UNIT 11: ANTOINE DE SAINT EXUPERY: *THE LITTLE PRINCE*

UNIT STRUCTURE

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11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- appreciate the art of translation
- gain an idea of the generic form of allegory as this story is considered to be an adult fable
- differentiate between an adult perception from that of a child
- appreciate the joy of adventure
- explain the element of fantasy in the story

11.2 INTRODUCTION

Have you ever come across fictional accounts of imaginary adventures written by eminent authors like *The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland,*

Gulliver's Travels, Rasselas, etc. This unit, through the story by the French poet and novelist, Antoine de Saint Exupery, takes us into a world of fantasy and day dream. The narrator, whose journey from a child to an adult covers the length of the novel, is thought to be Saint Exupery himself. The story is an account of his aviation experience and the subsequent plane crash in the deserts of Sahara. But it will be interesting to see how Saint Exupery narrates the whole adult experience through the perception of a child. The publication year of this novella is September 1943. It was first published in French as *La Petit Prince.* The novella includes wonderful illustrations, also created by Saint Exupery. In *The Little Prince,* the narrator's account of his plane crash is believed by some critics to be Saint Exupery's own account of a similar experience in the Sahara Deserts, which has been recorded in his 1939 memoir, *Wind Sand and Stars* (French: *Terre des hommes).* Saint Exupery, along with his co-pilot, Andre Prevot, had to suffer extreme dehydration in the desert due to this plane crash which occurred on December 30, 1935. But in this novella, Saint Exupery has skillfully made the adult experience seem like events which occur in a child's life. He has merged the reality of adult life with the fanciful and colourful life of a child.



LET US KNOW

A ***novella*** is shorter than a novel but longer than a short story.

11.3 ANTOINE DE SAINT EXUPERY: LIFE AND WORKS

Born on June 29 1900, in Lyon, France, St. du Exupery was a French writer, journalist, aristocrat, poet and aviator. His literary genres include essays, letters, autobiography and children's literature. He received several literary awards of France. He was also the recipient of the honorable U.S. National Book Award.

Born to an aristocratic Catholic family, Saint Exupery was the third of the

five children. His parents were Count Jean de Saint Exupery and Countess Marie de Fonscolombe. After his father's death due to a fatal stroke, the family had to witness the trials and tribulations of a declining aristocracy. His father was an insurance executive at Le Soleil (The Sun) brokerage company and his death jerked the family out of its complacency. This family tragedy was followed by another. Antoine's younger brother, fifteen-year-old Francois, died of rheumatic fever. During the World War I, they were both studying at the Marianist College Villa St. Jean in Fribourg, Switzerland.This incident also finds relevance in the end of *The Little Prince.* After the death of the two men in the family, the responsibilities of his three sisters and his mother fell on him.

Before studying architecture for fifteen months at Ecole des Beaux-Arts without completing his graduation, Antoine failed twice in his finals at a preparatory Naval Academy. After that, he took to accepting trifle jobs to earn money. He began his military life in 1921 when he joined service as a basic-rank soldier and was transferred to Neuhof, Strasbourg, where he also found the opportunity to take flying lessons. Following this experience, he was offered a transfer from the French Army to the French Air Force. He was first posted at 37th Fighter Regiment in Casablanca, Morocco, and then at the 34th Aviation Regiment at Le Bourget, Paris. After experiencing several aircraft crashes as part of the aviation career, he had to finally surrender to the disapproval of his fiancee's (Louis Leveque de Vilmorin) family and leave his Air Force job for an office job. The engagement finally broke off and Antoine continued looking for several other jobs after this incident. Finally, Antoine began his flying career again in 1926, and this time, he was one of the spearheads of the international postal flight. After his transfer to Argentina in 1926, Exupery was appointed the director of Aeroposta Argentina.

