern on the faces of the old couple and the old man's warning that the young lady's husband could arrive any time. The Field Marshal seems to be taking liberties with the lady as the old woman tries to stop him by tugging at his sleeve and saying, "It's not decent! There are limits!" The old man tries to distract the Field Marshal from what he is doing by trying to have a conversation about the battlefield. Just when he appears to have failed to stop him and expresses his disappointment at his undignified manners, the doorbell rings again. He hurries towards the door to welcome the new guests while the woman rushes off to fetch more chairs.

From the door, the old man is heard exclaiming delightedly at the arrival of a lady and her husband. The lady and her beauty, it appears, must have had much influence upon the old man in his youth. He expresses surprise at her arrival, and begins to stumble with words. Greeting her, he says, "- the fabulous Beauty ... And this must be the Beast, I mean your husband". Speaking to the husband, he says, "... you must forgive me only I knew your wife long before you did ... Oh yes – she was just the same – apart from the hose, I mean nose ..." While he introduces his childhood friend, the 'fabled Beauty' of his youth to his wife and the other guests, the husband of the Beauty gives Sémiramis a gift. Sémiramis, the old woman is flattered and begins to flirt with him. The couple stands behind the chairs, back to back, but almost touching, and while the old man is busy talking to the Beauty, Sémiramis talks to the husband. In between, they speak a word or two with the lady and the Field Marshal. The old man's conversation with the invisible Beauty reveals that he had been in love with her once upon a time. While he nostalgically recalls the past, his wife deteriorates into an increasingly grotesque behaviour in her attempt to flirt with Beauty's husband, the Offsetlithographer. She lifts her skirts, reveals her red stockings, shrieks erotically, and laughs like a whore. This grotesque behaviour of the woman ends abruptly, but she continues to speak coquettishly with the Offsetlithographer, and her responses show that he is flirting with her as well. Gradually, as the old man speaks to the Beauty

about the past and what could have been if they were courageous enough, and the old woman flirts with Beauty's husband, they lead them towards the chairs and offer them seats. The old couple too sits down in silence, except for occasional 'yes' and 'no'. Between them lie four empty chairs, seemingly occupied by their guests, who are invisible to the audience's eyes.

The woman tells the Offsetlithographer about their son who has left them and how they had tried to stop him from leaving. The old man contradicts his wife by revealing that they never had a son although they had tried everything to have one. While the woman continues with her story about the son who left, the old man talks about himself, and how bad a son he had been to his mother, whom he had left to die alone in a ditch. While the old man continues with this story, the wife contradicts him by asking the Offsetlithographer not to reveal about the son to the old man, who loved his parents dearly. While the old man claims that he left his mother to die alone, the old woman reveals that the old man's parents died in his arms. The conversation grows more and more disjointed culminating in the old couple remaining frozen in their chairs. Then the doorbell rings again.

The old man is suddenly charged with energy as he rushes to the door while asking Sémiramis to get more chairs. She frantically rearranges the chairs and gets the room ready since the Orator is due very soon. The old man walks in with three or four very tall guests and after making the preliminary introductions hurries Sémiramis off to fetch more chairs. She begins to grumble but does as ordered. More and more guests arrive and Sémiramis fetches more and more chairs to accommodate them. The old couple are seen trying to make introductions among the ever increasing number of guests, but fails. The doorbell rings more frequently, and the old man is almost out of breath welcoming the guests and trying to arrange them, while the old woman hobbles as fast as she can fetching chairs for the guests. As the stage is filled with chairs, we are given the impression of an incredibly large gathering, among whom the old man is trying to move to and from the door, while the old woman is trying to fetch chairs. They are careful not to bump into the guest, and at the same time try to talk to the

guests. The momentum of the action, the old man answering the door and his wife fetching chairs seem to rise to a crescendo, before gradually slackening and then finally stopping. The doorbell does not ring anymore, and the man and his wife do not have to accommodate any more guests. The room/stage, however appear to be jam-packed with people or rather, empty chairs. Many guests appear to have found no chairs to sit on, and Sémiramis declares that there are no more chairs. She begins to sell programmes, while the old man tries to placate the guests, assuring them that they would be given seats. They are getting impatient and asking questions to the man as well as his wife, to which they respond impatiently and sometimes rudely. In between selling programmes, Sémiramis is heard wondering, "Who on earth are all these people?"

