PGEG S3 03

Modern Poetry

SEMESTER III

ENGLISH

BLOCK 3

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SEMESTER 3
MA IN ENGLISH
COURSE 3: MODERN POETRY
BLOCK 3: AFTER WORLD WAR II

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BLOCK 3: INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

Unit 15: This unit deals with Seamus Heaney's poem "After a Killing". The intensity of the Irish experience is portrayed in most of the works of Heaney, because since an early age, Heaney felt the tension between the protestant groups and himself because of their divergent views on politics and religion, and their different languages and literary traditions. The present poem was occasioned by the killing of the British Ambassador Christopher Ewart-Biggs in July 1976 by the Provisional Irish Republican Army.

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

UNIT 11: W. H. AUDEN: "IN MEMORY OF W. B. YEATS"

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.1 Learning Objectives

11.2 Introduction

11.3 W.H. Auden: The Poet

11.4 Reading the Poem prescribed

11.5 Major Themes

11.6 Auden's Poetic Style

11.7 Reception of Auden

11.8 Let us Sum up

11.9 Further Reading

11.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

11.11 Possible Questions

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- identify W. H. Auden as one of the important modern poets
- get an idea about the vast dimension of Auden's works and the basic features of his poetry
- interpret the poem prescribed in terms of its different aspects
- discuss the themes, philosophy and concerns of Auden as a poet in the poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"
- appreciate the poem in its totality

11.2 INTRODUCTION

Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973) is one of the most influential poets of the 20th Century. It is difficult to summarise his achievements with around four hundred poems written in a variety of styles. Besides, he is also famous for drama, essays, travel writing, and critical works. From his college days, he was recognised as a leading poet of his generation; he was the joint

editor of *Oxford Poetry* with Cecil Day Lewis (1925-1928). In the thirties, he developed leftist sympathies, and in the poetry published in that period, he wrote with a definite spirit of social commitment, along with other poets like Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis, and Louis MacNeice. He was a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War and wrote a long poem called *Spain* (1937) in support of the Republican cause. His poetry was especially marked by his deep interests in psychoanalysis. His fame often rests on his ability to exercise a vibrantly poetic idiom based on contemporary speech and observation. In his later life, Auden developed a religious commitment. This unit deals with his poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats". This elegy was written in 1939 soon after Yeats died on January 28, 1939. For Auden, the moment was historical because it marked the end of the nineteen-thirties, the decade of unrest and lost hopes. World War II began nine months later. Auden here not only pays tribute to a great poet but appeals, in a moving dirge as expressed in the third section of the poem, to poets in a time of defeat and distress. He asserts the value of poetry as a means of survival against the forces of humanity.

11.3 W.H. AUDEN: THE POET

Wystan Hugh Auden was born in York, England, in 1907, and was brought up in the industrial city of Birmingham by devout and well-educated Anglo-Catholic parents of clerical descent. His father was School Medical Officer and Professor of Public Health in Birmingham. The family library, which was filled with books on archaeology, psychology, the classics, and Norse saga, acquainted young Auden with scientific subjects and literature. His mother, with whom Auden maintained a powerful attachment, held a degree in French and worked as a nurse. Auden attended preparatory school at Saint Edmund's between 1915 and 1920, where he befriended Christopher Isherwood. He then went to Gresham's School, Holt, where he wrote his first poems. His first published poem appeared in *Public School Verse* in 1924.

In 1925, Auden began to study at Christ Church College, Oxford, on a scholarship in natural science, though he later switched to English. As a

young man, he was influenced by the poetry of Thomas Hardy and Robert Frost, as well as William Blake, Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Old English verse. At Oxford, he formed lifelong friendship with two fellow writers—Stephen Spender and Christopher Isherwood. In 1928, his collection *Poems* was privately printed, but it wasn't until 1930, when another collection titled *Poems* (though its contents were different) was published, that Auden established himself as the leading voice of a new generation.

After graduating from Oxford, he went for a year (1928-29) to Berlin, just before Hitler seized power. He was thrilled by the German culture, especially the plays of Bertolt Brecht, some of whose techniques he used in his verse plays. In 1930, Auden returned to Britain and published his first volume of poems. He served as a school-teacher at Larchfield Academy, Helensburgh (Scotland) and the Downs school, Colwall (near Malvern). He then worked for six months with the G.P.O. film unit, writing his poems "Night Mail" as a commentary for a film. He and Louise MacNeice visited Iceland in 1936, and on returning, they together published *Letters from Iceland,* which includes his entertaining "Letters from Byron".

In 1937, he went to Spain during the Civil War. Then in 1938, he and Isherwood decided to journey to China. For their visits to the country, they had to cross United States twice and that attracted them so much that in 1939, they immigrated to the States. However, gradually Auden ceased to be a Marxist and turned to Christianity—a change resulting in a series of reflective and religious poems. In explanation of this decision, Auden said, "The attractiveness of America to a writer is its openness and lack of tradition. You are forced to live. There is no past."



LET US KNOW

Auden was the most active member of the group of young English poets who, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, saw themselves bringing new techniques and attitudes to English poetry. Stephen Spender and Cecil Day Lewis were the most prominent members of the new school, which soon afterward broke apart. Like

many of his generation, Auden learned from the poetic wit and irony of T. S. Eliot, and the metrical and verbal techniques of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Wilfred Owen.

In the 1930s, he was both praised and dismissed as a progressive and accessible voice, in contrast to the politically nostalgic and poetically obscure voice of T. S. Eliot. His departure for America in 1939 was hotly debated in Britain (once even in Parliament), with some critics treating it as a betrayal, and the role of influential young poet passed to Dylan Thomas. While in America, the detached, ironic tone of Auden's regular stanzas set the style for a whole generation of poets. His manner was so pervasive in American poetry that the ecstatic style of the Beat Generation was partly a reaction against his influence. In the 1950s and 1960s, some writers (notably Philip Larkin and Randall Jarrell) lamented that Auden's work had declined from its earlier promise.

Ever since, he has been admired for his unsurpassed technical virtuosity and an ability to write poems in nearly every imaginable verse form. Besides, the incorporation of popular culture, current events, and vernacular speech in his works; and the vast range of his intellect, drawn from an extraordinary variety of literatures, art forms, social and political theories, and scientific and technical information, make Auden one of the greatest modern poets. He had a remarkable wit, and often mimicked the writing styles of other poets such as Dickinson, W. B. Yeats, and Henry James. His poetry frequently recounts, literally or metaphorically, a journey or quest, and his travels provided rich material for his verse. A prolific writer, Auden was also a noted playwright, editor, and essayist. Generally considered one of the greatest English poets of the 20th century, his work had a major influence on succeeding generations of poets on both sides of the Atlantic. W. H. Auden was a Chancellor of The Academy of American Poets from 1954 to 1973, and divided most of the second half of his life between residences in New York City and Austria.

He died in Vienna in 1973.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Why is W. H. Auden often considered a great modern poet?

Q 2: Name the famous poets who influenced Auden during his Oxford days.

Q 3: What is the appeal that Auden makes in his poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"?

His Works: [Adapted from http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/w-h-auden]

His early verse in *Poems* (1930) is characterised by terse exposition, alluring abstraction, and inventive use of language, bearing the influence of T. S. Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Laura Riding, Wilfred Owen and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Drawing on eclectic sources for the verse drama *Paid on Both Sides*, Auden merges the archaic style and blood-feud theme of Anglo-Saxon poetry with structural elements of Greek tragedy and the fragmentary modernist presentation of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Auden built upon these early experiments in the prose and verse of *The Orators*, drawing on Freudian Psychoanalysis, Marxist doctrine, and the avant-garde techniques of Eliot, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein to present a surreal vision of the revolutionary hero and a warning against the danger of fascism. *The Orators* laments and satirises the stagnation of the English society and the dubious promise of untamed modernism. Similar political and psychological concerns are echoed in Auden's collaborative verse dramas with Isherwood from this period include *The Dog Beneath the Skin, The Ascent of F6,* and *On the Frontier.*

From the second half of the 1930s, Auden's poems mark his many travels during this period of political turmoil. "Spain"—one of his most famous and widely anthologised pieces, is based on his experiences in that country during the Civil War (1936-1939). *Look, Stranger!* (1936), reprinted as *On This Island* (1937), marks Auden's entry into the leftist politics and his shift toward an increasingly formal aesthetic. His poem "Spain" composed immediately after witnessing the brutal war in that country reflects Auden's

disillusionment with political causes and the indiscriminate violence of war. "In Time of War" a sequence of sonnets, which appeared in *Journey to a War*, reveals the maturation of Auden's civic voice and liberal humanist creed.

Auden left England in 1939 and became a citizen of the United States. *Another Time,* contains some of his best-known poems, among them "September 1, 1939" and "Musee des Beaux Arts," which were inspired by a Breughel painting. The volume also contains elegies to poets A. E. Housman, Matthew Arnold, and William Butler Yeats, whose careers and aesthetic concerns had influenced the development of Auden's artistic credo. The full impact of Auden's self-imposed exile and acute spiritual crisis, which led to his reversion to Christianity, is evident in *The Double Man*. Influenced by the existentialist thinkers like Soren Kierkegaard and American theologian Rheinhold Neibuhr, Auden moved still further toward a cerebral style that sought universal harmony in a system of religious ideals. His *For the Time Being* contains poems like "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio," which is an overt Christian allegory based on the Nativity in which he employs the terminology of science and psychology to rationalise religious faith, and "The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*," an ambitious allegorical work that examines the complex relationship between life and art and the creative potential of literary interpretation.

His next major work, *The Age of Anxiety*, subtitled "a baroque eclogue," relates the inner consciousness of four disparate characters as they converse among themselves in a New York City bar during World War II. Returning to the alliterative Anglo-Saxon versification of his early poetry, Auden explores the spiritual dimensions of their ordinary lives and individual failings within a religious context. The height of Auden's mature, intellectual style is evident in *Nones*, which contains "In Praise of Limestone," "The Shield of Achilles" (1955), and "Homage to Clio" (1960), which includes "The Cave of Making" and "Tonight at Seven-Thirty." These poems display Auden's unsurpassed technical control and deep insights into the nature of human existence and experience, particularly as informed by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, medieval Christianity, history, and nature. Auden's highly perceptive critical essays, reviews, and lectures in *The Enchafèd Flood* (1950). *The Dyer's Hand* (1962) and *Forewords and Afterwords* (1973)

document his intellectual concerns and artistic principles during his American period.

In his later years, Auden wrote three major volumes: *City Without Walls and Many Other Poems, Epistle to a Godson and Other Poems,* and the posthumously published *Thank You, Fog: Last Poems.* While all these three works are noted for their lexical range and humanitarian content, Auden's later poems often received mixed and sometimes unenthusiastic reviews. Commenting on *Thank You, Fog,* Howard Moss in *New York Times Book Review* argued that the collection is "half the ghost of what it might have been. Writers, being human, are not in a position to choose their monuments. This is the summing up of a man who set his mark on an age."

Auden's relevance to literature continues with the publication of *Lectures on Shakespeare,* a collection dating from 1946, when Auden taught a course on Shakespeare at the New School for Social Research in New York City. The lectures were reconstructed from the scrupulous notes taken by Auden's students, which were then edited by Arthur Kirsch. Auden discusses Shakespeare's plays with an eye toward their historical and cultural relevance, comparing Richard III to Hitler, for example.



LET US KNOW

While at Oxford, Auden became familiar with modernist poetry, particularly that of T. S. Eliot. It was also at Oxford that Auden became the pivotal member of a group of writers called the "Oxford Group" or the "Auden Generation," which included Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, and Louis MacNeice. The group adhered to various Marxist and anti-fascist doctrines and addressed social, political, and economic concerns in their writings. Auden's first book of poetry *Poems,* was privately printed by Stephen Spender in 1928. Critics have noted that Auden's early verse suggests the influences of Thomas Hardy, Laura Riding, Wilfred Owen, and Edward Thomas. Stylistically, the poems are fragmentary and terse, relying on concrete images and colloquial language to convey Auden's political and psychological concerns.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Comment briefly on Auden's poetry?

Q 5: What is the significance of the poem 'Spain'?

Q 6: Mention some of the important works Auden wrote during his stay in the States.

11.4 READING THE POEM PRESCRIBED

I

He disappeared in the dead of winter:
The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,
The snow disfigured the public statues;
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.
What instruments we have agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.
Far from his illness
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,
The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;
By mourning tongues
The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,
An afternoon of nurses and rumours;
The provinces of his body revolted,
The squares of his mind were empty,
Silence invaded the suburbs,
The current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers.
Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,
To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.
The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living.

But in the importance and noise of to-morrow
When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the Bourse,
And the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly accustomed,
And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom,
A few thousand will think of this day
As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.
What instruments we have agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

II

You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:
The parish of rich women, physical decay,
Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

III

Earth, receive an honoured guest:
William Yeats is laid to rest.
Let the Irish vessel lie
Emptied of its poetry.
[Auden later deleted the next three stanzas.]

Time that is intolerant
Of the brave and the innocent,
And indifferent in a week
To a beautiful physique,

Worships language and forgives
Everyone by whom it lives;

Pardons cowardice, conceit,
Lays its honours at their feet.

Time that with this strange excuse
Pardoned Kipling and his views,
And will pardon Paul Claudel,
Pardons him for writing well.