In 1931, Exupery married a twice-widowed writer and artist, Consuelo Suncin. In 1935, Exupery, along with his co-pilot, Andre Prevot, set off to break a speed record in an air race from Paris to Saigon, whose prize money was 150,000 francs. However, their plane crashed near the Nile Delta, in a valley named, Wadi Natrun. They both survived the crash, but suffered immensely from dehydration. On the fourth day in the Sahara Desert, they were

finally discovered by a Bedouin on a camel, and their lives were saved. What came out as a result of this experience was his memoir, *Wind, Sand and Stars* (1939), and his novella *The Little Prince.* His first novella, however, was not *The Little Prince,* but *L'Aviateur*(*The Aviator*). It appeared in a short lived magazine, Le Navire d' Argent (The Silver Ship). In 1929, his book *CourrierSud* (*Southern Mail*) was published that introduced him as a journalist to the reading public. The publication of *Vol de nuit* (*Night Flight*) in 1931 established him as a promising newcomer in the literary world. This book was a compilation of his experiences as a mail pilot and director of the Aeroposta Argentina airline.

On 31st July, 1944, Exupery took off on an unarmed war plane, numbered P-38. From this fateful flight to Corsica to fulfill a mission, Exupery never returned. An unidentified body in French air force uniform was discovered a few days later. The sudden disappearance of the pilot created quite a few headlines. It is said that he was suspected of supporting Germany secretly during his air missions. Such scandals were popularised by his professional adversaries like Vichy Regime and Charles de Gaulle. He took to drinking heavily and suffered from depression. His impulsive flight to Corsica bears testimony to his mental turmoil.

11.4 THE TITLE OF THE NOVELLA

As the title suggests, the story is about a little prince from another world. He helps the adult narrator to look at the world from a different angle. The size of the prince might be small, but he outsmarts the adult narrator through his wit. He is referred to as the 'prince' because he occupies his own small world, an asteroid, which is no bigger than a house. Regarding the choice of the title and the subject-matter of the novella, it is opined by some that the physical description of the Little Prince resembles Exupery himself when he was a child. His golden curly locks fringing his plump face made him popular as le Roi Soleil (the Sun King) among his family and friends. The entire story revolves around the events that take place in the desert where the narrator's plane crashed. The Little Prince comes to Exupery like a hope that keeps him going through the

most strenuous time in that desert. The Little Prince is also interpreted by some as Christ himself who has simple answers to every complex question. Miraculously, when the photojournalist of the magazine *Life,* John Phillips, asked Exupery about the inspiration behind his creation of this child character, Exupery simply said that, one day, as he was looking down on a blank sheet of paper, he saw a shadowy image of a child, and when asked who he was,the image replied that he was the Little Prince. The story covers the time length of the narrator from his childhood to adulthood, and the Little Prince becomes a constant reminder of who he had been when he was a child. He appears before the narrator at a time when the latter is caught up in the throes of adult life, and the life story of the Little Prince becomes a silent reminder of the narrator's childhood. The 'Prince' becomes a metaphor for the philosopher in the little boy and his reflections and observations that make the narrator a wiser and a sensible man.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Fill in the blanks with appropriate answers:

a. *Wind, Sand and Stars* is a ____ by Antoine de Saint Exupery.

b. Saint Exupery was initially engaged to ____ .

c. His brother, Francois, was ____ years old when he died.

Q2. Say whether the following sentences are true or false:

a. Saint Exupery married Consuelo Suncin in 1935.

b. The plane in which Saint Exupery made his last flight was P-37.

c. Saint Exupery was suspected by the French Air Force of secretly supporting Germany in his air missions.

Q3. What simple messages does the little prince impart during his stay with the narrator?

11.5 THE CONTEXT OF THE NOVELLA

As discussed in the beginning of the unit, the novella is inspired by the incidents that occured in the life of Saint Exupery. The novella was published in 1943, a crucial year in the history of the world. The novel is set against the backdrop of a desert, where Exupery's own plane had crashed. In the extreme heat that caused him and his co-pilot to suffer from dehydration, they began to hallucinate. The character of the little prince is inspired by the younger brother of Exupery and his death has some relevance in the novella when the writer describes: "He remained motionless for an instant. He did not cry out. He fell as gently as a tree falls."