Climbing onto the rostrum, the old man tries to address the gathering, but the place is so crowded that he is jostled and pushed, and then propelled by the crowd towards the window near a step-ladder. Sémiramis too is pushed and jostled by the crowd and propelled towards another window near another step-ladder. They continue to talk to the guests, and also try to talk to each other, amidst the crowd. They cannot see each other, but can hear each other's voices. The dialogues are disjointed as the man speaks to guests on his side while the woman speaks to those on her side. They let it be known to the guests that they are about to hear his message through an Orator who is due very soon. Soon the words of the woman sound like echoes of her husband's. When the old man says, "Suffered much. Learned much", the woman repeats the words and when he says, "You'll see for yourselves: my system is perfect", she says, "You'll see for yourselves: his system is perfect."

The last of the invited guests, the Emperor himself, arrives amidst a lot of fanfare and loud noise, without ringing the doorbell and the old man hurrying to open the door. The Emperor is equally invisible, but with his arrival, the stage is flooded with an intense light. The old man is full of wonder and weeps with emotion. He climbs the step-ladder to get a glimpse of the Emperor, calls out to him and greets him. He declares himself and his wife as the Emperor's most faithful subjects. He tries to reach the

Emperor and offer him a seat, but in vain. He cannot make way through the crowd. Sémiramis too is standing up on the step-ladder trying straining her back to see if the Emperor has been taken care of. Through repetitions, the old man's occupation, his 'life full of suffering', betrayals and persecution by friends are brought up. The woman continues to repeat phrases after him, like an echo. He tries to tell the Emperor how his message could have saved the world, but soon apologises for his ineptness at it. He tells him that the Orator is coming and he would explain everything.

The Orator comes much later, and he is the only other real person on stage apart from the old couple. Looking like a nineteenth-century painter or poet, the Orator appears to be unreal as he walks slowly to the back, to face the gathering. Climbing on to the rostrum, he surveys the gathered crowed and freezes in a solemn pose. The old man tells the audience to ask for the Orator's autograph, and almost immediately, he begins to sign. Thanking the heavens for the arrival of the Orator, the old man addresses the crowd. He thanks them for coming to listen to his message. "My life has been a full one. My mission is accomplished. I shall not have lived in vain now that my message can be revealed to the world", he says. As he goes on to speak about his philosophy, which would guide the universe, the Orator appears to be oblivious about what the man is speaking about. He is seen busy repelling requests for autographs. Putting his full faith upon the Orator, the old man throws himself out of the window. At the same time, Sémiramis too throws herself out of the window near her. The fanfare, the fireworks, the showering of confetti and streamers and the cry ''Long live the Emperor!' comes to a sudden halt and there is a sudden silence. The guests react with only an 'Ah' as the sickly sound of bodies falling into the water is heard. All the lights vanish except for a faint one, and the windows remain wide open like two black holes.

After a few moment of silence, the Orator communicates with the guests. He tries to make the crowd understand that he is deaf and dumb by making signs. He makes desperate attempts to make himself understood by producing guttural groans. The crowd appears to not understand him, as he lets his arms fall to his sides in resignation. Then his face lights up as

he comes upon an idea. He writes on the blackboard 'ANGELSWEEP' followed by 'NNA NNM NWNWNW V'. Turning to his audience, he points to what he has written. However, the audience seems to have failed to understand him again, and dissatisfied, he violently rubs what he had written. He makes a second attempt by writing in equally big capital letters 'XP ËGOD IS ËGone I©'. He is very pleased at what he has written and turns to look at the audience. He smiles at them questioningly, remains motionless for a while, and when he realises that his audience have not understood him, he angrily takes his leave and gets off the rostrum. He walks towards the door, takes a final ceremonious leave of the guests and the Emperor and exits.

The door at the back, like the windows remain wide open after the Orator leaves. The stage is filled with empty chairs, covered in confetti and streamers. For the first time, human noises, apparently belonging to the gathered crowd, such as bursts of laughter, mutterings, 'shush'ing and coughing are heard. The play ends with this noise first growing and then gradually dying down.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How is *The Chairs* similar to *The Bald Soprano*?

Q 2: Explain the relationship between the Old Man and the Old Woman.

Q 3: Describe a typical evening in the lives of the old couple.