In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of Europe bark,
And the living nations wait,
Each sequestered in its hate;
Intellectual disgrace
Stares from every human face,
And the seas of pity lie
Locked and frozen in each eye.

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice.

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress.

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountains start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

In this poem, Auden discusses Yeats as the last poet able to write about public events. When Auden wrote the poem in February 1939, Europe was on the verge of World War II. War did not actually break out until Germany

invaded Poland in September, but the sense of impending catastrophe is present throughout the poem. The failure of Britain and France to resist Hitler's claims on Czechoslovakia in 1938 seemed to define the mood of Europe as Auden wrote. In spite of the sense of expectant foreboding, all the nations seemed paralyzed, incapable of action. The poet here plans to offer us three variations on a traditional elegy, all of which remember the life and work of the poet William Butler Yeats. Then, the tone of the poem shifts. Suddenly the poet is addressing Yeats himself and admiring Yeats' poetry. Finally, the poem lapses into a-traditional elegiac form.

Lines 2-6

The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,
And snow disfigured the public statues;
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.
hat instruments we have agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Winter is the perfect time to talk about death. He seems to be expressing doubts about the adequacy of human tools to measure or reflect upon the actual death of a man. And, if recording the *death* of the body is hard, imagine how much more difficult it would be to commemorate the *life* of his mind and soul in a poem.

Lines 7-11

Far from his illness
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,
The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;
By mourning tongues
The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

A man is dead, but life goes on. Nature does all the things it is supposed to do, even when life-changing events are taking place in the human world. Auden deliberately chooses to refer to Yeats as "the poet" making him an anonymous figure rather than a specific man. Even the mourners are abstracted into "mourning tongues," not specific people. Another way to look at line 11 of the poem is that the death of the poet is being kept *out of* the poems.

Lines 12-17

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,
An afternoon of nurses and rumours;
The provinces of his body revolted,
The squares of his mind were empty,
Silence invaded the suburbs,
The current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers.

Now we are back in the world of hospitals and nurses and all that other stuff that we don't tend to think about when mourning the passing of a national figure. Auden is emphasizing Yeats' humanness here: his death is just as depressing and solitary as any other death. Moreover, it's something that we can't share. As if Auden is determined to depict Yeats' death with a restraint that he himself doesn't feel. Once again, Auden turns to geographic and architectural language to describe human conditions. Referring to a person's body as his "country" or "kingdom" is a fairly traditional poetic trick, but Auden takes it a step further here. Yeats' body is described as a city at war with itself–a war it eventually loses. In line 17, the poet wants us to experience the awful strangeness and emptiness of Yeats' death as a very real and upsetting kind of loss.

Lines 18-21

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,
To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.

There is a strange tension between the assertion of Yeats' death and the imagery at work here, which seems to suggest that the poet is still alive in some ways. It is precisely that tension that Auden wants to highlight–to point out all the ways the idea that "life goes on" seems unnatural.

Lines 22-23

The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living.

Even Yeats' poems change. They can no longer emerge from the poet's own mouth. The poet seems to withdraw even further from Yeats' death in these lines, becoming almost philosophical as he describes "a dead man." It is no longer Yeats; it is not even a poet – it is just a dead man.

Lines 24-27

But in the importance and noise of to-morrow
When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the Bourse,
And the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly accustomed,
And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom,

So, the human world is going on as usual. The stockbrokers are back to their stock-broking (the Bourse is Paris's version of Wall Street), and the bums on the street are back to their bumming. The poet is not exactly thrilled about the world as it currently is. People locked in the cells of themselves. Even Yeats was not immune from this sort of isolation. His death was described as the shutting down of a self-enclosed city. Auden seems to be struggling with the difficulty of conveying how Yeats is both a man (like any other) and an absolutely unique and irreplaceable poet. However, Auden allows us to see just how difficult it is to navigate between Yeats the man and Yeats the poet.

Lines 28-29

A few thousand will think of this day
As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.

Therefore, the news of Yeats' death does not really outlive the evening news. It is a ripple on the water, something that makes us frown slightly before turning. "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," tends to claim that the world will change forever after someone dies and millions of people from hundreds of countries will spend thousands of years wailing and sobbing. But, Auden's is the more realistic of the two descriptions.

Lines 30-31

What instruments we have agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

The last two lines of the first stanza become a refrain now–they're repeated as the final two lines of the first section. These lines seem to suggest that there's a certain limitation to what humans are able to express in times like this when, the day is "dark" and "cold." However, it is also much more than that. Repeating the lines at the end of this section only underscores just how few tools we have to tackle a topic as strange and unwieldy as death.

Lines 32-34

> *You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:*
> *The parish of rich women, physical decay,*
> *Yourself. […]*

Then, all of a sudden, the poet directs his words towards a "you" who seems to be Yeats. The tone of the poem doesn't get any more reverent, and almost as if the poet were talking to a good friend. Instead of just showing us the honourable and good stuff, he makes sure we understand that Yeats' "gift" emerges in spite of all these complications. The Parish of rich women refers to Maud Gonne and Lady Gregory, both of them influenced Yeats considerably.

Lines 34-36

> *[…] Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.*
> *Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,*
> *For poetry makes nothing happen: […]*

Yeats was deeply involved in (and occasionally critical of) the Irish Independence movement of his time. Some of his most remembered poems (for example, "Easter 1916") emerge from his engagement with independence struggles. Yeats often got frustrated with Irish nationalists – especially the generation emerging right around the time of World War I. He cared passionately about Ireland, but his political positions were often complicated. The speaker says that Ireland has not changed one bit because of Yeats' poetry. However, that is only because poetry isn't *meant* to be a political tool. Yeats' poetry was not, at least. That is what Auden means when he asserts that poetry makes "nothing" happen. The poet isn't saying that poetry is worthless. He *is*, however, asserting that the "work" poetry

can do is very different from other sorts of work. It "makes" nothing; it "does" nothing. However, it also is able to make "nothing" happen in a way that, say, politics is not able to do. Auden finds a definite value in the fact that poetry cannot be or do specific things in the way that a political speech or a conversation can.

Lines 36 – 41

> *[…] it survives*
> *In the valley of its making where executives*
> *Would never want to tamper, flows on south*
> *From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,*
> *Raw towns that we believe and die in.*
> *[…] it survives,*
> *A way of happening, a mouth.*

So what is poetry, exactly? Well, according to Auden, it is something that flows...sort of like the currents of Yeats' feelings flowed earlier in the poem. If life is stagnant, caged, and isolating, then poetry is what flows between the cracks of our isolated cells. It remains untouched by all of the busy activities of the rest of the world, which, after the descriptions we've had earlier, is probably a good thing. Poetry isn't a *thing*. It's a mode of doing something, "a way of happening."

Lines 42-43

> *Earth, receive an honoured guest:*
> *William Yeats is laid to rest.*

Auden here is delving deep into tradition of the elegy. We cannot help but notice that this is the first time Yeats is referred to by name in the poem, other than the title. Explaining just who it is that you're mourning is usually one of the first things that an elegy sets out to do– something this final, formal section makes very clear.

Lines 44-45

> *Let the Irish vessel lie*
> *Emptied of its poetry.*

Each previous section has some reference to the poet's body ending and his work continuing on. But now, Yeats is referred to as an "Irish vessel," a body meant to carry *only* poetry (and not, say, the problems the speaker brought up at the beginning of Section II). It is almost as if the poem itself goes through a purifying process: as Auden recycles certain ideas about Yeats' death, he figures out new ways to approach a subject that is admittedly pretty difficult. We also can notice now that even the formal reference to William Yeats seems strangely impersonal – as it refers to the Irish vessel.

Lines 46-49

In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of Europe bark,
And the living nations wait,
Each sequestered in its hate;

Auden may be drawing on age-old traditions in the first stanza of this section, but he's not about to let his readers forget some of the specifics of Yeats death, particularly the time of his death. Yeats died in 1939, when the world was gearing up for World War II. Yeats and Auden shared the sentiments of many of their fellow artists and intellectuals, who were dismayed at the thought of another world war. They had lived through the horror of World War I, and they were not excited to plunge right back in to all that bloodshed and death. We can notice here how the poet paints the impending war as a sort of nightmarish unreality. That is a common tone in works written during this time.

Lines 50-53

Intellectual disgrace
Stares from every human face,
And the seas of pity lie
Locked and frozen in each eye.

As Auden states, sometimes the best way to pay homage to someone is to spend some time thinking about the world in which they lived. Yeats was deeply connected to his nation and to political and social movements. If we

read Yeats' poetry, we'll see how deeply he worries about human connections. By Intellectual disgrace, it was meant that the poet is disillusioned by the inability of intellectuals to stop war.

Lines 54-57

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

The world is not a happy place and the poet seems to value Yeats' ability to accept that. He admires how Yeats combines realism (a recognition of "night") with rejoicing. The poet switches to the present tense in this stanza. He is no longer addressing us or an outside audience; he's talking to the "poet," someone who continues to exist *in the present*, even after his death.

Lines 58-63

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;
In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,

Ah, now we're back to the idea of poetry itself. Poetry, which was earlier described as a thing that can creep through the stiff and frozen world, is now channelled into a single image: that of a healing fountain. Auden holds out hope for the possibility of life and growth and, also, the future. All this wishing and hoping has led to language that tends to be a whole lot more metaphorical than Healing fountains and desert-like hearts? Not exactly the stuff of hospitals, nurses, and the minute details of death. It's an invocation of Yeats' poetic powers. The verb "let" is an imperative, or a command. The speaker is hoping that things will happen – and that takes some doing.

Lines 64-65

In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

The last lines of the poem combine a downright depressing analysis of the human condition (life is a prison) with hope for the future (humans can learn how to "praise") – a hope that is built upon the possibilities that Yeats' poetry allows in the world. Sure, it's a pretty radical claim. But then again, Yeats was a radically amazing poet. Auden's final approach to this elegy is peculiar. He doesn't want Yeats to live forever. He doesn't even want his poems to be immortalised or written in gold on the top of a building. He wants the people of his time to read and think and maybe even be better people as a result of their interaction with Yeats' poems.

11.5 MAJOR THEMES

The following may be read as some of the major themes of the poem.

Idea of the Poet and Poetry:

Auden claims "poetry makes nothing happen"; instead, it is merely a "way of happening, a mouth". This subtle distinction illumines the delicate opposition between Yeats and Auden. Yeats considered poetry to be a tool, whereas Auden proclaims it is nothing in itself, but only in how its readers respond to it. Auden clarifies that poetry is not a force in itself, but is only as effective as a parable. The parable is what "survived" all of Yeats' physicality and delusion. The problem that Yeats sought to fix, the "madness" of Ireland, still exists. Despite his misdirected effort, Yeats' poetry endures, indebted to his readers' "foreign code of conscience" that keeps the poetry alive and pertinent. Likewise, in "The Poet in the City," Auden claims that the political poet can achieve nothing more than to enlighten the "management" of the plight of the "managed".

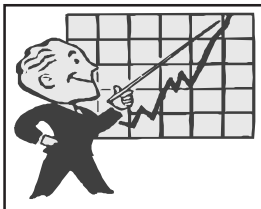
The Theme of Isolation:

In one sense, the fondness for the war arose for the sense of menace, which all poets of the thirties had received, from the sense of being in an enemy country. These poets felt that they did not properly belong, that they could not assume their own place in society. The impression of isolation from the affairs of society was acute and so was the desire for reintegration. They wanted to challenge many of the society's guiding assumptions. They

were torn apart by two poles of thinking: their realisation of the vast indifference of society to the creative artist, and their great desire to change the society. Auden was quite vocal to address such a dilemma and the poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" is an example of this realisation of his age.

The theme of Death

It is an elegy written on the death of W. B. Yeats, which is represented in two ways: a literal description of the day Yeats had actually passed away and a sense of the impending doom strung throughout the elegy. It is drawn from imageries and symbolism such as using a city at war as a metaphor for Yeats' dysfunctional body: "provinces of his body revolted, the squares of his mind were empty". This can also evoke a parallel image of the disruption of Europe present at that time, which resonates with the fear of people in that era. Another example of a negative reflection of Europe plunging into World War II is found in lines 46 to 49. However, Auden adds another dimension to the poem by incorporating political references significant during the age of oppression and turmoil of the impending war and the extent of effectiveness of poetry at any point in time.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: How does Auden view poetry?

Q 8: What are the two ideas of death explained in the poem?

11.6 AUDEN'S POETIC STYLE

Auden possessed a formidable technique and an acute ear. In her book, *Auden,* Barbara Everett commented on the poet's facility:

"In his verse, Auden can argue, reflect, joke, gossip, sing, analyze, lecture, hector, and simply talk; he can sound, at will, like a psychologist on a political platform, like a theologian at a party, or like a geologist in love; he can give dignity and authority to nonsensical theories, and make newspaper headlines sound both true and melodious."

Jeremy Robson noted in *Encounter:*

"The influence of music on Auden's verse . . . has always been salient: even his worst lines often 'sound' impressive." Everett found that a musical sensibility marked Auden's work from the very beginning, and she felt that when "he turned more and more, in the latter part of his career, to the kind of literary work that demands free exercise of verbal and rhythmic talent—for instance, to the writing of libretti—[he developed] that side of his artistic nature which was from the beginning the strongest."