The failed attempts of the narrator to paint are references to Exupery's own failure at making a mark in the initial period of his life to get through an exam at a preparatory Naval Academy. He had failed twice there. The philosophical discussions of the little prince, and his constant conclusion of the adult individual as 'odd' and 'queer' set it against adult's perception of life as 'matters of consequence'. Through the little prince, the novella, perhaps, starkly critiques on the ideas of war, man's desire to command and rule (like the king), to calculate profits (like the businessman), to conquer and limit (like the geographer), to be appreciated and admired (like the conceited man), to be unnecessarily engrossed to ignore existential questions (like the lamplighter) and to remain intoxicated by dreams and ambitions that have no limits (like the tippler).

The self introspection of the little prince and his regret at leaving his rose all alone in his planet is reflective of Exupery's own regret of leaving his wife Consuelo Suncin, because he perceived her as proud and vain. However, the little prince is reminded by the fox that one should never judge anybody by words. The rose is special and unique to him, as he has tamed her. Exupery's regret at having judged Suncin so harshly comes out clearly in his novella.

Thus, the life and experiences of Saint Exupery form a major part of the novella. Even at the end of the tale, the narrator admits that no grown-up would

believe his story, because only young children are blessed with the power to imagine beautiful things. Adults only live a life of facts and figures, and not a life of fancy. The longing of the narrator to meet the little prince once again in his life shows his quest for the beautiful and the innocent, which is limitless.

11.6 EXPLANATION OF THE NOVELLA

The novella consists of twenty-seven short chapters, each accompanied by colourful illustrations sketched by Exupery himself. It opens with the narrator musing upon his life as a six-year-old. He says that he was immensely inspired by a picture in a book entitled *True Stories from Nature.* The picture was that of a huge boa constrictor swallowing an animal. He tried to draw a picture of one with the swallowed animal inside its belly. He drew his first ever painting with colour pencils, and proudly showed it off to the grown-ups in his family. But the painting was interpreted as a hat, and in his second attempt, the grown-ups thought it to be an elephant. Disheartened, the child narrator took to another profession—of an aviator of airplanes. And he decided to talk to them of other "sensible matters" like "bridge, and golf, and politics, and neckties"—a clear reminder of the dry, matter-of-fact world of an adult, where creativity and imagination of a child has very little place.

The adult life of the narrator was full of loneliness and gloom. He even met with an accident in the Sahara Desert. During his moments of depression and self-sought exile, he heard a cheerful voice urging him to draw him a sheep. He looks around and finds a little boy, with golden curly hair and a golden scarf around his neck. He calls him the Little Prince. Gradually, he comes to know about the origins of the Little Prince, and that he has landed on earth from some other planet. When the narrator is unable to draw him a sheep, and draws him a box instead, the Little Prince says that he had actually wanted a sheep inside a box, which he could use as his house. From his description, the narrator was assured that his planet was no bigger than the size of a house. He lived in an asteroid called B-612.

The narrator admits that the arrival of the little prince in his life inspired to take up painting once again- a hobby which he had given up long ago. He

wanted to cherish the memories of his new found friend and the constant little demands of the young boy to sketch him something or the other made the narrator take up painting once again at a much mature age. At a point of time, the narrator wishes to remain a little boy like the young prince because he wants to see things that only young children can see. He says "My friend never explained anything to me. He thought, perhaps, that I was like himself. But I, alas, do not know how to see sheep through the walls of boxes. Perhaps, I am a little like the grown-ups. I have had to grow old."

