UNIT 14: JOHN STEINBECK: *THE MOON IS DOWN* I

UNIT STRUCTURE

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14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to :

- explain various aspects of a novel with reference to the novel under discussion
- discuss about the famous American playwright, John Steinbeck
- describe the context of the novel and analyse the significance of its title

14.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall take up a novel by a famous American novelist John Steinbeck. The name of the novel is *The Moon is Down*. But before we take up the novel, let us discuss what a novel is.

You all know that a novel is a long story which is generally written in prose. Its subject matter is the portrayal of life in all its varieties. Walter Allen, in *The English Novel* makes an interesting point about the novel when he says:

"Even if we cannot define it, we know what to expect when we read a novel. 'We find here a close imitation of man and manners; we see the very web and texture of society as it really exists, and as we meet it when we come into the world'..."

Why is it that we cannot define a novel? With every major novel as it appears our interpretation of the novel as a literary form must to some extent alter. Most importantly, we know that a novelist is essentially a maker. He is making an imitation of life as he sees and feels it. His impressions of life are expressed in the characters he invents, the situation in which he places them, and the dialogues he invents for the purpose. In this context, the view of Lionel Trilling in his book *The Liberal Imagination* appears relevant. He says that "a novel teaches us as no other **genre** ever does the extent of human variety and the value of this variety."



Genre : literary form.

You may like to ask yourself: why do novelists write novels? Obviously, the novelist likes to create a world out of the experiences of life that he has gathered, showing his point of view of events, incidents, characters, situations in which the characters are placed, their behaviour and a host of other things. He selects his materials from the world around him and then writes in the form of a story. In this way, he creates what you and I would like to call a social novel.

Sometimes, of course, a novelist may like to draw his materials from history, even contemporary history. But we must not confuse this type of novel which we call a historical novel with history in the sense that we understand the term. A historical novelist may take resources from history, for example, the Napoleonic Wars and creates a novel like *War and Peace* (Tolstoy). Even for that matter, *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens can be a historical novel because it is a fictional venture to represent the history of the French Revolution.

When you read *The Moon is Down*, you will find that the novel is concerned with external events like soldiers invading a town, taking possession of it, controlling the industry of the town, holding trials and so on. There are echoes of history too without naming places and people. But we can guess that the Leader who controls the invading army could be Hitler and that the story

is written in the historical backdrop of the Second World War.

But not all novels deal with external events. Every feeling, every thought, every quality of the brain and spirit can also be the source of novels. We talk about 'Psychological Novels' and 'Stream of Consciousness Novels' where the novelist explores human thoughts and feelings and spirit. You may like to read George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and *Romola*. These are popular Psychological Novels. Likewise, a novel like Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is an example of a stream of consciousness novel.

Sometimes a novelist takes a character and attempts to write an imaginary 'autobiography' of the character. In other words, the character is made to tell his/her story of life in the background of some events and incidents. Such novels are known as Autobiographical Novels. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* are examples of such types of novels.

The novel is invariably influenced by the taste of the reading public and its variation of forms or types is conditioned by it. You can see in bookshops glossy paperback novels which too are novels conforming to certain forms. But not all novels can attain instant and/or long lasting popularity. There are many factors that qualify the novel for such fame but that is another story.

14.3 JOHN STEINBECK: LIFE AND WORKS

John Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902, in the town of Salinas, California. He had spent most of his first forty years in the Salinas Valley, where his mother taught in the public schools of the area and his father worked for many years as a Government official, notably a treasurer of Monteny County.



Ranch : large farm in America where cattle or other animals are bred.

Salinas was in those days a small rural township surrounded by the world's most fertile farmlands growing fruits and vegetables. There were many cattle **ranches** around the township. Young Steinbeck studied in the local Salinas High School but during school vacations he loved to work in the neighbouring farms and ranches and later with migrant workers. He became aware of the hard life of these workers and the ugly side of human nature. This rich experience of life coupled with the life close to nature provides the background of most of his novels written in his later years.

In addition to his rich experience of life and nature, his wide fund of resources for his novels developed through his wide reading, probably through the influence of his mother. His favourite authors were Walter Scott, Jack London, Robert Louis Stevenson, Dostoyevsky, Flaubert and Thomas Hardy. He had found reading Hardy's *The Return of the Native* a rewarding experience. He states that he remembered these books not at all as books but as things that have happened to him.

After completing his schooling in 1919, Steinbeck joined Stanford University in 1920 eventually leaving the university in 1925 without a degree because of the pressure of self-support and a growing interest in writing. He went to New York and held odd jobs there while pursuing his dreams of becoming a writer. He stayed in New York for two years during which period he seemed to have definitely decided on a career in writing. He made a few unsuccessful attempts to publish stories. When he failed to get his work published, he returned to California. He lived most of the years of the **Great Depression** in California. He found various means of earning a living – fruit picker, surveyor, caretaker of an estate, journalist, labourer – while he was writing novels.