Auden's linguistic innovations, renowned enough to the adjective "Audenesque," were described by Karl Shapiro in *In Defense of Ignorance* as "the modernization of diction, [and] the enlarging of dictional language to permit a more contemporary-sounding speech." As his career progressed, however, Auden was more often chastised than praised for his idiosyncratic use of language. James Fenton wrote in the *New Statesman:* "For years—for over forty years—the technical experimentation started by Auden enlarged and enriched the scope of English verse. He rediscovered and invented more than any other modern poet. . . And yet there grew up . . . a number of mannerisms, such as the use of nouns as verbs, or the employment of embarrassingly outdated slang, or the ransacking of the *OED* [Oxford English Dictionary], which became in the end a hindrance to his work."

"In Memory of W. B. Yeats" is a poem within that tradition of elegiac poetry, but it's also a poem, which extends that tradition. Poems about death tend to be concerned not just with loss, but also with what remains after a man or a woman dies. Auden was a master of form and this poem is about unrhymed hexameter. The poem begins in free verse, moving to syllabic, and culminating in flawless trochaic tetrameter. The first part is free verse in order to downplay the death of the poet. Here, the variation and haphazard line lengths invoke a sense of chaos and disorder. The second part of the poem is syllabic, which is a very unimposing meter, here mostly regular, with an odd variation in the last half. Auden confronts Yeats in the second person, and rebuffs Yeats by describing where poetry comes from and what it does not do. This part, like the first, references Yeats personally, but soon diverges into a general interrogation of poetry.

Yeats wrote poetry with a view to curing his country. The third section comprises six stanzas of truncated trochaic tetrameter. Auden uses "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," to set forth his contrasting idea: that the worth of poetry is not in its author, but in its readers. Yeats' diction befits his relaxed meter, but Auden uses a strict pattern to respond to Yeats' overreaching efforts and to institute a different order.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: What do you mean by the term "Audenesque"?

Q 10: Briefly Comment on the style used by Auden in this poem.

11.7 RECEPTION OF AUDEN

Auden's career has undergone much re-evaluation in recent decades. While some critics have contended that he wrote his finest work when his political sentiments were less obscured by religion and philosophy, others defend his later material as the work of a highly original and mature intellect. Many critics echo the assessment of Auden's career by the National Book Committee, which awarded him the National Medal for Literature in 1967: "[Auden's poetry] has illuminated our lives and times with grace, wit and vitality. His work, branded by the moral and ideological fires of our age, breathes with eloquence, perception and intellectual power." Auden also received a National Book Award in Poetry for *The Shield of Achilles* in 1956. Auden's belief in various political theories is still debated. However, critics are almost sure that Auden habitually revised his writing to accommodate any shifts in faith. Hannah Arendt considered Auden's changes of heart to be a natural response to the flux of the times. Arendt wrote in the *New Yorker*: "In the Forties, there were many who turned against their old beliefs…They simply changed trains, as it were; the train of Socialism and Communism had been wrong, and they changed to the train of Capitalism or Freudianism or some refined Marxism." Auden apparently changed trains frequently. In "Spain 1937," a denouncement of fascism in the Spanish Civil War, Auden later wrote, "it would have been bad enough if I had ever held

this wicked doctrine, but that I should have stated it simply because it sounded to me rhetorically effective is quite inexcusable."

Auden's poetry is particularly concerned with the pressures of his time. In him, one finds completeness and virtuosity cliquishness and obscurity, interest in people, anxiety to reform and concern over the fate of society. His sympathies and interests were wide. He was witty and inventive, and wrote with gusto and fluency. Auden had much of the exhibitionist in him and had frequently written outside his range. During 1930s, his exuberance, the free play of so energetic and curious a mind worked as a stimulus in English verse. However, the same exuberance also invited reactions from another great modern poets like T. S. Eliot famous for austere poetic example. In Auden's verse, one often finds obscurity that results from an unusual handling of language; ellipsis, oddness of construction, experiments with new forms. In his verse, obscurity is also caused by private references mainly jokes, his utter sense of carelessness and the desire to be fashionably difficult. His contemporary poet Louise Mac Neice used the epithet "telegraphic" to mean Auden's style of writing distinguished by the omission of articles, connectives, personal demonstratives, pronouns and auxiliary verbs.

By the time of Auden's death in 1973, he had attained the status of a respected elder statesman. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* notes, "by the time of Eliot's death in 1965 ... a convincing case could be made for the assertion that Auden was indeed Eliot's successor, as Eliot had inherited sole claim to supremacy when Yeats died in 1939." With some exceptions, British critics tended to treat his early work as his best, while American critics tended to favour his middle and later work. Unlike other modern poets, his reputation did not decline after his death, and the Russian poet and essayist Joseph Brodsky wrote that his was "the greatest mind of the twentieth century." He is one of the most inventive and ingenious of modern poets with a gift for witty, memorable lines. He brought new styles of language and imagery into poetry and dealt with current political and scientific thought. According to Ernest Hilbert, "Auden coined the term Age of Anxiety (securing the Pulitzer Prize for the book of that title in 1947), and has been described as the first English poet to feel at home in the 20th century.



11.8 LET US SUM UP

By this time, you must have learnt that Auden having absorbed the influence of T. S. Eliot and G. M. Hopkins became the leader of a group of poets with strong Socialist leanings at the beginning of the 1930s. Auden was the first modern poet to have drawn his ideas and imagery from the material of Marxism and Psychoanalysis. He criticised the capitalist society from a Marxist point of view, but he identified the malaise of modern life as being fundamentally a psychological and spiritual one. Later he became a Christian like Eliot. Auden's poem draws on the tradition of elegiac poetry as it focuses on the immortality of a poet. This poem is an attempt at preserving Yeats the poet. However, most importantly, Auden understands this process of poetic after-life as taking place entirely within history. When Yeats' words disperse themselves after his death, they are received into a very specific time and place: Europe, 1939. Those who may continue to remember the poet's words live in a technological world of instruments, airports, cities, stock exchanges, and most important, they live at a moment of dark forboding, as the world seems about to go to war again. For Auden, while memory deals with the past, it takes place in the present. Therefore, the only way a poet can honour the dead, is to write a poem about the present. This is what Auden seeks to assert in the poem – "In Memory of W.B. Yeats."



11.9 FURTHER READING

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Websites and Electronic Resources:

http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/w-h-auden

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W._H._Auden

11.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Technical virtuosity… …ability to write poems in nearly every imaginable verse form… …incorporation of popular culture, current events, and vernacular speech… …resources drawn from a variety of literatures, art forms, social and political theories… …use of wit… …quest motif and so on.

Ans to Q 2: Thomas Hardy, Robert Frost, William Blake, Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Stephen Spender, Christopher Isherwood and so on.

Ans to Q 3: The year in which "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" was published, marked the the decade of unrest and lost hopes… …World War II began nine months later… …Auden not only pays tribute to a great poet but appeals to poets in a time of defeat and distress… …he asserts the value of poetry as a means of survival against the forces of humanity.

Ans to Q 4: Concerned with moral issues and the political, social, and psychological context… …influence of Marx and Freud… …analytical clarity, because he sought for order, for universal patterns of human existence… …Auden's poetry is considered versatile and inventive… …incorporation of a vast range of scientific knowledge.

Ans to Q 5: "Spain," is based on his experiences of the Spanish Civil War… …this poem reflects Auden's disillusionment with political causes and the indiscriminate violence of war.

Ans to Q 6: *Another Time that contains poems like* "September 1, 1939" and "Musee des Beaux Arts"… …Auden's self-imposed exile and acute spiritual crisis is evident in *The Double Man*… …*For the Time Being*… … *The Age of Anxiety*, relates the inner consciousness of four disparate characters as they converse among themselves in a New York City bar during World War II…. …*Nones* which contains poems like "In Praise of Limestone," "The Shield of Achilles", and so on.

Ans to Q 7: Auden claims "poetry makes nothing happen"… …Auden opines that it is nothing in itself, but only in how its readers respond to it… … Auden views that the political poet can achieve nothing more than to enlighten the "management" of the plight of the "managed".

Ans to Q 8: It is an elegy on the death of W. B. Yeats which is represented in two ways: a literal description of the day Yeats had actually passed away and a sense of the impending doom strung throughout the elegy.

Ans to Q 9: As described by Karl Shapiro in *In Defense of Ignorance* the term Audenesque refers to "the modernization of diction, [and] the enlarging of dictional language to permit a more contemporary-sounding speech."

Ans to Q 10: "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" is a poem within that tradition of elegiac poetry… …the poem begins in free verse, moving to syllabic, and culminating in trochaic tetrameter… …the first part is free verse… …the second part of the poem is syllabic… …the third section comprises six stanzas of trochaic tetrameter.



11.11 Possible Questions

Q 1: Why does Auden say that 'Poetry is a mode of doing something or a way of happening?

Q 2: Describe what Auden means while saying that 'Poetry makes nothing happen'.

Q 3: Is it true that the poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" represents Yeats as a man as well as an absolutely unique and irreplaceable poet?

Q 4: Do you agree that Auden as a modern poet tries to reject romantic ideals completely?

Q 5: In what way is Auden a modern poet? Illustrate with reference to his poems?

Q 6: How is Auden received in the modern age? Mention some of the works that bear the mark of his excellence as a poet?

Q 7: In what ways, are the themes of isolation and death described by Auden while referring to W. B. Yeats?

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UNIT 12: DYLAN THOMAS: "POEM IN OCTOBER"

UNIT STRUCTURE

12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 Introduction

12.3 Dylan Thomas: The Poet

12.4 Reading the Poem prescribed

12.5 Major Themes

12.6 Thomas' Poetic Style

12.7 Reception of Thomas

12.8 Let us Sum up

12.9 Further Reading

12.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

12.11 Possible Questions

12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- have a look at the life and works of the poet Dylan Thomas
- explain the main aspects of Thomas' poetry through the poem prescribed
- interpret the poem in terms of its different important aspects
- identify the themes and different aspects of the poem "Poem in October"
- discuss the poem in its nuanced totality

12.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall discuss Dylan Thomas and his poem "Poem in October". Thomas is a unique poet because no other modern poet is so popular with the common masses as him. In this course, you have read about 'impersonal' poetry of a modern poet like T. S. Eliot. Other modern poets like Eliot, Auden and Yeats gave birth to a kind of intellectualism in poetry. However, in the era of impersonal and intellectual poetry of the 1940s,

Thomas was a personal poet, and he revived the spirit of lyric poetry and romanticism. Subsequently, in his poetry one can find the abundance of vital energy. "Poem in October" is a birthday poem, which was published in the collection *Death and Entrances* (1946). The poem describes in great detail his 30th birthday, which he celebrates in his hometown of Swansea, Wales, a small fishing village. He walks through the village one early morning, while other inhabitants are still asleep. He reflects on his life so far, marvelling the nature around him and taking joy in it, till the weather makes an abrupt change. In that change, he seems to relive moments of his childhood, and a great feeling of joy surges through the poet.

12.3 DYLAN THOMAS: THE POET

[The following account of Thomas's life is largely derived from the biography provided by Michael Huff in Great World Writers: Twentieth Century. Volume: 11, edited by Patrick M. O'Neil, New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2004, pp. 1511-1526, Walford Davies' *Dylan Thomas*, and Rod Attrill's account of the poet's life at http://www.newquay-westwales.co.uk/dylan_thomas.htm, 7 June 2009]

Dylan Thomas was born on October 21, 1914, in a middle-class suburb of Swansea, Wales. His grandfather was a guard on the Great Western Railways and lived in Johnstown, on the edge of Carmarthen. His mother, Florence Hannah Williams, came from a farming background and was warm-hearted, sociable and religious. On the other hand, Dylan's father David John (known more by his initials D. J.) Thomas was educated at Aberystwyth University where he gained a first in English after winning a scholarship in1895. Later, he became a senior English Master at Swansea Grammar School. He was strict in his duties aided by a deep and sonorous speaking voice. He wanted to be a poet, and felt that teaching was very much a waste of his talents. He was an atheist, ashamed of his working-class background, and resentful that he was only an English teacher rather than a traditional Welsh bard like his uncle, Gwilym Marles who "had been a spokesman of the common people, a poet, preacher, and political radical" (Huff in O'Neil: 1512). Apart from being a bard, Marles was also a priest,

and ministered to the Unitarian Chapel at Llwyn Rhydowen near Llandyssul from 1860. The name Dylan was taken by D. J. Thomas from the *Mabinogion*, a collection of Mediaeval Welsh stories, while his middle name Marlais was the name of a stream near the birthplace of his great uncle, the Reverend Marles Thomas.

Initially, Thomas attended a private school at 22 Mirador Crescent, in the Uplands area of Swansea where he was taught by a Mrs. Hole. From 1925-1931, he attended Swansea Grammar School where he put up a poor performance in other subjects but excelled at English and in school plays. It was here that he developed a love of language, along with a sonorous, theatrical voice. Though both of Thomas's parents spoke Welsh (D.J. Thomas even teaching Welsh in evening classes), his father made a point of not teaching it to his son, believing it to represent something less than the sophistication he craved for his family. He wanted his son to get on in the world, and for this English was the language of power, not Welsh. Nevertheless, Thomas internalised the rhythms and melodies of Welsh to go along with his talent for expression in English. At the same time, he was fascinated by his father reading Shakespeare aloud in his sonorous voice. As early as age 11 he was busy writing poetry, and his first poems and prose pieces were published in the school magazine, which he went on to edit from late 1929. Thomas had a typical Welsh boyhood, playing with friends in his Swansea neighbourhood. His summer holidays were spent at the Carmarthenshire dairy farm of his mother's sister, Ann Jones, and her husband, Jim at Llangain. The farm, Fern Hill, became famously the subject of the poem of the same name. The pleasant times Thomas experienced in his childhood went on to have a lifelong presence in his mind, and showed itself in his writings through the dominant image of the child that frequent his work.