The little prince, through his innocent deeds, teaches each day a new thing to the narrator. He says that he wants to own a sheep so that it eats up all the baobab trees that might crowd his small asteroid. He suggests that one should weed out the baobab bushes when they are still small, lest they become a problem when they grow into big and strong trees. This little piece of advice from the little prince can be read as a wise saying that one should tackle one's problems when they are still fresh and within one's grasp. To overlook a problem at the very beginning means to invite greater problems that may arise from it. This simple philosophy becomes evident in the words of the little prince: "Before they grow so big, the baobabs start out by being little." The narrator understands the significance of these words and interprets them as a wise comment on nurturing good ideas and weeding out bad ones. He says: "Indeed, as I learned, there were on the planet where the little prince lived- as one on all planets- good plants and bad plants. In consequence, there were good seeds from good plants and bad seeds from bad plants. But seeds are invisible. They sleep deep in the heart of the earth's darkness, until someone among them is seized with the desire to awaken. Then this little seed will stretch itself and begin- timidly at first- to push a charming little sprig inoffensively upward toward the sun. If it is only a sprout of radish or the spring of a rose-bush, one would let it grow wherever it might wish. But when it is a bad plant, one must destroy it as soon as possible, the very first instant when one recognizes it." What the narrator indicates here is the need to destroy undesirable thoughts and ideas the moment they start taking roots on the soil on one's mind, whereas good thoughts should be encouraged to grow into better ideas.

The narrator gradually comes to know of the little prince's fascination for sunsets. The Little Prince says that one loves the sunset most when one is really sad. On being asked, what made him sad, the little prince remains silent. On their fifth day in the desert, the little prince asks the narrator whether sheep eat flowers with thorns. When the narrator replies in the positive, the little prince becomes apprehensive. The narrator keeps trying to mend his plane so that he could go back to his duty, but the constant questions of the little prince makes him angry. The little prince says that he is no different than the grown-ups, and becomes sad. Without his realization, the narrator starts behaving like grown-ups, because this is what he is- a grown-up, after all. What is important to a child seems ridiculous for the grown-up. All they believe in are 'matters of consequence'. The little prince's concern over a little flower in his planet, and the only flower to be so, and who is going to take care of her in his absence is of no importance to the narrator. But the little prince argues in his own childlike simplicity that things that do matter to him are things like flowers, butterflies and caterpillars, and not calculations and numbers that grown-ups are so fascinated about. The narrator mentions this in Chapter 4: "They (grown-ups) never say to you, "What does his voice sound like? What game does he love best? Does he collect butterflies?" Instead they demand, "How old is he? How many brothers has he? How much does he weigh? How much money does his father make?" only from these figures do they think they have learned anything about him."

The little prince finds in the narrator a friend and tells him how his flower looked like, and how she grew in a bush. Initially, he thought it to be yet another baobab sprout. But soon, he noticed a bud and one day the bud bloomed into a little flower; she took time in choosing the colours of her petals from nature. She was a proud flower, as she was beautiful. She knew that the little prince doted on her, and would run little errands on her demand. She would demand water in the morning and a glass globe when the wind was no longer mild. The little prince took offence and left her alone in his planet. She had once told him that she could protect herself well with her four thorns, and the little prince took her words way too literally and left her behind. Now, in the desert, he realises his fault and confesses his guilt before the narrator. He

admits that, "The fact is that I did not know how to understand anything! I ought to have judged by deeds and not by words. She cast her fragrance and her radiance over me. I ought never to have run away from her… I ought to have guessed all the affection that lay behind her poor little stratagems. Flowers are so inconsistent! But I was too young to know how to love her…"

The narrator believes that the little prince flew away from his planet on the back of a flock of migratory birds. Before his flight, he cleaned his two active volcanoes which were convenient means of heating his breakfast. He also cleaned the dormant volcano, fearing that it might get active one day and cause harm to his planet. And then when he bade farewell to the flower, she only urged him to leave soon, lest he would see her tears.

The little prince describes his journey to the planet earth before the narrator. The asteroid of the little prince was in the proximity of six other asteroids namely 325, 326, 327, 328, 329 and 330. He decides to visit each of them. The first had a king who had no subjects to rule. But the moment he saw the little prince, he addressed him as his subject, although they had never met before. Here, the narrator makes a wise comment: "He did not know how the world is simplified for kings. To them, all men are subjects." The king urged him to stay and become the dispenser of justice, but the little prince said that there was no one else to be judged. To this the king argued that, if so was the case, he should judge himself, because it was the toughest of all tasks. The little prince politely took his leave from the king and visited the next planet.

