UNIT 2: WILLIAM COWPER: "THE SOLITUDE OF ALEXANDER SELKIRK"

UNIT STRUCTURE

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2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- familiarise yourself with the eighteenth century poet William Cowper
- describe the life and works of the poet
- explain the poem "The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk"
- discuss the themes of the poem
- analyse the poetic style of William Cowper

2.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall delve into the life and works of one of the well-known poets of the 18th century. William Cowper is also known as the forerunner of English Romantic Poetry. His poem titled "The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk" is the subject of our discussion in this unit. The poem is a reference to a sailor who had spent four years alone in an uninhabited island of

Scotland. However, the poem is unique and is notable for the celebration of man's imaginative power. You will also find the explanation of the poem in the unit. By throwing light upon the themes and use of language by the poet, the unit aims to acquaint you with the works and poetic style of William Cowper in general.

2.3 WILLIAM COWPER: THE POET

Regarded as the forerunner of English Romantic Poetry, William Cowper wrote in the eighteenth century drawing from the day to day experiences of his life. Mostly noted for his poetry on nature, William Cowper was a notable poet and essayist who also wrote hymns. His poetry had the flavour of both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Let us read through the life and works of this great poet.

2.3.1 His Life

William Cowper was born on November 26, 1731 to Reverend John Cowper and Ann Donne Cowper at Berkhamsted in London. He lost his mother at a tender age. Critics claim the loss of his mother to be the cause for the mental breakdown and instability of the poet. His experience of schooling was an unhappy one because he was bullied at Dr. Pitman's school where he was first admitted. He was next sent to Westminster school where he spent seven years from 1741 to 1748. He pursued law in Middle Temple.
Although Cowper had developed a romantic inclination towards his cousin, Theodora, his love was not a successful one as his parents were against the relationship.This resulted in increasing depression and instability in the poet.Cowper suffered from severe nervous breakdown while appearing for an examination for the position of Clerk in the House of Lords. It led to his hospitalisation at Nathaniel Cotton's asylum for two years after three failed suicide attempts. After his conversion to Evangelism he moved to Huntington to stay with a retired clergy Morley Unwin and his wife, Mary. A family relation developed among them with the support and care bestowed on him by the Unwins. Even after the death of Morley Unwin, he stayed with Mary and a

close relationship grew between them. Mary took care of Cowper in an attack of insanity in 1773 and successfully helped him to recover from his illness. They lived together until Mary's death in 1796. Her death overshadowed his life with despair. In 1800, William Cowper breathed his last after he was diagnosed with dropsy.

2.3.2 His Works

William Cowper is best remembered for the poem "The Diverting History of John Gilpin" as well as his hymns.*The Olney Hymns* was the first publication which was a joint work by Cowper John Newton. The major theme of this work is the need for salvation of human beings. Some of the hymns are "There is a Fountain Filled With Blood", "To Jesus, the Crown of My Hope", "O Lord! in Sorrow I Resign", "There is a Safe and Secret Place", to name a few. His famous poem" "The Diverting History of John Gilpin" is a comic piece published in 1782. The volume *Poems by William Cowper, of the Inner Temple, Esq.* was published in 1782. In 1785, William Cowper's" "The Task"- a poem of about five thousand lines written in blank verse was published and received wide critical acclaim. This was one of the remarkable treatments of the themes such as man and nature. His later life was engrossed in translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Besides these, Cowper's letters are known for its humour and his lively treatment of everyday life.

2.4 TEXT OF THE POEM

"The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk"

I am monarch of all I survey;
My right there is none to dispute;
From the centre all round to the sea
I am lord of the fowl and the brute.
O **Solitude**! where are the charms
That **sages** have seen in thy face?
Better dwell in the midst of alarms,
Than reign in this horrible place.

I am out of humanity's reach,
I must finish my journey alone,
Never hear the sweet music of speech;
I start at the sound of my own.
The beasts that roam over the plain
My form with indifference see;
They are so unacquainted with man,
Their **tameness** is shocking to me.

Society, Friendship, and Love
Divinely bestow'd upon man,
O, had I the wings of a dove
How soon would I taste you again!
My sorrows I then might **assuage**
In the ways of religion and truth;
Might learn from the wisdom of age,
And be cheer'd by the **sallies** of youth.

Ye winds that have made me your sport,
Convey to this desolate shore
Some **cordial endearing** report
Of a land I shall visit no more:
My friends, do they now and then send
A wish or a thought after me?
O tell me I yet have a friend,
Though a friend I am never to see.