Thomas left school early at the age of sixteen to work first as a copyboy and then as a junior reporter with the *South Wales Daily Post.* He did not like the job, and became careless, frequently failed to include critical details, dates, and names in his articles. He became more avid socialising and drinking with his friends, most of whom were similarly inclined toward

the arts. It was in the pubs and taverns in Swansea that Thomas developed his notorious love for alcohol. In December 1932, he left the paper and joined an amateur dramatic group, *Swansea's Little Theatre*, and joined a local writers' circle. Thomas began publishing his poems in literary magazines – a number of his poems were published between 1932 and 1933 in the 'Poets Corner' of the *London Sunday Referee.* His first poem to be published outside Wales however, was "And death shall have no Dominion" in the *New English Weekly.* In early 1934, he left Swansea for London (where he stayed with his sister Nancy) to meet a young woman with whom he had been corresponding, as well as to look for a literary job. While there he made influential contacts and won a poetry contest, the prize being publication of his first book, *18 Poems (1934).*

Thomas spent the next two years travelling back and forth between Wales and London, making friends with other poets and artists, scraping a living from writing literary reviews, and borrowing money and then drinking it away (Huff in O'Neil: 1517). His book *18 Poems,* meanwhile, was gathering favourable reviews from distinguished poets, critics, including Edith Sitwell and Stephen Spender.

In 1936, Thomas's second book, *25 Poems,* was published. For some time in London, he lived in a basement flat at 54 Delancey Street in London where there was a caravan at the end of the garden. Thomas liked to be alone when writing and it was here therefore that he went to seek solitude. The London caravan later led to similar places of seclusion that doubled as a writer's workshop attached to the main house, such as the 'Apple House' at Llanina Mansion near New Quay, the caravan at Southleigh, Oxfordshire and finally the writing shed near the 'Boathouse' at Laugharne. In the same year in June, Thomas visited the Surrealist Exhibition in London, and inspired by it tried to incorporate surrealist elements in his own work. When *25 Poems* came out in 1936, it also carried this influence on Thomas. While most critics considered it inferior to his previous book, Sitwell once again praised Thomas's work, especially its the lyricism and its engagement with the elemental themes of birth and death. "And Death Shall Have No Dominion", a key poem in the volume, remains one of the best-known poems in the English language.

In 1936, Thomas met the painter Augustus John and his young Irish mistress, Caitlin Macnamara, a dancer, at the Wheatsheaf pub in Charlotte Street in London. Like Thomas, Macnamara also loved drinking. They married the next year, that is in 1937, moved to Laugharne, Wales, and began a tempestuous life together. Interestingly, they had to postpone the wedding twice as they had drunk the money put aside for that purpose. At Laugharne they stayed with Dylan's parents in Bishopston, Swansea - they had moved from Cwmdonkin Drive after his Father's retirement from teaching at Swansea Grammar School to a smaller house. Later, in order to avoid the mounting pressure from various creditors in the winter of 1937 - 38, they lived with Caitlin's Mother at the family home Blashford near Ringwood in Hampshire. Their finances comprised money from publishers along with loans from friends. A son, Llewelyn Edouard, was born in January 1939, and later that year Thomas's third book of poems, *The Map of Love,* was published. In the meantime, in 1938, the Thomases had moved, first, to Eros, a small two bedroom fisherman's cottage with no bathroom and an outside toilet on Gosport Street, and later to a larger house Sea View just behind the castle at Laugharne where they lived from 1938 to 1941.

At the outbreak of World War II, Thomas was found physically unfit for military service. He began writing documentary scripts and narrating them with his powerful, emotive voice for Strand Films. His poetic production, however, slowed, but he continued to publish individual poems in literary magazines and read his poems and prose pieces frequently on BBC radio. During these years Thomas's drinking and socializing circles broadened to include the poets W. H. Auden, George Baker, Theodore Roethke (visiting from America), and Louis MacNeice (Huff in O'Neil: 1515). Thanks to influential contacts and national exposure on the airwaves, the war years added considerably to Thomas's fame. Near the war's end he wrote some of his best poetry, including "A Winter's Tale," "Fern Hill," and "In My Craft or Sullen Art."

Thomas's success, however, did not bring in financial security. To add to that, both Dylan and Caitlin were wholly artistic, impractical, and prone to extravagance. As a result they suffered penalties for neglecting

their taxes, and their debts were never over. Their financial uncertainty frequently brought impassioned conflict in their relationship. In the summer of 1940, the family had shifted to The Maltings at Marshfield in Gloucestershire, with John Davenport. In 1941, Thomas and Caitlin moved to Plas Gelli at Talsarn in Cardiganshire. At this time, Thomas also retained a studio flat in Manresa Road, London as he was intermittently working on wartime propaganda films. In the midst of this their second child, daughter Aeronwy, was born in 1943. A few years later Thomas took in his ailing parents, even though he could not afford to support his own little family, and had to resort ever more to patrons and creditors.

In 1946, Thomas published *Deaths and Entrances,* a book of poetry, which was in a way an immediate response to World War II and its manifestation in England and particularly London. It was a critical success, and Thomas received a travelling scholarship from the Society of Authors. He took his family to live in Italy for several months in 1947 and while there, he worked on poetry that reflected his troubled personal spirituality. In 1949, Thomas travelled to Prague for the inauguration of the Communist Writers' Union. That same year they had their third child, a son, Colm.

In 1951, Thomas went to the United States on the first of his four reading tours there. At that time, such a tour was new in America, and was therefore a sensation generating tremendous public interest in poetry. Dylan Thomas proved himself to be as much a dynamic performer as he was a dynamic poet. He was overwhelmed by America, yet he also enjoyed its hospitality to the full, hobnobbing with celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe and Charlie Chaplin and drinking more than ever. Between his tours, back in Wales, he worked on a radio play *Under Milk Wood* and on his *Collected Poems,* particularly on an elegy for his father, who died late in 1951. Thomas loved his father strongly, especially so in their last years together, and that love is evident not only in the unfinished elegy, but also in Thomas's most famous poem, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night."

Thomas' second trip to the United States began on 20th January 1952 with Caitlin by his side. However, they quarrelled loudly and publicly, making a spectacle of themselves; the tour itself was also lukewarm. Thomas

arrived in New York for his third tour on the 21st April, 1953 and it was in the US that the World Premiere of *Under Milk Wood*, a radio drama, took place on May 3rd, 1953, in the Fogg Museum at Harvard. Thomas' debts were increasing by this time and the Bailiffs were threatening him. His financial problems were compounded by his deteriorating health. He suffered blackouts regularly and was advised by his doctor to stop drinking. The only way out seemed to be another American lecture tour. Thomas thus embarked on a fourth trip to the United States beginning in October 1953. It was a gruelling tour, and Thomas tried to deal with the hectic pace by supplementing his drinking with drugs like morphine and cortisone, which was administered to him by doctors. He gave a last reading at City College of New York and then collapsed in the Chelsea Hotel. He was taken to Saint Vincent's Hospital where he died several days later, on November 9. Thomas' death however, was probably not only a result of the over-consumption of alcohol but also of problems with blood sugar balance. Moreover, he was known to have not eaten properly for several days prior to this death and the doctor who treated him (as mentioned earlier) injected him on two occasions with both cortisone and morphine. His body was returned to Wales, where he was buried in Laugharne.

LET US KNOW



Thomas, when his first volume *Eighteen Poems* got published, came to be seen as a refreshing and radical new voice that articulated not "the anxious, uncertain tones of T. S. Eliot, the more cautious Romanticism of W. B. Yeats," and the rationalism and social concerns of his colleagues like Auden and Spender, but a Romantic vigour, passion and flamboyance (Carter and McRae: 437). From his earliest poetry, Thomas gives the impression of trying to give expression to powerful feelings, making many of his poems dense in meaning. His poems are also at times seen as surreal though this has become somewhat contested now. At the same time, his poetry is also characterised by its originality in selection and combination of

words, as can be seen in his famous poem "Fern Hill". This poem also addresses themes like childhood, nostalgia for the past, and a strong pastoral presence that are featured more evocatively in his later poems. Also in "Fern Hill" is a preoccupation with the Welsh background, his aunt's farm in Carmarthenshire where he spent his summer holidays. This also finds expression in Thomas collection of short fiction *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* that is loosely based on his own life. Another theme in his poems is the recurring cycle of birth, death and rebirth, and thus an affirmation of life over death, the latter occurring at the centre of that famous villanelle of Thomas addressed to his dying father:

"Do not go gentle into that good night
Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Why is Dylan Thomas's *Deaths and Entrances* significant?

Q 2: How was Dylan Thomas viewed when his first volume of poems *Eighteen Poems* was published?

12.4 READING THE POEM PRESCRIBED

It was my thirtieth year to heaven
Woke to my hearing from harbour and neighbour wood
And the mussel pooled and the heron
Priested shore
The morning beckon
With water praying and call of seagull and rook
And the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall
Myself to set foot
That second
In the still sleeping town and set forth.

My birthday began with the water-
Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my name
Above the farms and the white horses
And I rose
In rainy autumn
And walked abroad in a shower of all my days.
High tide and the heron dived when I took the road
Over the border
And the gates
Of the town closed as the town awoke.

A springful of larks in a rolling
Cloud and the roadside bushes brimming with whistling
Blackbirds and the sun of October
Summery
On the hill's shoulder,
Here were fond climates and sweet singers suddenly
Come in the morning where I wandered and listened
To the rain wringing
Wind blow cold
In the wood faraway under me.

Pale rain over the dwindling harbour
And over the sea wet church the size of a snail
With its horns through mist and the castle
Brown as owls
But all the gardens
Of spring and summer were blooming in the tall tales
Beyond the border and under the lark full cloud.
There could I marvel
My birthday
Away but the weather turned around.

It turned away from the blithe country
And down the other air and the blue altered sky

Streamed again a wonder of summer
With apples
Pears and red currants
And I saw in the turning so clearly a child's
Forgotten mornings when he walked with his mother
Through the parables
Of sun light
And the legends of the green chapels

And the twice told fields of infancy
That his tears burned my cheeks and his heart moved in mine.
These were the woods the river and sea
Where a boy
In the listening
Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy
To the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide.
And the mystery
Sang alive
Still in the water and singing birds.

And there could I marvel my birthday
Away but the weather turned around. And the true
Joy of the long dead child sang burning
In the sun.
It was my thirtieth
Year to heaven stood there then in the summer noon
Though the town below lay leaved with October blood.
O may my heart's truth
Still be sung
On this high hill in a year's turning.

"Poem in October" (written around 1944) is one of Dylan Thomas's four birthday poems, the others being "Especially When the October Wind" (on the occasion of his 20th birthday), "Twenty-Four Years" (as the title says, on his turning twenty-four), and "Poem on his Birthday" (to commemorate

his thirty-fifth birthday). It is a mystic summoning back or a re-creation of his childhood presented in more lucid terms than in his early poems (in fact this as well an element of serenity have been two widely noted features of his later poems like "Poem in October", "Fern Hill", "Over Sir John's Hill"). This poem is also an instance of Thomas's obsession with the inter-involvement of creation and destruction, life and death, and the ritual invocation of the moment of birth at the beginning of the poem ushers in also a celebration of this continuous process and the workings of biological processes as part of the natural world that link generations of life with one another (like the adult Thomas looking at the child Thomas in the poem walking with his mother) as well as human beings with nature. This reveals his engagement with the cyclic organic processes of birth and death, and decay (or degeneration) and regeneration that are articulated through an emphasis on the "intensity and integrity of non-human organic life" (Davies: 69). This brings about some kind of humility that translates itself into the possibility of the human to shed its ego and become assimilated within such a life within nature.

The themes of bodily processes, childhood, nature, and even poetry, are all underpinned and informed by this engagement. The poet, on waking up on the morning of his 30th birthday, encounters the sounds and sights of nature that seem to celebrate the day of his birth. With this, he is made to remember his past and see himself in the familiar Welsh landscape as a boy with his mother. As the poet comes out of the town that seems to be enclosed like a womb, he is overwhelmed by the literal transformation of the rainy autumnal weather into summery sunshine and a "springful of larks". This is accompanied by the transformation of the adult self of the poet into that of the poet as a child, which is more figurative in nature. All this is accompanied by a 'sacramentalising' of nature, that is, certain Christian rituals (like baptism) being superimposed on events in nature (such as the birds – both water and land birds – crying out in the morning; the town on the edge of the sea, water being an important element in baptism; nature in terms of a "green chapel"; and the use of the phrase "heron-priested" since in Celtic folklore and mythology, birds like the heron, crane or stork are

associated with the creation of life and had similar associations in early Celtic Christianity). It also contains a sense of glory in the natural world. Since the child is seen by Thomas as being more organically related to nature and its cyclical processes, the poem centres round the child's happiness and joy in a natural environment. This becomes the base on which the poet explores the coming together of the religious, spiritual and the physical/material aspects in the child's wonder and absorption in nature that this organicity implies (for example, in expressions like "parables/ Of sunlight" that the child seemingly learns from his mother in the "green chapels").