Q 4: Can you deduce the nature of the message from the kind of guests who come to the old couple's house? Give reasoned answer.

16.4 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON *THE CHAIRS*

The Chairs, Ionesco's third anti-play is a tragic farce about an old couple who seemed to have stumbled upon a great message that would save humanity. In their nineties, the couple live in a tower surrounded by water on all sides, living lonely and stagnant lives. Nothing much happens

in their lives, and we get a sense that every evening of their married life they have been playing the same role-playing games and telling the same stories. This is similar to the absurdist playwrights' concern about the sameness or routine activities with which human lives are characterised. The old man's protest that he is bored of telling the story "the two of us came" every evening, is indicative of this repetition. This repetition is a part of Eugene Ionesco's technique to highlight the absurdity of life, and in *The Chairs*, it can be seen not only in the games and stories the old couple tell each other, but also in several other aspects. For instance, the old man keeps telling Sémiramis, his wife to drink her tea, while Sémiramis repeatedly praises her husband's intellect and how he could have been more successful. The most telling repetitions are of the constant ringing of the doorbell, the arrival of guests and the fetching of chairs for the guests. As the stage is filled with chairs, we see Ionesco's other signature technique of overwhelming the audience with the multiplication of objects, which is symbolic of the absurdity of human life.

While the constant arrival of guests should have filled the stage with people, and we are given that sense, the stage is actually stark empty, except for the old couple and the empty chairs. The guests are invisible or non-existent, just like the many other things or references in the play, which are non-existent. When the play begins, the old man claims to love watching the boats in the sea as they look like tiny sunspots. However, there is no sun, and it being dark, the man cannot see any boats. The tea that he asks his wife to finish is non-existent. The existence of the son that the woman talks about with one of the guests is doubtful, just as the profound message of the old man is uncertain. For, the very speech through which the message should have been revealed fails to come into existence, as the man responsible for it turns out to be deaf and dumb. The conversations that take place between the couple or with the guests are hollow-sounding without depth or meaning, like the incoherent words uttered by the Orator.

An uncertainty similar to the existence of the son or the old man's profound message can also be seen in the kind of relationship shared by the old man and his wife. While we are given the impression that they are

man and wife, we see the relationship alternating between that of conjugality and of a mother-son relation. The man sits upon his wife's lap, while she strokes him lovingly. When he cries out for his mother, his wife assures him of her presence and calms him down by singing a lullaby. Once or twice we also hear the man telling the Beauty, one of his guests, that his wife has taken the place of his mother now. The old man's behaviour is almost infantile while that of his wife's is that of an adult taking care of a child calling him 'Poppet' or 'Poppety-poppet'. While the old man complains of boredom, the wife attempts to pull him out of it by suggesting games or stories with which they can entertain themselves. She constantly praises his intellect while wondering at the possibilities lost due to his lack of will and ambition. Just as their routine is cyclical, the old couple's existence itself is a circle, as they do not know the beginning from the end. In his nineties, the old man behaves like a child; the wife, his companion towards the end of life also becomes the mother, the gate, which seems to promise much actually leads them to a city in ruins, and the revelation, which would have saved humanity, is preceded by the old couple's death.

It is probably due to the man's lack of will and confidence that another possibility will be lost to the couple. They are determined to reveal the profound message to the world through the guests that have gathered there. However, the man would not speak. He has difficulty putting his thoughts into words and hence has hired an orator. Ironically, the Orator has neither the capacity to hear his message nor the language to reveal it. The Orator's failure to deliver the message highlight Ionesco's belief that while the entire human race struggle to know life's meaning, it remains ever elusive, escaping from the grasp of man like the couple who throws themselves out of the windows even before the message is delivered. Coming from a playwright who has expressed his distrust of language in his earlier plays like *The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson*, *The Chairs* too highlights Ionesco's concern about the insufficiency of language as a medium of communication. The profound message remaining undelivered is significant as it helps to highlight the old man's failure to take responsibility, as has been seen in his refusal to accept his fault for losing friends, and his abandonment of his

mother as well as his denial of having a son (if they had one). The suicide in this context can also be seen as a part of the man's escape from responsibility.