Great Depression : the depression originated in the US with stock market crash of October 29, 1929 (known as Black Thursday).

Tortilla Flat (1935) brought Steinbeck moderate success as a novelist besides improving his economic condition. He built a summer ranch-house in Los Gatos. In 1940, he went on a voyage around the Gulf of California with his influential friend Ed Ricketts, a marine biologist. Ricketts is clearly the figure behind some of Steinbeck's major works. His characters like Dr Phillips in *The Snake*, Doc Burton in *In Dubious Battle*, Doc of *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday* have been modelled on Ed Ricketts.

In Dubious Battle (1936) is a vigorous work of social protest, interpreting some left-wing activity among the fruit pickers working in the agricultural farms. *Of Mice and Men* (1937) is also about the plight of the migrant workers in the farms and ranches. The novel was very popular and so was its dramatic version and film version.

The Grapes of Wrath (1939) is Steinbeck's best novel and one of the most sensationally impressive books in American literature. Described as a

novel of social protest, the novel exposes the desperate conditions under which migratory farmer families were forced to live during the greatest Economic Depression the United States had ever known.

Other works of Steinbeck include *The Long Valley* (1936), *Sea of Cortez* (1941), *Bombs Away* (1942), *The Moon is Down* (1942), *Cannery Row* (1945), *The Pearl* (1947), *The Wayward Bus* (1947), *East of Eden* (1952), *Sweet Thursday* (1954), *The Short Reign of Pippin IV* (1957), *The Winter of our Discontent* (1961) and *Travels with Charley* (1962).

In 1962, Steinbeck won the Nobel Prize for Literature for his "realistic and imaginative writing combining as it does sympathetic human and keen social perception". His critics observe that his best works appeared in the 1930s when he wrote some powerfully moving studies of human characters and protests against social injustice as he had seen in the California of his time. He died on December 20, 1964 in New York at the age of 66.

14.4 INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

You will have noticed that the novel attempts to tell us a story. We may like to call this aspect of the novel its plot. This is the story element in the novel. It deals with certain events and situations and episodes. Something happens, a comedy or tragedy takes place. All these incidents and situations make the plot of a novel.

The novel that you are going to read about in this unit is a novel written by the American author, Steinbeck, in 1942. The plot is developed around the occupation of a small sea-side town in Northern Europe by the army of an unnamed nation at war with England and Russia. The name of the town is not given nor do we know the name of the nation that had invaded this peaceful little town. But we can see that the occupation is not unlike the occupation of Norway by the Germans during World War II. This plot forms the chief part of the novel.

It is noticeable that the events and incidents in a novel take place in the lives of certain men and women, who are essential to form the plot of the novel. These men and women form the characters of the novel. The main business of

the novelist is to create characters. Steinbeck is credited with creating some very moving characters in his novels. Some of his short stories are immensely readable because of their depth of characterization. Each of his characters has been developed very powerfully. For example, in this novel we meet a wonderful character called Orden who is the Mayor of the invaded town. We are touched by his intense patriotic feelings and his love and sympathy for each and every individual of the town. Thus, after the plot, the character forms the second but perhaps the most important element of the novel, and along with the plot, it conducts and controls the course of the novel. We see in this novel how the characters build up a silent resistance which forms a major event of the plot.

The development of the plot or the portrayal of the characters must be made in a novel in the framework of a narrative and this constitutes the third element of the novel. The narrative and the dialogue serve both to advance the plot and to develop the characters of the novel. The dialogues help the reader in making an assessment of different characters. In this novel the dialogues of Orden helps us to understand his utter bitterness towards the invaders of his beloved town. We understand how the people of the town had built up a climate of passive resistance that had made Colonel Lanser to realize the hopelessness of the situation. Lanser finds it impossible to break a man's spirit permanently.

It is notable that the plot of the novel takes place at a certain time. A novel can hardly grow without a time of action. In the novel *The Moon is Down*, the time of action is the aggression of the Nazis in western Europe in 1940. While working in Mexico around this time, Steinbeck was greatly agitated by the news of German military successes. In 1943 Steinbeck served as World War II war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune* and worked with the Office of Strategic service. His work for the Air Force, the Writers' War Board and the Office of War Information provided him an exposure to the nationalist upsurge in the occupied European countries and this experience forms the genesis of *The Moon is Down*. Steinbeck's experiences of the war thus help us to make an assessment of the time of the novel.