The poem can also be seen as belonging to a long tradition of English poetry (to be found in such poems as Henry Vaughan's "Regeneration" and Wordsworth's "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality") that sets a "reflection of man's moods" in a **pastoral context** (Davies: 52). Again, the town that provides the milieu of the poem is Laugharne in Carmarthenshire, in Dylan Thomas's native Wales, and the hill referred to is probably Sir John's Hill, in the same area. The poem was therefore called by Thomas as a "Laugharne poem", the first "place poem" he had written (Goodby and Wigginton: 198). The images of the sea, water, the heron, "green chapels," and so on reinforce the pantheistic nature of the poem. At the same time, the image of the sea (central to many of Thomas's major poems) is, according to Goodby, a "non-location redolent of margins, swamping, self-loss and erasure" (Goodby and Wigginton: 200). The poem is one that is concerned with being in multiples realms that is upheld primarily the sea imagery.

The figure of the Bard in this respect becomes important, more so when one remembers that when Thomas went for his first public reading in the United States of America, he was introduced as "having come 'out of the druidical mists of Wales'" (Davies: 96). In ancient Wales (and in similar societies in Ireland, Scotland and so on) a poet was not merely a professional writer of verse, but was acknowledged to exercise extraordinary spiritual power. Moreover, the bard was not simply a respected member of the community; he was one with the people, he was their voice. He sang the people's songs, maintained their general traditions, and kept their connection

to poetry and song vital and personally meaningful. For Ackerman and many other critics in the 1980s, Thomas seemed to claim a high function for the poet as prophet in terms of the bard. Again, with the exuberance of the bardic personality, the liking for ceremony and elaborate ritual coexisted a devotion to composition and craftsmanship in Thomas, linking him yet again to the spontaneous but at the same time meticulously technical poetic practice of the bard. Another important feature of old Welsh poetry that Thomas seemed to incorporate was an awareness of the dual nature of reality, of unity in disunity, of the simultaneity of life and death, of time as an eternal continuous moment rather than divided among the past, present and future.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: What is the poem "Poem in October" all about?

Q 4: How does the idea of the bard get reflected in the poem?

12.5 MAJOR THEMES

The following are the important themes in the poem.

The Welsh Background:

One important theme in Dylan Thomas is his Welsh background. He rooted himself in south West Wales - Carmarthenshire and Cardiganshire - now known as Ceredigion, counties to which he was drawn throughout his life. Initially seen as a Romantic and a 'provincial', the poetry of Thomas was regarded as being influenced by the Welsh language, its rhythms and the Bardic tradition. For instance, John Ackerman in his book *Welsh Dylan*: *Dylan Thomas's life, writing, and his Wales* (1980) viewed his poetry as the product of a strongly individual imagination fostered by ways of thought and feeling that were Welsh in origin and characterised by its lyrical quality, strict formal control, a romantic conception of the poet's function, and a religious attitude to experience. Ackerman identifies three ways in which this Welsh background informed his poetry. Firstly, it was through the direct

and inevitable influence of a particular community with particular traditions, for example, the bardic tradition; secondly, there was the influence of other Welshmen who were writing in English (Thomas himself did not speak Welsh) and who helped to create a national consciousness, the sense of a life that was peculiar to Wales. Through these friends, Thomas came to have an access to a community of ideas from Welsh culture. The third influence of the Welsh context in Thomas, Ackerman argues, was through the cultural tradition existing in and through the Welsh language.

Problem of Identity against the Changes Brought by Time:

Dylan Thomas's poetry also records the trauma associated with the World War II. "Poem in October" was published in the volume *Deaths and Entrances* (1946) and assumes significance because it contrasts with most of the other poems in the volume that provide graphic details of the bombing of London by Germany during the War. It traces the traumatic entrance of the war into the everyday, private lives of people and its implications for the poetic self. Given this, the poem seems to occupy a level of nostalgia for the past in the face of unbearable violence. In spite of the pastoral and peaceful nature of the poem, the poem has an elegiac tone that questions the happiness associated with birthdays, since they also take us closer to death. Given the preponderance of death and the general tone of mourning in the entire volume, the poem ends on a note of hope regarding the poet's role in such a situation:

> "O may my heart's truth
> Still be sung
> On this high hill in a year's turning."

The title of the volume "Deaths and Entrances" is strongly echoed in "Poem in October" in the constant allusions to "turning" as the poet emerges from the confines of the town to climb towards the hill only to turn back towards the town again.

Idea of Modernism:

Thomas is also seen in relation to Modernism. The landscapes and imagery and the hallucinatory effect of the images he evokes in his poems seem to

approach a surrealism that is more aligned to the imaginative and psychological explorations of modernist writers. However, while the Surrealists brought about this effect through an arbitrary or irrational juxtaposition of images that dispensed with conscious selection and ordering, Thomas, even when he was using an inner landscape of the mind, selected, controlled and developed his images into a conscious poetic order that fulfilled an aesthetic function. However, Davies argues that Thomas has affinities with modernism in that he believed in "concreteness of presentation", "the final barrier that Modernism...had placed against any return to Victorian discursiveness or Georgian descriptiveness" (Davies in Goodby and Wigginton: 115). Secondly, Thomas displays a kind of self-consciousness in the use of language, that is another key Modernist trait: "the conscious foregrounding of language as language, language itself as theme, within poems" (Davies in Goodby and Wigginton: 115).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Which, according to John Ackerman, are the three ways that inform Thomas's Welsh background?

Q 6: In what ways can Dylan Thomas be considered a modern poet?

12.6 THOMAS' POETIC STYLE

"Poem in October", like all other poems of Thomas, is replete with prosodic devices like **alliteration** (the interplay of consonants) and **assonance** (the interplay of vowels), seen, for example, in:

"Woke to my hearing from harbour and neighbour wood
And the mussel pooled and the heron
Priested shore"

This meticulous attention to alliteration and assonance is aimed at achieving not only a visual and mental effect but a physical, kinaesthetic (combination of senses) effect in as the reader reads the words and articulates the sounds and listens to them. Thomas's poems lend

themselves to public performance, conveying powerful emotions driven by lyricism, and rhythms and melodies that have a hypnotic effect. As you can see in the poem, it uses a range of vivid imagery drawn from nature. It can thus be read as a celebration of the natural creations of God, or God manifest in the natural world ("green chapels"), but a God who comes across as a combination of pagan pre-Christian elements (indication nature worship) and Christian elements.

As mentioned earlier, there is also noticeable in Thomas's poetry some affinity with modernism, seen in his preoccupation with concreteness of images and poetic presentation with language. Many of his poems also demonstrate this with their irregular syntax, unusual coinages, and imagery that is apparently irrationally organised. Thomas uses an incremental and dialectical method of creating imagery that he recounted in one of his:

"I let, perhaps, an image be 'made' emotionally in me and then apply to it what intellectual and critical force I possess – let it breed another, let that image contradict the first, make, of the third image bred out of the other two together, a fourth contradictory image, and let them all, within my imposed formal limits, conflict." (Goodby and Wigginton: 54)

"Poem in October", by splitting up the poet's persona into the adult and the child, and then fusing them back together, recreates the process described above that also can be read as a recreation of the process of organic assimilation. The immediate experience of the natural world brings unto itself "the truth of [the child's] joy", so that "his [i.e., the child's] tears burned my [i.e., the adult poet's] cheeks and his heart moved in mine", and "the mystery/ Sang alive/ Still in the water and singing birds". The run-on lines have a fluid, expansive effect that reinforces this imagery. Paradoxically, however, they are sustained within a fixed stanza shape and syllabic pattern (the number of syllables per line in each verse being constant: 9-12-9-3-5-12-12-5-3-9) (Davies: 52). The poem is populated by several repeated words and phrases, the repetition conjuring up a trance-like quality – something that lends itself very well to a reminiscence of long-lost childhood that surfaces again for a moment. The refrain "the weather turned

around" registers the constant shifts of the poem as the poet undertakes a journey again in a renewed search for his self on his 30th birthday.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: What are the stylistic devices used by Dylan Thomas?

12.7 RECEPTION OF THOMAS

Dylan Thomas was one of the most popular English language poets of the 20th century. Though he was a meticulous craftsman who would endlessly revise his poems, it is the emotional force of his poetry that first surfaces in an initial reading. The lyricism and dynamic romanticism of Thomas effectively countered the dry, erudite tendencies of modernism as well as the mainstream socially committed English poetry of Auden and Spender and anticipated a generation of confessional, beat, and magical-realist verse. In spite of his huge literary talent however, Dylan Thomas was better known for his engaging, sociability.

Thomas was a highly influential major poet as well as a popular one, whose books were always in demand, and whose public readings were hugely attended. A dominant critical position regarding Thomas was that he brought energy and feeling back to poetry that had been under the monopoly of decades of the extremely intellectualised, erudite and elitist modernist poetry. He thus seemed to represent a return to romanticism and "made possible an era of confessional, beat, and magical-realist poets, after which the pendulum swung back again to less emotive, more intellectually oriented realist poetry such as that that dominated the 1980s and 1990s" (Huff in O'Neil: 1518). His critical reputation was at its highest till the 1980s but then it began to recede as a more realist brand of poetry became more preferred. One of the more general critical opinions of Thomas especially during the 1970s and 80s was the perceived unevenness of his poetry with some critics arguing that "while Thomas was capable of genuinely great poetry, he wrote only a few great poems" (Huff in O'Neil: 1518). They also argued that undoubtedly "he had exceptional talent and

remarkable vision but that his gift for word craft too often made it easy for him to neglect the construction of sturdy, sound, solid, formally defensible poems, poem after poem after poem" (Huff in O'Neil: 1518).

While this influence is no doubt there, it has been reread by later critics such as Walford Davies, James A. Davies and John Goodby who see Thomas as a poet of two worlds and cultures – the Welsh and the English (Thomas's formal education, in fact, was in English throughout at his father's behest). For them, he exploits his liminal presence (as an English-speaking Welsh speaking to an Anglo-American audience) to use English subversively against the hegemonic poetic norms of the 1930s and 40s, as well as the early 1950s (chiefly Auden and his group and, later, the Movement) with their emphasis on ratiocination and rationality. This is reinforced by the performative aspect of his poetry that Thomas derived from his Welsh background, and more particularly from the figure of the bard discussed earlier.

Walford Davies' book on Thomas, appearing in the 1980s provided a counter to the dominant trend in the criticism of Thomas' poetry that tended to see him as a provincial poet or as a psychologically troubled person in order to explain the liberties he took with the English language and its structures. Davies however took into account his national, social and linguistic contexts and saw this use as a kind of subversiveness in terms of a potential alternative model that did not derive literally from the Welsh language itself and "direct knowledge of the intricate rules of the prosody and internal rhyming patterns of the Welsh poetic tradition" (Davies in Goodby and Wigginton: 108). Rather, it owes itself to "a certain sense of externality to the English language, a refusal to leave it alone, to take it for granted" that Thomas possessed, being Welsh and not English (Davies in Goodby and Wigginton: 110). It implies that Thomas felt "a strong sense of provincial, cultural, even religious 'otherness'" as far as Britain and the English language was concerned and his use of the language therefore demonstrated an act of getting back at the "imperial, standardising norms of the English language itself" (Davies in Goodby and Wigginton: 110). Thus, for Davies, Thomas's poetry occupies a "no man's land between two

languages" – Welsh and English. Given this poetry itself, trying to mediate between the two and trying to come up with a new kind of language and identity was becoming difficult to write, as a result of which, the poet turned more towards "oral performance of poems already accomplished than on the production of new ones" (Davies in Goodby and Wigginton: 110). It also explains, for Davies, the turn back to an "idealised childhood" and even to "pre-childhood states" since a "poetry of adulthood...was peculiarly difficult since, culturally, it could not be a Welsh adulthood" (Davies in Goodby and Wigginton: 110). This is relevant because Thomas, as a Welsh, seems to "draw on the differences that help him gain visibility and identity in an essentially centralised Britain" (Davies in Goodby and Wigginton: 111).



12.8 LET US SUM UP

By this time, you must have noted that the English poet Thomas has been acknowledged as one of the most important original, rhythmic and ingenious poet. His position as one of the great modern poets has been much discussed, though this has not tarnished his popularity amongst the general public, who found his work easily accessible. As David Daiches writes, Thomas's reputation remains as a thoughtful and cerebral poet who sought to put new drive and passion into the language of English poetry. During his brief span of life, he has left a handful of poems that will be read and remembered outside the classroom and the critic's study.



12.9 FURTHER READING

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12.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: *Deaths and Entrances was* a response to World War II… …Thomas received a travelling scholarship from the Society of Authors.

Ans to Q 2: Thomas came to be viewed as a refreshing and radical new voice… …he gave the impression that he was trying to give expression to powerful feelings, making many of his poems dense in meaning… …his poetry was characterised by its originality in selection and combination of words.

Ans to Q 3: "Poem in October" is a birthday poem… …its a re-creation of his childhood … …it marks Thomas's obsession with creation and

destruction, life and death, and the ritual invocation of the moment of birth… …since the child is seen by Thomas as being more organically related to nature and its cyclical processes, the poem centres round the child's happiness and joy in a natural environment.

Ans to Q 4: The bard was not simply a respected member of the community; he was one with the people, he was their voice. He sang the people's songs, maintained their general traditions, and kept their connection to poetry and song vital and personally meaningful. Thomas seemed to claim a high function for the poet as prophet in terms of the bard.