LET US KNOW

For Albert Camus, the 'Existential Hero' is one who, like Sisyphus, grasped the absurd pointlessness of his task or existence and chooses to embrace it anyway. Sisyphus overcomes his fate by choosing a heroic attitude toward life's apparent meaninglessness and thereby proving that man has the capability to will meaning into any situation. In contrast, the Old Man is the non-hero who is paralysed by his situation and unable to rise above the meaninglessness.

The double suicide of the couple seems to be their only exit, trapped as they are in their semi-circular claustrophobic room surrounded by water on all sides, with their cyclical existence of the same stories and games cut off from any outside contact, overwhelmed with the burden of a profound message. The multiplication of the chairs on the stage and the growing number of guests who push the couple towards the windows, symbolically contribute to the sense of claustrophobia. The stagnant water that surrounds them is indicative of the stagnant lives the couple have been living for years, with nothing new happening. It is a circle of existence from where, if there is a possibility of escape, it is only through death.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Elaborate on the uncertainty that surround the Old man and the Old Woman.

Q 6: Discuss the two signature techniques of Ionesco seen in *The Chairs*.

16.4.1 Major Themes

"The theme of the play is nothingness". Eugene Ionesco is reported to have written so in 1952, to the first director of *The* Chairs,

Sylvian Dhomme. Then, in the programme for the original production of the play, he said, "As the world is incomprehensible to me, I am waiting for someone to explain it". The overriding theme of The *Chairs* is then, absurdity itself. Ionesco's third, this absurdist play deals with the larger overwhelming absurdity of human existence, where man is confronted with nothingness in its everyday reality and therefore, he has to constantly attempt to fill this nothingness with meaning. The futile attempt to find meaning in life is the theme of absurd drama, which is formulated around the paradox where only two answers are possible; the absurd silence or the futile and empty talk. Central to the absurdist notion of life is that it is meaningless and purposeless, and is characterised by repetitions. Apart from the cyclical nature of life, the isolation of mankind and failure of communication are the themes, which make the play an absurd one.

Cyclical Nature of Life:

The old couple live a cyclical existence in their island house where they tell the same stories and play the same games every evening. The old man declaring that he is sick to death of Tudor history, which his wife keeps referring to, tired of doing February, or being sick of the game "the two of us came", provides us a glimpse into the life of these two old people who seem to be stuck in their cyclical existence. To highlight this further, Ionesco gives us speeches which sound quiet repetitive, with the woman merely echoing her husband's words and phrases at times. The wife's constant praise of the man's intellect and the talk of what could have been if he had the will is another example of that repetition. The sense of repetition becomes all the more pressing upon the readers and the audience with the arrival of more and more guest and the bringing in of chairs to accommodate them. We are made to realise that just as the invisible guests appear to impatiently press upon the old couple, similarly, they are pressurised by the repetitions, which entrap them in a prison-like existence with no access to the past or the future.

Isolation of Mankind:

The old man and the woman are lonely and isolated in their semi-circular room, and they try to keep each other company by attempts at entertainment. The stagnant water that surrounds them cuts them off from the rest of the world. It isolates and confines them in their lonely and tedious lives. The old man, we get to know, has lost friends and probably family due to his intolerant nature. The couple does not have any visitor, nor do they go to visit anyone. They had a son who left them, and the old man had a mother whom he left to die alone. That they are utterly isolated is reflected in the number of empty chairs that fill up the stage, supposedly occupied by guest awaiting his message, but who are all invisible. The only other visible person, the Orator, hardly notices the couple, and when they leave him behind to convey their message, he looks all the more lonely as he has to face the crowd on his own. He tries to make communication, but in vain, remaining ever alone in his own silent world.

Failure of Communication:

Language, according to Ionesco, is not a very reliable medium of communication. He realised this while trying to learn English from an English primer and had revealed the idiosyncratic nature of language in *The Bald Soprano*. In *The Chairs*, communication is futile as the conversations between the old man and his wife are empty and hollow-sounding, one repeating phrases after the other, or pronouncing empty phrases like echoes. The old man shies away from communicating his message to the world despite its utter necessity, because he knows that he cannot put ideas into words. The conversations of the old couple with their guests also highlight the futility of communication, as it is only their words that the audience hear against the silent words of the invisible guest. Their conversations are characterised by repetitions, empty phrases, sometimes spoken hurriedly, rising to a crescendo and

then falling into long silences. The ultimate failure of communication takes place through the deaf-mute Orator in whose hands the old couple leave the responsibility of passing on their message. Just as words and phrases fail to establish a connect between human beings, the meaning of life remains elusive since it is through language that it needs to be done, and language has time and again proved its insufficiency.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: Discuss *The Chairs* as an absurd play.