How **fleet** is a **glance** of the mind!
Compared with the speed of its flight,
The **tempest** itself lags behind,
And the swift-wingèd arrows of light.
When I think of my own native land



Solitude: the state of being alone
Sages: men of profound wisdom
Tameness: without the fear of humans that is normal/common in wild animals
Assuage: be relieved of
Sallies: a flight of passion
Cordial: friendly
Endearing: lovable
Fleet: swift, move very fast
Glance: a quick look at
Tempest: a violent windstorm
Sea-fowl: a sea-bird



Lair: den
Affliction: a state of distress
Reconciles: to bring oneself to accept

In a moment I seem to be there;
But alas! recollection at hand
Soon hurries me back to despair.

But the **sea-fowl** is gone to her nest,
The beast is laid down in his **lair**;
Even here is a season of rest,
And I to my cabin repair.
There's mercy in every place,
And mercy, encouraging thought!
Gives even **affliction** a grace
And **reconciles** man to his lot.

2.4.1 The Explanation of the Poem

The poem is based on Alexander Selkirk, a sailor from Fife, Scotland. He ran away from home at the age of nineteen to be left alone on a deserted and uninhabited island in Chile following a feud with a young captain. Even though he asked his shipmates to join him, he was refused by all and had to spend four years of his life at the island alone which had no sign of human life in it. Many writers had been influenced by Alexander Selkirk's adventurous stay at the island which was called Juan Fernandez. He was however accompanied by goats and cats, the animals which earlier survived shipwrecks. He spent his life there hunting and was completely engrossed in reading the Bible until he was rescued four years later by an English ship.



LET US KNOW

Highly influenced by Alexander Selkirk's story was the novel *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe. The novel has an engrossing plot and deals with the life and experiences of Robison Kreutznaer in a distant tropical island for twenty eight years. He was also rescued in the end of the novel.

William Cowper's poem is a direct address to the story of this sailor's life in the island. Cowper must have consulted many books written on Alexander Selkirk. However, his poem throws interesting light on the relationship of man with nature.The first stanza begins with the solitude life of the sailor in the island where there is no one to disrupt or interfere him. Being the only human presence, he is the king of the island. He is, however, filled with regret for his decision of staying in the island.It is evident from these line: "Better dwell in the midst of alarms,/Than reign in this horrible place."

The sailor regrets that he has nobody to share his grief too. He is out in such a faraway place where the possibility of human vegetation is less. Cut off from the society, he assured himself that he had to reside there all alone by himself. He longs to hear the "sweet music of speech" for there was no one he could talk to. He reflected on the point that the island had never before seen the presence of human beings because he found that even the beasts look at him "with indifference".

He longs for "Society, Friendship and Love" which are solely humanly affairs. He imagined how he could have escaped if he had wings like the Dove. His sorrows might then be lessened by the new hope he would find in religion and he would learn from his "wisdom of age,/And be cheer'd by the sallies of youth."

The fourth stanza reflected his utter desolation and his eagerness to go back to a life he earlier had lived with friends and family. Out of frustration he asked the wind to convey his message to his dear ones about how he missed them. The sailor's imagination is at full play in this stanza.

The fifth stanza is the sailor's return to his reality. Cowper beautifully describes the imaginative power of Selkirk as "How fleet is a glance of the mind" and emphasised on the fact that it could not last forever. The sailor had to accept his self chosen fate.

The poem ends with a note of hope for human beings are strong enough to survive in all situations and what encouraged the sailor is the hope that mercy still pervaded. This strong bent of mind led to the survival of the sailor in the island even after four years. In spite of the hopeless situation,

Alexander Selkirk's determination and courage to survive has been an inspiring story for many writers. Through the poem, William Cowper manages to throw light on human trials and the necessity of courage and will to survive.

2.5 MAJOR THEMES

Let us discuss some of the major themes evident in the poem.

Power of Imagination

The most dominant theme of the poem is the power of imagination. Stuck in an uninhabited island alone, Alexander Selkirk spent four years of his life alone. Devoid of other human lives, he was compelled to live alone. His only activities were hunting goats and reading the Bible.It was, however, the flights of imagination of the sailor that had saved him from breaking down completely. He found solace in imagining about his friends, their love and companionship. Although he is aware of his reality yet his imaginative bent of mind helped him to survive in such a deserted island. The company he had in the island comprised only animals. Cowper emphasized how one's imaginative power can lead him/her to the source of happiness. If not permanent yet a temporary relief was found by the lonely sailor which encouraged him to struggle to live until finally rescued.