Ans to Q 5: Firstly, it was through the direct and inevitable influence of a particular community with particular traditions… …secondly, there was the influence of other Welshmen who were writing in English… …the third influence was through the cultural tradition existing in and through the Welsh language.

Ans to Q 6: The landscapes and imagery look surrealistic and are aligned to the imaginative and psychological explorations of modernist writers… …Thomas consciously applied a poetic order that fulfilled an aesthetic function…. …Davies argues that Thomas has affinities with modernism in that he believed in "concreteness of presentation"… … self-consciousness use of language.

Ans to Q 7: Alliteration and assonance… …melodies that have a hypnotic effect… …concreteness of images… …poetic presentation with language.



12.11 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Give a critical account of the modernist elements in Dylan Thomas' poetry.

Q 2: How does Dylan Thomas use the pastoral motif and place the child in it? Discuss with reference to his later poems like "Poem in October".

Q 3: In what way, did Dylan Thomas return to nature in his poem "Poem in October"?

Q 4: Critically examine the treatment of childhood in the poems of Dylan Thomas.

Q 5: Dylan Thomas brought energy and feeling back to poetry that had been under the monopoly of decades of the extremely intellectualised, erudite and elitist modernist poetry. Discuss.

Q 6: What is the significance of Thomas' Welsh background?

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UNIT 13: TED HUGHES: "PIKE", "THRUSHES"

UNIT STRUCTURE

13.1 Learning Objectives

13.2 Introduction

13.3 Ted Hughes: The Poet

13.4 Reading the Poems prescribed

13.5 Major Themes

13.6 Hughes' Poetic Style

13.7 Reception of Hughes

13.8 Let us Sum up

13.9 Further Reading

13.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

13.11 Possible Questions

13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- gain ideas on the life and works of the poet Ted Hughes
- explain the main aspects of Hughes' poetry through the poems prescribed
- interpret the poem in terms of its different important aspects
- identify the themes that consist in the concerns of Hughes as a poet
- discuss the poems in its nuanced totality

13.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit is based on two poems "Pike" and "Thrushes" written by Ted Hughes who was a famous and important English poet and children's writer of the 20th century. Hughes' earlier poetic works are rooted in nature and, in particular, the innocent savagery of animals. You will soon see that he wrote frequently of the blend of beauty and violence in the natural world. For Hughes, animals serve as a metaphor for his view on life: animals live

out a struggle for the survival of the fittest in the same way that humans strive for ascendancy and success. But, there is a difference. The poems "Pike" and "Thrushes" are from Hughes' second collection of poetry *Lupercal*, which came out in 1960. "Pike" is based on his childhood. As a child he often visited the lake (presumably with his father) in which there lived a huge pike in the deep part of the pond. It is the memory of such a place that acts as a foundation on which this poem is based. The second poem "Thrushes" paints a picture of birds as efficient, instinctive killing machines. The poet is observing some thrushes on his lawn, the experience of which leads him to contrast them to human beings, such as himself, whose best acts seem produced by the suppression of such energies as the birds display.

13.3 TED HUGHES: THE POET

[Adapted from Edward Hadley "Ted Hughes OM (1930-1998)"]

His Life:

Ted Hughes (Edward James Hughes) was born on 17 August 1930 at Mytholmroyd, West Yorkshire, and lived, as a child, with his father, William, his mother, Edith Farrar, and his elder siblings Gerald and Olwyn. Hughes drew upon his family in much of his poetry, such as his father's military experiences during the First World War; his mother's in *Remains of Elmet* (1979); his brothers Gerald and Olwynin many other poems. The landscape of his native Yorkshire also provides a natural backdrop to his poetry, as well as his encounters with animals as a child there.

Hughes had his higher education at Pembroke College, Cambridge, in English literature and subsequently at Cambridge University, where he studied anthropology and archaeology, graduating in 1954. Hughes did a number of jobs after graduating, but kept a regular contact with Cambridge where a number of his friends still resided. Together, they published a short-lived single volume journal named *St Botolph's Review*, featuring poems by Hughes and his contemporaries. It was at the launch party for their journal that Hughes first encountered Sylvia Plath, the famous American poet who was in Cambridge on a Fulbright scholarship. This led to a romantic

attachment between them, leading to their marriage in 1956. They settled in America where both briefly held teaching posts. Plath entered the manuscript of Hughes' *The Hawk in the Rain* for a poetry competition judged by Marianne Moore, W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender. It won the competition and in 1957 the first collection of Hughes' poetry. This and the succeeding volume *Lupercal* (1960) established Hughes as a strong emerging English poet. Plath and Hughes relocated to Devon, in August 1961 after the birth of their first child, Frieda Rebecca in 1960. The couple had a second child Nicholas Farrar in 1962. By this time, however, their marriage was becoming increasingly troubled. Hughes had an affair with a woman named Assia Wevill and left Plath, who returned to London with the children. On 11 February 1963, Plath committed suicide by gassing herself.

The death of Plath greatly affected Hughes, whose poetic output registered a decline at this point of time. However, his third collection, *Wodwo* (1967), suggested a resurgence of his poetry, also one that was slightly changed in nature from his two earlier collections. Now it was less formal than earlier and with the inclusion of short stories and a play seemed to indicate at experimentation and innovation. On the personal front, however, Assia Wevill also committed suicide in 1969, in a repetition of the earlier tragedy. The following year in 1970, Hughes married Carol Orchard, with whom he remained until his death.

Hughes' poems of the 1970s mostly address issue of the revival of myth in verse, as can be seen in *Crow* (1970), *Cave Birds* (1976) and *Gaudete* (1977).However, by the 1980s, Hughes comes back to rural Britain (in such collections as *Moortown Diary* and *Remains of Elmet*) which is addressed in a manner devoid of overt mythologising. Hughes also demonstrates an environmental consciousness verging on activism in *River* (1983) where he pictures rivers in the rural poems and takes the view that the life that depends on them is less terse and more spiritually orientated. In 1984 Hughes became the Poet Laureate of Great Britain with his Laureate verse collected in *Rain-Charm for the Duchy* in 1992. A year later, in 1993, Hughes published his prose work, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1993).

Towards the final years of his life, Hughes largely wrote translations of classical poetry and drama, the most well known among them being *Tales from Ovid* (1997) which won the Whitbread Book of the Year prize. In early 1998, *The Times* newspaper started to publish poems from Hughes' last collection of poems, *Birthday Letters* (addressing and exploring Hughes' relationship with and marriage to Sylvia Plath), which again won the Whitbread Book of the Year prize. In the same year, Hughes was named a member of the Order of Merit by Queen Elizabeth II. Towards the end of the year, however, Hughes succumbed to cancer and died at his home on 28 October 1998.

His Works:

Hughes' poetry treats nature as violent and pitiless, focussing in many of his poems both animals traditionally regarded as violent and those usually seen as benign but who always vigorously pursue their lives with a single-minded strength and power. He shows the influence of Dylan Thomas and D. H. Lawrence among the 20th century poets who are part of the tradition of nature poetry in English literature. His poetry combines "memory, closely observed detail, and sensation through nature" (Carter and McRae: 444). Hughes approaches animals and the natural world without sentimentality, as can be seen in poems like "Hawk in the Rain", "Hawk Roosting" "Pike", "Thrushes", "Jaguar" and "The Otter". In these poems, from the first two volumes of his poetry "Hawk in the Rain" and "Lupercal", animals in different settings are presented with implications of humans being outside the immediate and instinctive lives they lead. In the first four poems, the shifting perspectives privilege the animals' view of the world. The human is seen as alienating itself from an immediate living and access to the tremendous forces of nature by distancing itself through an overconfident reliance on rationality and culture. As a result, the human feels threatened by an uncanny proximity with them. In "Hawk in the Rain" the human struggles against the mud and the wind and his eye is transfixed on the hawk that seems to effortlessly defy the elements. However, the poem concludes with the hawk and the human occupying the same level as the hawk also meets a fate similar to the human as it is brought down by the winds, dead, at the end of

the poem. What makes the abilities of the two seem different here is the rational, mediating gaze of the human for whom the 'eye' of the hawk is the 'other' seemingly threatening the human with annihilation. Hughes' "Hawk Roosting" ventures further into this area by being a monologue spoken entirely by a hawk who claims utmost superiority over the universe. While critics tended to read authoritarianism into Hughes' depiction of the hawk, he on the other hand asserted that through the bird, he was trying to voice Nature. This ecologically conscious voice of the poet also informs "Jaguar" and the "Otter" as the two animals are represented as falling prey in different ways to the rapacity and cruelty of humans who desire to overpower and exploit nature.

In his later work, however, Hughes displays a greater preoccupation with myths and legends, and the figure of the shaman (who mediates between the human and supernatural worlds) being foregrounded. The poet according to Hughes performs a similar function. In *Crow,* Hughes retells the story of creation from the point of view of the crow, which emerges as a "violent, anarchic consciousness", "a kind of anti-Christ" (Carter and McRae: 442). Along with the later volume, *Gaudete*, *Crow* enacts "sparse dramas in which traditional metrical patterning and realistic presentation are abandoned" (Carter and McRae: 442). Hughes also admired the surreal work of East European poets as Vasko Popa and Miroslav Holub, and like them "explored a post-Holocaust awareness of what it felt like to live in the spiritual chasm at the end of the twentieth century" (Carter and McRae: 443). Two of the most acclaimed during the later years of Hughes were *Birthday Letters* and *Tales from Ovid*. In the first, Hughes explored the intricacies of his relationship with his late wife the American poet Sylvia Plath, who had committed suicide in 1963. The second revisits as the title points to, Ovid, but rendered anew by Hughes.



LET US KNOW

The Following are Important Poetry Collections by Ted Hughes:

1957: *The Hawk in the Rain*

1960:	*Lupercal*
1967:	*Wodwo*
1970:	*Crow: From the Life and the Songs of the Crow*
1972:	*Selected Poems 1957–1967*
1975:	*Cave Birds*
1977:	*Gaudete*
1979:	*Remains of Elmet* (with photographs by Fay Godwin)
1979:	*Moortown*
1983:	*River*
1986:	*Flowers and Insects*
1989:	*Wolf watching*
1992:	*Rain-charm for the Duchy*
1994:	*New Selected Poems 1957–1994*
1997:	*Tales from Ovid*
1998:	*Birthday Letters*
2003:	*Collected Poems*



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How does Ted Hughes portray nature in his poems?

Q 2: Name the two English poets who influenced Ted Hughes.

Q 3: How does Ted Hughes view the humans in his poetry?

13.4 READING THE POEMS PRESCRIBED

The following subsections will guide you to read the poem in terms of its different aspects.

"Pike"

Pike, three inches long, perfect
Pike in all parts, green tigering the gold.
Killers from the egg: the malevolent aged grin.
They dance on the surface among the flies.

Or move, stunned by their own grandeur,

Over a bed of emerald, silhouette
Of submarine delicacy and horror.
A hundred feet long in their world.

In ponds, under the heat-struck lily pads-
Gloom of their stillness:
Logged on last year's black leaves, watching upwards.
Or hung in an amber cavern of weeds

The jaws' hooked clamp and fangs
Not to be changed at this date:
A life subdued to its instrument;
The gills kneading quietly, and the pectorals.

Three we kept behind glass,
Jungled in weed: three inches, four,
And four and a half: red fry to them-
Suddenly there were two. Finally one

With a sag belly and the grin it was born with.
And indeed they spare nobody.
Two, six pounds each, over two feet long
High and dry and dead in the willow-herb-

One jammed past its gills down the other's gullet:
The outside eye stared: as a vice locks-
The same iron in this eye
Though its film shrank in death.

A pond I fished, fifty yards across,
Whose lilies and muscular tench
Had outlasted every visible stone
Of the monastery that planted them-

Stilled legendary depth:
It was as deep as England. It held

Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old
That past nightfall I dared not cast

But silently cast and fished
With the hair frozen on my head
For what might move, for what eye might move.
The still splashes on the dark pond,

Owls hushing the floating woods
Frail on my ear against the dream
Darkness beneath night’s darkness had freed,
That rose slowly toward me, watching.

“Thrushes”

Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn,
More coiled steel than living - a poised
Dark deadly eye, those delicate legs
Triggered to stirrings beyond sense - with a start, a bounce,
a stab
Overtake the instant and drag out some writhing thing.
No indolent procrastinations and no yawning states,
No sighs or head-scratchings. Nothing but bounce and stab
And a ravening second.

Is it their single-mind-sized skulls, or a trained
Body, or genius, or a nestful of brats
Gives their days this bullet and automatic
Purpose? Mozart’s brain had it, and the shark’s mouth
That hungers down the blood-smell even to a leak of its own
Side and devouring of itself: efficiency which
Strikes too streamlined for any doubt to pluck at it
Or obstruction deflect.

With a man it is otherwise. Heroisms on horseback,
Outstripping his desk-diary at a broad desk,

Carving at a tiny ivory ornament
For years: his act worships itself - while for him,
Though he bends to be blent in the prayer, how loud and
above what
Furious spaces of fire do the distracting devils
Orgy and hosannah, under what wilderness
Of black silent waters weep.