16.4.2 Major Characters

Had the guests in *The Chairs* been visible, this play would have probably had an absurdly large number of characters. However, while we are given the impression of a large gathering, there are only three real or visible characters. These three major characters are the Old Man, the Old Woman and the Orator.

The Old Man:

The protagonist of the play, the Old Man has been married to the Old Woman for seventy-five years, and entertains her nightly with the same story and role-playing games. He is bored of his repetitive existence. Life is so cyclical for him, in fact, that he seems to be confused about beginnings and endings, as well as about his age. Though he is ninety-five years old, he defers tremendously to his superiors and, is utterly infantile. His wife has to repeatedly praise him, love him and think of ways to drive away his boredom. He sobs on his wife's lap, upon whom he has conferred the role of a mother. He calls himself an orphan, though he is the one who abandoned his mother.

Living on the island, in a house surrounded by water on all sides, he spends his time looking at tiny boats in the water. Apart

from that, he devotes his time to the heroic quest of finding life's meaning. His quest appears to have been successful, as he seems to have arrived at the profound meaning of life, which would save humanity. He desires to share it with the world, but lacks the confidence to speak. He has intellect, so we are told, and could have achieved a much higher occupational position. However, he lacks the will or the ambition for a higher place, and has remained a janitor all his life. The partial reconstruction of his past through a chaotic retrospect hints at his lack or failure to take responsibility. He is a non-hero in his quest for a higher meaning in life, which remains unachieved due to his characteristic denial of possibilities. Unachieved heroism, and unfulfilled hopes due to his own reluctance to be responsible, makes the Old Man's life a tragic farce.

The Old Woman:

Called Sémiramis, she has been married to the Old Man for seventy-five years. On the island where the very thought of water makes her head spin, her only entertainment is listening to her husband's stories and role-playing games. While telling the same stories and playing the same games tires her husband, she keeps them fresh by erasing her memory every night. The stories and the games are always new to her. She frequently plays the role of the Old Man's surrogate mother, by allowing him to sit upon her lap and stroking him lovingly, by singing lullaby to him and encouraging him. She is also seen frequently reminding him about lost opportunities for a better life due to his shortcomings, while not stopping short of praising his intellect repeatedly. While she is a comforting presence for the Old Man, there is also a hint of passivity or obedience to her husband as she is seen bringing in chairs for his guests, selling programmes for the night and following him to the dark abyss of death.

The Orator:

The only real person or character on stage apart from the old couple, the Orator is the man hired by the Old Man to deliver his

profound message. Since he cannot express himself well, the Orator shall speak on his behalf. He is dressed as a 19th century artist, has all the bearings of an actor, but is more unreal than the invisible guests. Like a lifeless puppet, he walks up to the rostrum and when asked for, he signs autographs. The Old Man has put all his hopes into the Orator and believes that he would fulfil his responsibility of revealing the message. When the man welcomes his guests, and speaks with full exultation and joy at the prospect of a new future after the message, the Orator continues to deny or sign autographs as per his wish. When the old couple throw themselves out of the windows committing a double suicide, he remains silent and unmoved. Only when he begins to communicate with the guests do we realise that he is both deaf and dumb, a severe occupational hazard for an orator. The profound message, we realise was never comprehended by the Orator, we realise, and hence would never be delivered, for he does not have the language for it. The reason for this is because the Old Man has not taken responsibility for his life and for the delivery of the message, and thus the message becomes irrationally absurd.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: Critically analyse the role of the Orator in the play.



16.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have tried to study Ionesco's play *The Chairs* in detail. We have seen that the play deals with man's existential crisis, his heroic quest for meaning and fulfilment and his non-heroic tragic failure. It is not fate or some divine power, which prevents him from achieving his goals, but his own utter boredom and reluctance to take responsibility. The old

couple live in a no-exit cyclical life where the end is the beginning and the beginning is the end, and where they follow the same routine for every day of their lives. *The Chairs*, we have seen, can rightly be called an absurd play, as it highlights the absurdity of the old couple's lonely existence. Their attempt at communication fails as their language is insufficient, and their lives meet a tragic end. It is a tragic farce, for while the old couple believe that they are dying heroic deaths leaving behind a profound message, the message is never delivered.