The occupant of this asteroid was a conceited man and the little prince found him more entertaining than the king. But soon, he is bored of admiring the conceited man. He left him by wondering how anybody could be interested so much in being admired. But this, after all, was a trait that is common in grown-ups.

The next asteroid was inhabited by a tippler. When asked why he drank so much, the tippler replied that it was because he was ashamed of drinking and to forget his embarrassment, he drank heavily. The little prince only concluded that the grown-ups could be really odd.

The fourth asteroid was occupied by a businessman. He was calculating

the stars which he claimed to be his own, because there was no other to claim them. The little prince showed him the futility of such ownership by saying that he cannot really own them because he was of no use to them. The little prince owned the flower because he watered her every morning and tended to her needs; he owned the volcanoes because he cleaned them every day. But the businessman was of no use to the stars.

The fifth asteroid was the smallest of all the other asteroids. It was inhabited by a lamplighter. He would light the street lamp every single minute, and then blow it out alternately. According to the little prince, this man was the busiest of all the other men he had met so far. He had not a minute's respite. The lamplighter told him that his planet revolved at such a tremendous speed that it was night and day every alternate minute. He had no time to eat or sleep. Without his knowledge the little prince spent one month in it. The little prince wanted to stay for some more time on that planet, but it is too small to have room for two persons. He left it with a heavy heart, because it was the only planet that witnessed 1440 sunsets a day.

The sixth asteroid was ten times bigger than the one occupied by the lamplighter. The inhabitant of this planet was a geographer. When asked by the little prince about the features of his planet, the geographer could not reply as he was ignorant about them. He explained that he is a geographer, and not an explorer. There was a difference; the geographer only had to note down in his book the discoveries made by the explorer. But what amazed and to a point disappointed the little prince was when the geographer said that they do not record flowers. They are 'ephemeral' and hence could not be enlisted in their books of discoveries. They were not mighty and eternal like the oceans and mountains, and therefore do not enter the great records of discovery. The geographer explained: "Geographies…are the books which, of all books, are most concerned with the matters of consequence. They never become old-fashioned. It is very rarely that a mountain changes its position. It is very rarely that an ocean empties itself of its waters. We write of eternal things." This farther fills the little prince with remorse. He thinks: "My flower is ephemeral…and she has only four thorns to defend herself against the world. And I have left her on my planet, all alone!" the geographer advised the little

prince to visit the friendly planet earth. The little prince moved away with a heavy heart, thinking all his way about his flower.

The earth is his seventh planet, and the last on the list of the little prince. Here, the narrator gives us an idea of the immensity of the earth by saying that men occupy only a small portion of its surface. The first thing that the little prince met on earth is a golden snake. The snake introduced himself and says that if ever the little prince missed his own planet then he could send him back to it, although not physically, but through his memory. Perhaps, the little prince understood what the snake indicated at. The conversation between the snake and the little prince brought to light up a lot of philosophical observations about man and his eternal loneliness. The snake reflected that it was always lonely among men. The next object that the little prince encountered was a flower. As they conversed, the flower said that she had seen a caravan of men passing by her place. They were people without permanent homes. After that the little prince climbed up a nearby mountain and shouted with the mountain echoing his words. This made the little prince feel lonely and small. He missed his own planet with a single flower which always spoke first. But soon, the little prince came across a garden full of roses. He was amazed to see so many flowers blooming there. Until then he thought that his own flower was the most beautiful one in the universe, and that it was unique. Soon, the little prince met a fox. The conversation with the fox is another enlightening passage in the novella. The fox said that they could become friends only if he tamed the fox just as he had tamed the flower in his planet. His flower was unique and special to him. There may be thousand other flowers in the universe, of the same kind, but what made the flower in his planet special to him was the fact that she yielded only to him. She missed him, and he should not have left her. Her pride and vanity was her exterior garb, underneath which she disguised her real feelings for him. She actually feared to be left alone, but she never wished to stand on his way of progress and exploration. This journey, according to the fox, was very important because it taught the little prince what the flower actually meant for him. The fox taught him that his rose was unique to him and he owed responsibility towards her alone. “Men have forgotten this truth. But you must not forget it. You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed. You