The poems "Pike" and "Thrushes" are from Hughes' second collection of poetry *Lupercal*, which came out in 1960. The title refers to the ancient Roman festival of Lupercalia that used to be held every year on February 15. The purpose of this festival was "to secure fertility for the field, the flocks, and the people" (Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*. Ed. Paul Keegan, New York: Farrar, Straux and Giroux, 2003, p.1243). In both the poems, Hughes registers a decentred vision that takes cognizance of the inherent value of non-human species within nature. It is not merely sympathy for these two animals that emerges in the poems but a sense of awe that is partly the result of displacing the anthropocentrism or anthropomorphism involved in our usual dealings with nature and animals. At the same time the animals in Hughes' poetry, like the pike and the thrush here; also operate on an imaginative as well as a symbolic level apart from functioning as real animals. Hughes emphasises the lives of animals, and by those aspects of human nature which link it to them but which seldom surface in the conscious life of humans. In a way, the animals in his poetry can also be seen as reflecting the inner turbulence or conflicts of the modern human being especially after the meaningless destruction during and consequent disillusionment after the World War II. It also takes into account the perceived decline, both political and cultural, of post war England.

A good example of the symbolic aspect of animal imagery in Hughes is his own comment on the writing of "Pike":

"Here, in this next poem, is one my prize catches. I used to be a very keen angler for pike, as I still am when I get the chance, and I did most of my early fishing in a quite small lake, really a large pond. This pond went down

to a great depth in one place. Sometimes on hot days, we would see something like a railway sleeper lying near the surface, and there certainly were huge pike in that pond. I suppose they are even bigger by now. Recently I felt like doing some pike fishing, but in circumstances where there was no chance of it, and over the days, as I remembered the extreme pleasures of that sport, bits of the following poem began to arrive. You will see by looking at the place in my memory very hard and very carefully, and by using the words that grew naturally out of the pictures and feelings. I captured not just a pike; I captured the whole pond, including the monsters I never hooked." [Accessed from http://www. poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/single Poem.do? poemId =7079]

As in the poem, here again we can see how the pike carries with it not only its immediate presence as an animal but through it the poet can go back to the landscape of his native Yorkshire as well as to other regions (especially Devonshire) of England where he can explore his cultural roots. This is reflected again in the description of the pond at the monastery where the poet goes fishing in "Pike"

"A pond I fished, fifty yards across,
Whose lilies and muscular tench
Had outlasted every visible stone
Of the monastery that planted them-

Stilled legendary depth:
It was as deep as England. It held
Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old
That past nightfall I dared not cast."

The pike that rises up from the depths of this pond thus becomes more of a creature from the psychic past of England, one that threatens the matter-of-fact everyday realities in the present. It also implies the poet's unconscious associations with this past, as well as his recognition of the unknown but overwhelming forces of nature that for a brief but startling moment, is compressed in the pike.

Again, look at these lines from "Thrushes":

"Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn,
More coiled steel than living - a poised
Dark deadly eye, those delicate legs
Triggered to stirrings beyond sense."

The thrushes here are again aligned with something that goes beyond the boundaries of human sensory experience "stirrings beyond sense" and the immediacy with which their faculties work to hunt their prey, is something that the ordinary rational human mind (barring geniuses) can never approach.

Animals for Hughes thus work as "elemental symbols", which compress within themselves the "enraged energy" of the Universe (Ted Hughes in Dyson, 102-3). Hughes attempts to examine the possibility of a balance between the social consciousness of human beings and their primordial side, which has gradually succumbed to the process of civilization and industrialisation. For this purpose, he does not resort to didacticism, but creates representative animal figures that exist between the real and the symbolic.

This does not mean, however, that Hughes keeps these animals on the level of the abstract. Instead, his poems are populated by concrete images and accurate and detailed descriptions of their habitat, appearance and behaviour. The pike, for example, is a fish common in England, and popular both for the sport of angling and as food. It likes to hunt by ambushing its prey, keeping itself immobile till the careless prey comes near enough for it to pounce (the term for this is 'ambush predator'). It also displays the trait of cannibalism which is might be more due to their territorial nature than for food, though the latter also may play a role. Again, the thrush is a common garden bird in England and is known for clearly identifiable trademark song. It is feeds on primarily insects, earthworms and snails. In the two poems on these two species, Hughes carefully foregrounds the precise way of their hunting so as to emphasise their roles as predators to be reckoned with in their own habitat. This will be made clear when you look at pictures of the two:

The two pictures (especially of the bird) capture their subjects in their own habitat, but the point of view is obviously that of the human eye looking through the camera. Given this, the pike and the thrush do not come across as ferocious beasts but animals, which are harmless to humans. As has been mentioned earlier, from the point of view of humans, they would be in intermediate positions in the food chain, becoming the prey of larger predators as well as humans (who eat the pike). However, do we find the same attitude in Hughes' poems? Even though the pike and the thrush are described in terms that spring from human culture—

"silhouette
Of submarine delicacy and horror
The jaws' hooked clamp
A life subdued to its instrument
The outside eye stared: as a vice locks-
The same iron in this eye
Though its film shrank in death."

("Pike")

"Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn,
More coiled steel than living
Gives their days this bullet and automatic"

("Thrushes")

The greater effect is that of an environment where each of the two is at the top of the food chain, and therefore possesses a unique power. This is reinforced by the frequent shift of perspective from the human to that of the fish and the bird, pushing, at times, the human eye/perspective to the periphery. It is this decentred vision that accommodates both the human and the non-human in the framework of nature. This is a key aspect of the post-pastoral in play in the poetry of Hughes that is discussed later in this section. As a commentator on Hughes argues

His poems about animals, birds, and insects owe their weight and solidity to the fact that he can survey, without flinching, the most grotesque forms of life, revering them no matter what their nature may be, however

repulsive they are, however alien to our human modes of existence. He feels for them an intuitive sympathy, which enables him to convey the inner quality of their being, without any trace of sentimental anthropomorphic glibness. (Press: 188)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: From which collection, are the poems "Pike" and "Thrushes" taken? What do animals signify in Ted Hughes' poetry?

Q 5: What are Ted Hughes' own views about the animal aspects in human beings?

13.5 MAJOR THEMES

The following are some of the dominant themes in the poem.

Violence and Energy:

Ted Hughes distinguishes between two kinds of violence. There is one that is all too visible in contemporary society and becomes a spectacle on TV and in pulp fiction, a "perpetual massacre" that "leaks up with its characteristic whiff of emptiness and meaninglessness, that smell of psychosis which is very easy to detect", one is sociological in nature (Ted Hughes in Dyson, Ed.: 101). For Hughes, however, there is a greater kind of violence that is manifest in the great works of literature, especially poetry. For Hughes, poetry is the record "just how the forces of the Universe try to redress some balance disturbed by human error" (Ted Hughes in Dyson, Ed.: 101). Thus, poetry becomes a medium through which this balance can be arrived at. Hughes visualises poetry taking the place of old rituals and dogma that bring about a heightened awareness of the energy of the Universe to us through our embeddedness in nature. Violence in this framework, as we have seen, is vitally linked to energy and power. Violence, for Hughes, therefore, as A. E. Dyson argues in his essay "Power Thought Absolutely", "is the occasion not for reflection, but for *being*; it is a guarantee of energy, of life, and most so, paradoxically, when it knows itself in moments

of captivity, pain or death" (Dyson (Ed): 116). This energy for Hughes is directly accessible to the animal world (represented here by the pike and the thrush) since their existence within the Universe is unmediated by reason that inevitably encumbers human responses to their immediate environment and determines human actions:

> "With a man it is otherwise. Heroisms on horseback,
> Outstripping his desk-diary at a broad desk,
> Carving at a tiny ivory ornament
> For years: his act worships itself - while for him,
> Though he bends to be blent in the prayer, how loud and above what
> Furious spaces of fire do the distracting devils
> Orgy and hosannah, under what wilderness
> Of black silent waters weep."
>
> **("Thrushes")**

The representation of the pike and the thrush as violent predators is part of this framework in that their violence is part of a natural cycle of birth death and regeneration that manifests itself in every living being. The reason their activities seem brutal is because we, the human observers, have ceased to relate to this process through our instinct, and instead interpret it through the obscuring veil of reason and rationalism that is part more of our social moorings. The 'eye' in both the poems (of the pike in the one and the thrush in the other) is an eye that stares at us from "the depths of the cultural and individual unconscious and slowly begins to confront and to make insecure the conscious life" (West: 23).

The Post-pastoral:

Terry Gifford coins the term post-pastoral to refer to "literature that is aware of the anti-pastoral and of the conventional illusions upon which Arcadia is premised, but which finds a language to outflank those dangers with a vision of accommodated humans, at home in the very world they thought themselves alienated from by their possession of language" (Gifford: 149). Gifford identifies six features of this literature.

Firstly, it expresses "an awe in attention to the natural world" that derives not merely from an intimate knowledge of nature of the kind that a naturalist possesses or a knowledge of "the dynamics of relationships" that is the concern of an ecologist, but from "a deep sense of the immanence of all things" (Gifford: 152). This "positioning of the self towards nature leads inevitably to a humbling that is a necessary requirement of the shift from the anthropocentric position of the pastoral to the ecocentric view of the post-pastoral" (Gifford: 152). As referred to earlier, the shifting perspectives in "Pike" and "Thrushes" approach this ecocentric vision that acknowledges the inherent value of all living beings regardless of their being human or non-human. Such a vision attempts to correct the hypocrisy that is usually involved in human responses to the natural world.

The second feature of the post-pastoral is "the recognition of a creative-destructive equally in balance in a continuous momentum of birth and death, death and rebirth, growth and decay, ecstasy and dissolution. Often this requires the recognition of the death process, as it does for Coleridge's Ancient Mariner who had not learned humility before the huge presence of the Albatross and had committed the hubris of causing the arbitrary death of not just the only fellow creature in the ice and fog, but one welcomed 'As if it had been a Christian soul'" (Gifford: 155). This takes into account nature as a dynamic process that inevitably has some negatives and positives. This, again, has some resonances in the two poems of Hughes in that the emphasis on hunting and killing prey are what make these two otherwise harmless animals (to us!) so intimidating. At the same time it is also emphasised that their hunting is for the purpose of preservation of their species (food, securing of territory, survival) and thus, they are different from us in that human violence in contemporary times is most often not for survival and in a way diverges from the natural cycles.

Thirdly, the post-pastoral recognises that "the inner is also the workings of the outer, that our inner human nature can be understood in relation to external nature" (Gifford: 156). This suggests that we can, through our humility towards other species in the natural world can regain our integral place in that framework rather than remaining alienated from it, and thereby

regain the "sensorial dimension of experience" that enables us to retrieve "the living landscape" in which we are bodily or physically placed (Gifford: 156). This implies that the cycles of this living landscape outside of us but in which we ourselves are embedded reflect the same cycles (say, of birth and death, and so on) that are constantly in process within us, and manifest themselves in our moods, our emotions, our intuition, in other words, our psychological landscape itself. We can locate this Hughes' poems through his use of images that bring out the impact of the environment or atmosphere on the poet's psyche. It is most noticeable in the fear of the irrational, dark depths of his unconscious that threaten the poet as he angles for a giant pike in the legendary depths of a pond dating back to medieval England:

> "A pond I fished, fifty yards across,
> Whose lilies and muscular tench
> Had outlasted every visible stone
> Of the monastery that planted them-
> Stilled legendary depth:
> It was as deep as England. It held
> Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old
> That past nightfall I dared not cast
>
> But silently cast and fished
> With the hair frozen on my head
> For what might move, for what eye might move.
> The still splashes on the dark pond,
>
> Owls hushing the floating woods
> Frail on my ear against the dream
> Darkness beneath night's darkness had freed,
> That rose slowly toward me, watching."
>
> ("Pike")

Following this, the post-pastoral demonstrates, as its fourth feature, that the terms 'culture' and 'nature' become frequently interchangeable since, as Gifford argues (using the American poet Gary Snyder, himself a key

figure in environmental ethics), culture becomes nature in that "our art is our natural way of thinking ourselves back into our natural world from which much of our previous culture has alienated us" (Gifford: 161). Conversely, nature can also become culture in that our responses to nature are always culturally conditioned and reflected in aspects of conservation as well (for example in India where in many places snakes are worshipped and so are not killed; or the conservation of lions in Gir that was prompted by the royal sport of hunting lions which required an adequate population of lions to exist). Again, when we have to describe our direct, immediate or intuitive experience of nature, we are inevitably forced to use language that is socially constructed and therefore bears the mark of culture.

However, post-pastoral literature attempts to express this symbiotic relationship between nature and culture. This can be demonstrated with the passage just quoted from "Pike", where it is implied that the fear of the poet is culturally conditioned, like the fear of snakes described in D. H. Lawrence's poem "Snake". This fear is the fear of the unknown, of the irrational, a fear that manifests only because as humans we are used to a rational way of thinking and experiencing the external world and therefore suppress our intuitions regarding it. In this case, rationalism, that is characteristic of human culture, becomes a natural way of looking at things. On the other hand, the poet's familiarity with the animal world and the workings of nature turns this rationalism on its head by making the pike (as well as the thrush) a denizen of both culture (through the mythologising tendency of the poet) and nature (as an efficient hunter that has an immediate relation to nature and the tremendous power it contains). This ecological consciousness leads to a conscientious responsibility towards nature and the various species (apart from humans) living within it (Gifford: 163). Post-pastoral literature (such as Lawrence's or Hughes') thus articulates this conscience that is part of one's humility towards other species. This aspect is however more noticeable in some other poems of Hughes like "An Otter", or "Hawk in the Rain".