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16.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: *The Chairs*, like *The Bald Soprano* deals with Ionesco's major concerns... …It is also a one-act play... …many of the motifs seen in *The Chairs* runs through all of Ionesco's works beginning from *The Bald Soprano*... …The first performance of *The Chairs* received a similar reception as that of *The Bald Soprano.*

Ans to Q 2: The Old Man and the Old Woman are married for seventy-five years... …The Old Man is infantile and needs mothering from his wife... …The wife alternates between an authoritative position and that of a submissive one... …She may have had to play the role of a mother for long... …A glimpse into her suppressed sexuality is provided when she flirts with the Offsetlithographer.

Ans to Q 3: The old couple play games and tell stories... …most of the time it is the old man who tells the stories... …The woman is full of awe for her husband's intellect... …yet she cannot help but constantly remind him about lost opportunities... …Through stories and conversations they try to recall a past they seem to have forgotten.

Ans to Q 4: Socialites, Field Marshals and Emperors are the kinds of guest who come to the Old Man, a mere janitor, to hear his message... …there is a sense of profundity attached to the message as it is the man's life-quest... …While it is the man's finding, it surely is something relevant for all.

Ans to Q 5: Inability to know something in its entirety leads to uncertainty... …the old couple do not know their beginnings from their end... …life moves in a cycle... …the woman's memory of the son is conflated with the man's memories of his mother... …husband-wife relationship is uncertain...language of communication is vague... …the message to be delivered is uncertain.

Ans to Q 6: Ionesco's concern about the futility of human existence is highlighted through his two signature techniques... …repetitions and multiplication of objects on stage.

Ans to Q 7: *The Chairs* shows us an elderly couple trapped in their circular lives in their semi-circular room surrounded by stagnant water on all sides... …Every evening they try to drive away their boredom through stories and games... …there is an important message to be shared with a great number of guests...the guests are invisible and the message is undelivered.

Ans to Q 8: The Orator is entrusted with the task of delivering the old ma's message to the gathered crowd... …His inability to do so highlights Ionesco's concern.



16.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the notion of 'nothingness' in *The Chairs*.

Q 2: Critically analyse the different themes of the play.

Q 3: The Orator's failure to reveal the old man's message is symbolic of the larger futility that characterise man's search for meaning in life. Discuss.

Q 4: Examine the existential crisis of the old couple in the play *The Chairs*.

Q 5: Discuss the symbolic significance of the stagnant water that surround the island house of the old couple.

Q 6: Analyse the Old Man as an existential non-hero.

Q 7: Justify *The Chairs* as a tragic farce.

*** ***** ***



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Name of the Paper:
Course Code:

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Learner's Feedback on Course

Dear Learner,

Regarding the course as mentioned above, we would like to know your opinions and comments so as to improve the quality of self learning materials in future. Please respond to the following statements by ticking the number you feel most reflect your opinion. After completion of the additional comments, please detach the page and send/mail the same to us at the address given below.

The Director, Centre for Internal Quality Assurance, KKHandiqui State Open University
Housefed Complex, Dispur, Guwahati- 781006
(E-mail id: ciqa@kkhsou.in)

1. Approximately how many hours did you spend for studying the units in the course? | | | |
2. Please give your opinions (by √ mark) to the following items based on your reading of the block:

Sl. No.	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I.	The SLMs of the course fulfil the learning objectives set out in the beginning of each unit					
II.	The units of the SLM could satisfy my academic needs and expectations					
III.	The Unit writers have excellent knowledge about the course contents					
IV.	Language and contents of the units were presented at a level which I could readily understand					
V.	Ample opportunity for participation in the activities provided in the units					
VI.	Used enough Illustrations (Diagrams, tables etc.) for conceptual clarity					
VII.	Quality of content is engaging, relevant, and up-to-date					
VIII.	The self check questions are very helpful					
IX.	The Possible/model questions and the answers to check my progress have benefited me a lot					

Additional Comments: *(Please feel free to provide your open comments)*

1. Which aspects of the SLM, according to you, worked well?

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2. What sort of changes/improvements do you feel KKHSOU could implement to improve the overall quality of the SLM?