are responsible for you rose…" Perhaps, this conversation is an indicator to the fact that man must complete his responsibilities towards something that he had initiated. The little prince had tended to the rose, but left her halfway. She became habituated to his care and love. He should have stayed with the rose and not isolated her.

Next, the little prince met a merchant who bragged that he has invented a pill that could make someone forget his thirst for fifty three minutes a week. The little prince argued that if he had that much time in his hands, he would rather try and find out a spring of fresh water. The little prince and the narrator spent eight days in the desert. Finally, they found a well where there was bucket and a pulley to draw water. They together quenched their thirst, and found the water rather sweet. The little prince mused that it was the difficulty in achieving simply and ordinary things that made them extraordinary and special. He wondered how people had five thousand roses in their garden and yet were on the lookout for something greater. The little prince made one understand that real happiness was in being content in the here and the now, then in searching it somewhere else, in another time. The narrator realized that the little prince looked dejected and greatly missed his rose. One day, he found him talking to the golden snake. The snake slithered away, and the little prince closed his eyes. He had once promised the narrator that he would shine up in the sky, among the glittering stars. The narrator tells the reader that six years had passed after this meeting, yet he dared not tell this story to any grown-up because it would hardly make any sense to them. The narrator further pleads that if anybody comes across a young boy who had golden hair and who refused to answer his questions immediately, then he should be informed.



11.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit tells us how things that are of least importance to grown-ups are so important to children. Things like flowers, sheep with muzzles, weeding out baobab bushes when still young, the preservation of a few caterpillars to see them grow into heavy-winged colourful butterflies, the pleasure of drinking water that one has pulled out of a deep well with the help of a bucket and a pulley, the joy of making new friends, and the mind to accept

one's mistake—all form an important part of a child's world. Whereas, counting loss and profit, geography and cartography with no mention of ephemeral things, ruling and commanding, vanity and counterfeited admiration are things of the adult world. For a child, there is eternity in a moment; he lives that moment to the last. On the other hand, adults waste their present either by being remorseful of their past or apprehensive of their future. Thus, this novella gives us a fresh perspective of looking at life through a child's eyes.



11.8 FURTHER READING

1. Saint Exupery, Antoine de. (1943). *The Little Prince.* Katherine Woods (trans.) New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.

2. Saint Exupery, Antoine Consuelo de. (2000). *The Tale of the Rose: The Love Story Behind the Little Prince.* Esther Allen (trans.) New York: Random House.

3. Smith, Maxwell A. (1956). *Knight of the Air: The Life and Works of Antoine de Saint Exupery.* New York: Pageant Press.



11.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1 :

a. memoir.

b. Louis Leveque de Vilmorin.

c. fifteen.

Ans to Q2 :

a. True.

b. False.

c. True.

Ans to Q3 : The story of *The Little Prince* carries home the thought that it is only a child who can say lofty things in a precise and simple way. The

innocence of the little prince teaches the absurdity of the adult world with all its vanity and meaningless competition. He sees no fun or meaning in those obsessions. Instead, being a child, he seeks pleasure in the simple things of life. Thus, the messages imparted by the little prince are rather philosophical in nature, though they appear to be simple.



11.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. How does the novella discuss serious existential questions through the innocent questions and conversations of the little prince and various characters?

Q2. Bring out the significance of the rose in the story.

Q3. How does the narrator help to unravel certain philosophical queries with the little prince?

Q4. Write a note on Antoine de Saint Exupery.

Q5. State briefly the context of the novella "The Little Prince".

Q6. What could be the possible sources that inspired the novella *The Little Prince*?

Q7. What fills the little prince with remorse after coming to earth?

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