In addition to the *time of action*, there is the *place of action* to be considered which forms the background of the novel. This aspect makes the setting realistic. Even an imagined place like R. K. Narayan's Malgudi or Hardy's Wessex becomes realistic from the way the place is described. In *The Moon is Down*, you can see how the houses with the snow on the roofs, the snow covered roads of the occupied town of Mayor Orden, and the coal mine among others appear very realistic. Steinbeck has placed his story in an unnamed country, cold and stern like Norway, cunning and **implacable** like Denmark, reasonable like France. Steinbeck states that he made the names of people in the book as international as he could. He did not even call the invaders Germans but simply invaders. The setting helps in a big way towards appreciating the novel.



Implacable : unyielding, unbending, uncompromising.

Lastly, the novel must present the author's criticism of life. It is in a way a point of view of the writer to an event or a situation that is highlighted in the novel. Through the novel *The Moon is Down*, Steinbeck seems to express his conviction that free people are inherently stronger than any aggressing military power. Colonel Lanser's war machines could not crush the spirit of the free people of the town. Steinbeck's attitude to the German war machine is voiced through the following words of Mayor Orden :

> *"Free men cannot start a war, but once it is started, they can fight on in defeat Herd men, followers of a leader, cannot do that, and so it is always the herd men who win battles and the free men who win wars."*



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions briefly:

Q1. a) What is the plot of *The Moon is Down*?

b) Where does the incident of the story of *The Moon is Down* take place?

14.5 THE TITLE OF THE NOVEL

The title of the novel is drawn from Act II Scene 1 of Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. The setting of the scene in Shakespeare's play is the courtyard in Macbeth's castle at Inverness. Banquo, a loyal courtier of King Duncan enters with his son Fleance. If you haven't read either the play or the prose rendering included as a lesson in many + 2 level textbooks, you may like to know that Macbeth was also a noble courtier of King Duncan besides being a kinsman. But on that night he and his wife Lady Macbeth had conspired to murder King Duncan who was a guest in his castle that night along with his courtiers including Banquo. It is night time and the courtyard of the castle is in darkness and Baquo's son is seen carrying a torch. There follows a conversation between the father and son at the courtyard. Banquo asks his son, "How goes the night, boy?" He wants know what time of night it is. Fleance looks at the sky and replies, "The moon is down; I have not heard the clock." To this Banquo replies, "And she goes down at twelve."

The title of the novel is taken from the words of Fleance uttered in course of his conversation with his father. You may like to know how these words are appropriate for the title of the novel. In order to understand the appropriateness of the title, you have to take a close look at the plot of the novel. We have got the hint in 14.4 in our discussion on the plot of the novel that the plot is developed around the military invasion of the small sea-side town of which Orden was mayor. As you read the summary of the novel in the next unit of this block, you will discover for yourself that most of the events in the novel take place in darkness. In fact, darkness seems to attain a symbolic significance in the novel and thereby giving us the impression of a night when the moon is down or in other word, a night of darkness. We shall look at this image of darkness a little closely in order to see the appropriateness of the title of the novel.

In the opening chapter of the novel Steinbeck depicts a bright Sunday morning with many things happening in the sea-side town simultaneously. One was that two prominent persons of the town – the postman and the policeman

– had gone fishing in the boat lent to them by Mr. Correll, a popular storekeeper of the town. They were several miles away at sea and because of the brightness and clear visibility, they could see a convoy of "small dark transports loaded with soldiers go quietly past them." Note the use of the word "dark" in the extract quoted. The word apparently indicates that the soldiers were bringing darkness to the town.

The contrast between light and darkness becomes apparent in the description of Mayor Orden's drawing room. In the first chapter, Steinbeck refers to the brightness of the "sweet and comfortable room" with its gilded chairs and white woodwork. However, when Captain Bentick rapped on the door of Mayor Orden's drawing room, "it seemed that some warm light went out of the room and a little greyness took its place."

In the third chapter, there is another description of the drawing room of Mayor Orden's palace. Meanwhile, a portion of the Mayor's palace was occupied by Colonel Lanser and his staff. This time, the brightness of the room is gone. It is in this room that the trial of Alex Morden would take place. The time of the trial was eleven o'clock (Chapter IV). But over the town, there hung a blackness that was deeper than the clouds. Mayor Orden's drawing room was in darkness. The lights were on when the court was in session. The situation correlates with the mood of the town. While describing the town, Steinbeck's description is evocative of a night when the moon is down.