Man's relation to Nature and Society

Another theme evident in the poem is man's relation to nature and the society. As part of the society, men are habituated to the company of friends and lovers.The poem throws light on the fact that a life without society is worthless. A human being is complete in relation to another human being. Also, the reliance of men on nature is quite evident through the poem. The sailor lived in the island amidst nature and survived by the provisions laid down by Nature.

2.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

The influence of Evangelism on William Cowper was reflected in his hymns. The wide range of his works consisting of hymns, lyrics, letters, satires, translations is evident of his talent and genius. His tone may be didactic but

his poems reflect his love for Nature, Humanity and Society. Humour is evident in his letters. He draws from the everyday life experiences and his poetry strongly has its base in the poet's psychology and inner consciousness.His works bear the influence of John Milton and Abraham Cowley, a seventeenth century poet. William Cowper is also noted for his use of blank verse.

"The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk" is a simple yet elegant poem written on the sailor's mental condition during his stay at the island. The language is also simple denoting the simplicity of the sailor's imagination to become a part of a society again. Though written in a simple style, the poem has deeper philosophical implications. Man's need for a society, man's relationship with nature and his strong determination are some of the points that Cowper focuses on. Cowper's strong observation is implied through his works. His style is lively and is a reflection of his personal undertone.



2.7 LET US SUM UP

As you have finished reading the units, you will be familiarised with one of the forerunners of English Romanticism. William Cowper. Mostly noted for the poem "The Diverting History of John Gilpin", William Cowper's style is lively and elegant. In the poem, "The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk," Cowper celebrated human courage and faith. Stuck in the lonely island for four years, Alexander Selkirk's strong determination to survive is the chief motive in the poem. You are now familiar with the themes of the poem and aware of Cowper's poetic style.



2.8 FURTHER READING

1) Cowper, William. (2008 rpt.)*Poems*. California Pomona: Press.

2) Nick Rhodes (ed.) (2006) *Selected Poems: William Cowper*. Manchester Carcanet Press Ltd.

2.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: His experience of schooling was an unhappy one because he was bullied at Dr. Pitman's school where he was first admitted.

Ans to Q No 2: After his conversion to Evangelism he moved to Huntington to stay with a retired clergy Morley Unwin and his wife, Mary. A family relation developed among them with the support and care bestowed on him by the Unwins. Even after the death of Morley Unwin, he stayed with Mary and a close relationship grew between them.

Ans to Q No 3: "The Diverting History of John Gilpin", "The Task", "The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk", etc.

Ans to Q No 4: The major theme of his hymns is the need for salvation of human beings. Some of the hymns are "There is a Fountain Filled With Blood", "To Jesus, the Crown of My Hope", "O Lord! in Sorrow I Resign", "There is a Safe and Secret Place", etc.

Ans to Q No 5: Alexander Selkirk was a sailor from Fife, Scotland. He ran away from home at the age of nineteen to be left alone on a deserted and uninhabited island in Chile following a feud with a young captain. Even though he asked his shipmates to join him, he was refused by all and had to spend four years of his life at the island alone which had no sign of human life in it.

Ans to Q No 6: By "sweet music of speech" the poet means human voice. The sailor regrets that he has nobody to share his grief too. He is out in such a faraway place where the possibility of human vegetation is less. Cut off from the society, he assured himself that he had to reside there all alone by himself. He longs to hear the "sweet music of speech" for there was no one he could talk to.

Ans to Q No 7: Man's power of imagination and man's relation to nature and the society.

Ans to Q No 8: Yes, the language is as such simple denoting the simplicity of the sailor's imagination to become a part of a society again.

2.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q.1. Attempt a critical appreciation of the poem "The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk" by William Cowper.

Q.2. What is the central theme of the poem "The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk"? Elaborate.

Q.3. Write short notes on:

a) Poetic style of William Cowper

b) "The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk"

Q.4. Discuss the life and works of William Cowper.

Q.5. Explain the poet's intention behind writing the poem "The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk"?

Q.6. Discuss "The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk" by William Cowper as a poem of human courage and determination.

Q.7. How did Alexander Selkirk pass four years in the lonely island?

Q.8. What were the thoughts that the sailor battled with during his stay on the lonely island?

Q.9. Explain with reference to context:

a) "I am monarch of all I survey;
My right there is none to dispute;
From the centre all round to the sea
I am lord of the fowl and the brute."

b) "Society, Friendship, and Love
Divinely bestow'd upon man,
O, had I the wings of a dove
How soon would I taste you again!"

c) "How fleet is a glance of the mind!
Compared with the speed of its flight,
The tempest itself lags behind,
And the swift-winged arrows of light."

d) "There's mercy in every place,
And mercy, encouraging thought!"

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