In the last part of the novel, most of the incidents take place in darkness. Molly Morden's house is described with the image of darkness. The houses of the town appeared like dark lumps against the snow. Molly Morden's house is in shadows. "No light came from its shuttered windows." The conversation between Molly and Annie stresses upon the dark forces of nature. Annie tells Molly that the soldiers brought winter early that year. (Chapter VI).

The contrast between light and darkness becomes very vivid when Tonder visits Molly Morden's house a second time that night. She had blown out the light from the lamp. The room was in darkness except for a spot of red that came from the coal stove. That was the time when Tonder was killed. Thus, darkness becomes fairly symbolic in the action of the novel, thereby lending

force to the appropriateness of the title. We recall the darkness of Macbeth's castle when the moon was down on that night when king Duncan was murdered. Steinbeck's allusion suggests that the Nazis had brought a similar spiritual darkness to Europe.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q2. Why do you think Steinbeck used the words "the moon is down" from *Macbeth* for the title of his novel? Choose the correct answer from the three choices below:

a. Steinbeck was fond of Shakespeare's play.

b. Steinbeck wanted to create a situation of darkness that de stroyed the spirit of joy of Mayor Orden's town.

c. There is a similarity between the murder of King Duncan and that of Mayor Orden.

Q3. Mention one incident in the novel where a murder takes place in utter darkness. (Choose one out of three below)

a. The murder of Captain Bentick.

b. The murder of Alex Morden

c. The murder of Tonder.

Q4. Who was Fleance?

14.6 THE CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL

In this section, we shall look at the context or the situation in which *The Moon is Down* was written. It may interest you to know that this novel was written basically to meet the intellectual and emotional needs of the people of Europe during the Nazi regime. Prior to the Nazi domination democratic governments survived the First World War (1914-1918) in many European countries like Belgium, Holland, the Scandinavian countries – Norway, Sweden

and Denmark –and the new state of Czechoslovakia became the stronghold of democracy in Central Europe.

But with the rise of Adolf Hitler, democracy was crushed by the Nazi forces and from the period 1939 to 1945 the German dominions expanded their frontiers and many democratic states were forced to surrender to the German forces. Steinbeck was at the peak of his literary career in 1940 when the Nazis launched their aggression in Western Europe. His earlier novel *The Grapes of Wrath* had established his **empathy** with the downtrodden, his compassionate understanding of the migrant workers in the farmlands and ranches in California (USA). But the rise of Hitler had given him a conviction that there is the need for a reaffirmation of the cherished tradition of freedom which had suddenly been taken away from the free people.



Empathy : ability to understand and share the grief of another person.

It is in this context that this novel has to be appreciated. The incident that happened in Mayor Orden's town is the general pattern of Nazi occupation – it is swift and sudden. It is very likely that Steinbeck did not name the town because it could be any European town that came under German attack. It is this thematic aspect of the novel which has ensured its lasting popularity. By reiterating the basic values as freedom and democracy and the collective power of free individuals with shared commitments, *The Moon is Down* rises above the plane of a common war novel. This is the greatest achievement of the novel.



14.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have read about the form of the novel. The unit deals with John Steinbeck's *The Moon is Down* which has echoes of history in its subject matter. You are aware of John Steinbeck's contribution in the field of literature. Moreover, the context of the novel is described in the unit so as to give you a background in which the novel was set. Steinbeck seems to be inspired by Shakespeare's *Macbeth* because the novelist has borrowed the title from Act II Scene I of Shakespeare's play.



14.8 FURTHER READING

1. Allen, Walter. (1958). *The English Novel : A Short Critical History.* London : Penguin Books.
2. Forster, E. M. (1927) (2005 rpt.). : *Aspects of the Novel*. Penguin Books.
3. Hudson W. H. (1913). *An Introduction to the Study of Literature.* London : George G. Harrap & Company.
4. Neilson, J.B. : "Socrates, The Man who asked Questions" .
5. Shakespeare, William. (1985). *Macbeth*. Penguin Books.
6. Steinbeck, John. (2000). *The Moon is Down.* Penguin Books.



14.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1 :

a) The plot of the novel is the invasion of a small sea-side town in Northern Europe by the army of an unnamed nation and the resistance of the people against the invaders.

b) The incident of the story takes place in the town of Mayor Orden.

Ans to Q2: b.

Ans to Q3: c.

Ans to Q4: Fleance was the son of Banquo in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*.



14.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Write briefly on the main aspects or features of a novel.

Q2. What kind of novel do you think *The Moon is Down* is?

Q3. Write a note on the significance of the title of the novel *The Moon is Down*.

Q4. From your reading of the unit what connection do you find between Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *The Moon is Down*, particularly with reference to darkness?

Q5. Discuss the situation in which *The Moon is Down* was written.

Q6. Write a note on the life and works of John Steinbeck.

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