Finally, post-pastoral writing connects the exploitation of nature with the exploitation of women and minorities and thereby addresses both environmental and social exploitation at the same time (Gifford: 165). For

Gifford, one of the best illustrations of post-pastoral writing is Ted Hughes' *Cave Birds* (1978) (Gifford: 169-171).

The Idea of England:

In his poetry and other writings, Ted Hughes criticises the materialism and rationalism that characterises England or Britain in the modern era. For him, it is primarily the outcome of Britain's leaning towards Protestantism since the Reformation. To counter the stagnation brought about due to this, Hughes uses nature as a medium through which he can access the more vital life of an older England "made up of Anglo-Saxon, Nordic and Celtic influences, brought together under the sign of a feminine religion that spans paganism and medieval Catholicism" (Ingelbien: 629). In a seminal essay titled "Englands of the Mind" (included in *Preoccupations*) the poet Seamus Heaney argues that English poets like Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill and Philip Larkin "return to an origin" and imply a continuity of contemporary England with another, older England that combined together constitute for each of them the real England (Heaney: 150). At the same time, this England is informed by the region to which each of them belongs, articulating a "defensive love of their territory", something that was "once shared by those poets we might call colonial–Yeats, MacDiarmid, Carlos Williams. They are aware of their Englishness as deposits in the descending storeys of the literary and historical past" (Heaney: 150-151).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: What views of Violence and Energy can be derived from Ted Hughes' poetry?

Q 7: How do poems like "Pike" and "Thrushes" present Hughes' eco-centric vision?

Q 8: How does Ted Hughes view England in his poems?

13.6 HUGHES' POETIC STYLE

The most obvious feature of Hughes' poetic style, especially in his early verse, is the remarkable vehemence of the language replete with verbs,

adjectives, and nouns expressing powerful physical activity or fierce reactions. For example, look at the terms that describe the pike.

> "Pike, three inches long, perfect
> Pike in all parts, green tigering the gold.
> and the thrushes
> Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn,
> More coiled steel than living - a poised
> Dark deadly eye, those delicate legs."

Triggered to stirrings beyond sense in their respective poems. The concrete imagery that accompanies the animals at once aligns them with a real palpable world but at the same time endow them with a mythic power. Again, as stated earlier, the favouring of consonant sounds and of alliteration also manifests the obsession of language in Hughes with a primordial power. The violence that coils itself in the pike and the thrush is represented through an economy of words. The images refuse to sentimentalise the animals and instead set them up as representatives harbouring the formidable forces of nature.

The language of Hughes, argues Heaney, is a combination of "pagan Anglo-Saxon and Nordic elements" that draw their effect from "a related constellation of primitive myths and world views" (Heaney: 151). The literary heritage that emerges from this is the Middle English alliterative tradition with its "stark outline and vitality" that "went underground to sustain the folk poetry, ballads, and the ebullience of Shakespeare and the Elizabethans" (Heaney: 151). Hughes' "England of the mind" is correspondingly "a primeval landscape where stones cry out and horizons endure, where the elements inhabit the mind with a religious force,...England as King Lear's heath which now becomes a Yorkshire moor where sheep and foxes and hawks persuade 'unaccommodated man' that he is a poor bare forked thing, kinned not in a chain but on a plane of being with the animals themselves" (Heaney: 151-152). Because of such derivations of his poetry, Hughes verse leans heavily on consonants and alliteration that instils a particular robustness in his poems. The idea of the poet angling for pikes in an ancient pond "as deep

as England" seems to substantiate this idea. In fact, the choice of the pike and the thrush in the two poems itself is an indication of Hughes attraction for English landscapes and fauna.

13.7 RECEPTION OF HUGHES

Ted Hughes possesses certain qualities which very few English poets possess—a sense of nature, a sense of that other England which the London based writers of his time seemed to have forgotten. Although he cannot be straightway termed as an animal poet, his animal poetry, like we find in case of the poem "Pike", is an excellent example of poetry. He brings to animal subjects and sometimes to natural landscape, a feeling for their stark impingement far beyond the range of any of his contemporaries.

The poetry of Hughes has had a wide range of reception from the initial criticism during the 1950s and 60s of what was seen as his fascist sympathy (with reference to poems such as "Hawk Roosting") to an acknowledgement of the power of his poetic language. There was also the negative perceptions expressed by the 'Movement' poets like Philip Larkin who ridiculed the "myth-kitty" that had become empty now, a snide remark at the perceived irrelevance of the mythopoeic stance that poets like Hughes adopted. Critics like A. E. Dyson and Graham Hough were, however, appreciative of the "penetrating and transformative" (Hough) and the "exploratory, meditative" (Dyson) qualities of his poetry (Gifford 2009: 102). However, criticism towards the later decades of the 20th century and till the present has also concentrated on issues of nationhood, gender, and ecological consciousness in Hughes (as can be seen in Heaney, Gifford, and Ingelbien).



13.8 LET US SUM UP

From your reading of this unit, you must have noted that two experiences seem to have determined Hughes' frame of poetic reference: the myth of World War I and an awareness of nature. Anthropology was yet

another determinant affecting his early poems. Hughes is a traditionalist but his poetry is often deemed as 'New Poetry' of the 60s. This is mainly because, he reacted against the suburban generality of the Movement Poets of the previous generation of poets. His is a move away from sobriety and tidiness towards a kind of innovations often sought to be associated with modernism, with energetic poems that consider the violence and cruelty of life and also the recesses of the human mind. Unlike the 'Movement Poets' with their use of post war austerity that sought to give order to poetry, the 'New Poetry' of Ted Hughes and others were written in the shadow of nuclear weapons, and gave voice to a sense of disintegration and darkness that often characterises the post modern period. This tendency has been made explicit in his poem "Thrushes" where the observation of some thrushes in his own lawn lead him to contrast them to human beings whose best acts seem produced by the suppression of such energies as the birds display. The manner in which the bird(s) behave prompts the poet to reflect on human motivation and creativity. It can be seen as a poem, which is a philosophical attempt to differentiate between human and animal behaviour. While the poem "Pike" explains how the natural world provokes the realization of how human beings have been wrongly imposing their will and interpretation to the world of animals where nothing of 'human' perspective and understanding can apply.



13.9 FURTHER READING

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Websites and Electronic Resources:

http://www.thetedhughessociety.org/life.htm

http://www. poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/single Poem.do? poemId =7079

13.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Hughes' poetry treats nature as violent and pitiless… …many poems deal with animals traditionally regarded as violent and those usually seen as benign but which always vigorously pursue their lives with a single-minded strength and power… …Hughes approaches animals and the natural world without sentimentality.

Ans to Q 2: Dylan Thomas and D. H. Lawrence who are part of the tradition of nature poetry in English literature.

Ans to Q 3: The humans are seen as alienating themselves from an immediate living and access to the tremendous forces of nature by distancing itself through an overconfident reliance on rationality and culture. As a result, they feel threatened by an uncanny proximity with them.

Ans to Q 4: The poems "Pike" and "Thrushes" are taken from *Lupercal* (1960)… …In both poems Hughes registers a decentred vision that takes cognizance of the inherent value of non-human species within nature… …the poet does not sympathise with the animals but

provides a critique of our usual dealings with nature and animals… …animals also operate on an imaginative as well as a symbolic level.

Ans to Q 5: Animals are the "elemental symbols" which compress within themselves the "enraged energy" of the Universe… …Hughes attempts to examine the possibility of a balance between the social consciousness of human beings and their primordial side, which has gradually succumbed to the process of civilization and industrialisation… …thus he creates representative animal figures that exist between the real and the symbolic.

Ans to Q 6: Hughes distinguishes between two kinds of violence: one visible on TV and in pulp fiction, and the other manifest in poetry… …For Hughes, poetry is the record "just how the forces of the Universe try to redress some balance disturbed by human error"… … Poetry becomes a medium through which this balance can be arrived at.

Ans to Q 7: The shifting perspectives in "Pike" and "Thrushes" approach this ecocentric vision that acknowledges the inherent value of all living beings regardless of their being human or non-human. Such a vision attempts to correct the hypocrisy that is usually involved in human responses to the natural world.

Ans to Q 8: Hughes criticises the materialism and rationalism that characterises England or Britain in the modern era… …use of nature as a medium through which he can access the more vital life of an older England… …in the essay "Englands of the Mind" (included in *Preoccupations*) the poet Seamus Heaney argues that English poets like Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill and Philip Larkin "return to an origin" and imply a continuity of contemporary England with another, older England.



13.11 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Hughes has frequently been described as a poet of violence. Substantiate this argument with relevant examples from his poetry.

Q 2: What is the idea of England that emerges from a reading of Hughes' poetry? Critically discuss with suitable examples from his poems.

Q 3: Analyse the relationship between humans and nature as explored by Hughes in his poems.

Q 4: Animals in Hughes' poetry operate on an imaginative as well as a symbolic level. Discuss with reference to "Pike" and "Thrushes".

Q 5: Discuss the important aspects of Ted Hughes' poetry that also expresses his ecocentric vision.

Q 6: How did the 'New Poetry' of the Ted Hughes, react against the Suburban generality of the "Movement" poets? Elaborate with examples.

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UNIT 14: PHILIP LARKIN: "NEXT PLEASE" AND "AMBULANCES"

UNIT STRUCTURE

14.1 Learning Objectives

14.2 Introduction

14.3 Philip Larkin: The Poet

14.4 Reading the Poems Prescribed

14.5 Major Themes

14.6 Larkin's Poetic Style

14.7 Reception of Larkin

14.8 Let us Sum up

14.9 Further Reading

14.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

14.11 Possible Questions

14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- gain some ideas on the life and works of the English poet Philip Larkin
- make a detailed summary of the poems "Next Please" and "Ambulances"
- discuss the major themes evident in both the poems
- analyse Larkin's poetical style and language employed in the prescribed poems.
- provide a critical reception of the poems and further explore the poetry and writings of Philip Larkin

14.2 INTRODUCTION

The present unit takes up two interesting poems titled "Next Please" and "Ambulances" by Philip Larkin who wrote during the second half of the 20th century. Both these poems reflect the poet's compelling thoughts on

the fleeting nature of life and the inevitability of death itself. Although, the poems contain a sense of gloom in capturing our common sense of fear and insecurity with regard to death, yet they also confront death as a natural process of life in itself. Larkin who assumed the pseudonym of 'Brunette Coleman' was also considered one of the leading 'Movement Poets', greatly admired by this prominent literary circle of leading English poets and writers such as D.J. Enright, Donald Davie, Elizabeth Jennings, John Holloway, John Wain, Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest among a few others. The term 'movement' with reference to this close intellectual group was coined by J. D. Scott, the editor of the *Spectator* magazine, and thus with time, it came to define this little spark of a literary movement, which gradually developed through the literary, creative, and intellectual exchanges among its members. Philip Larkin was considered one of the most promising poets of England who was widely read and admired for his poetry that created new insights into the realities of modern life, as well as, the otherwise taken-for-granted or mundane aspects of everyday life that found a new expression through his poetry. Together with these prescribed poems, learners can also explore some of the other widely anthologised poems of Larkin namely, "Church Going", "Aubade", "Days", "High Windows", "Night Music" and "The Whitsun Weddings" among others. Before we explore the textual content and meaning of the prescribed poems, let us briefly familiarise ourselves to the life and works of Larkin.

14.3 PHILIP LARKIN: THE POET

Philip Larkin (1922–1985) was born in Warwickshire, England to Sydney Larkin and Eva Larkin and was raised along with his elder sister Catherine Larkin. He began his formal education at King Henry VIII School where he spent his formative years from 1930-1940 following which he studied English Literature at St. John's College, Oxford till 1943. Larkin not only excelled at his studies in College but also developed an interest in writing that could be traced to his school years when he wrote for his school magazine *The Coventrian*, an interest that he continued to pursue through his Oxford years where he wrote for *Cherwell* and *Oxford Poetry*, the popular

college magazines. During his studies at Oxford, he had also developed a close friendship with Kingsley Amis and Bruce Elinton Montgomery who eventually became his fellow poets or writers. While Amis became a prominent English poet, critic and writer, who as mentioned earlier, was also a member of the Movement Poets; Montgomery went on to become a well-known American author, painter and performer of musical-theatre.

Larkin was considerably influenced by Thomas Hardy whose writings inspired him to take up common themes or subjects from everyday life, and capture the same through an effective and lasting poetical expression. In addition, he was also greatly influenced by the poetical style of W.H. Auden. His first major volume of poetry was titled *The North Ship* (1945) followed by his other significant anthologies such as *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974). While Larkin's second volume *The Less Deceived* is the source of the poem "Next Please", the poem "Ambulances belongs to his third volume *The Whitsun Weddings*. While the second volume contains significant poems such as "Absences", ""Age", "Born Yesterday", "Coming", "Deceptions", "I Remember, I Remember" among others; the third volume contains poems such as "A Study of Reading Habits", "An Arundel Tomb", "Ignorance", "Self's the Man", "Sunny Prestatyn", "The Whitsun Weddings" and "Toads Revisited" to mention a few.

Besides his four major volumes of poetry, through the course of his long literary career Larkin wrote a fragment of his autobiography titled "Ante Meridian" containing anecdotes from his childhood; an incomplete novel titled *Michaelmas Term at St. Brides* centered on school life; a series of early poems compiled as *Sugar and Spice: A Sheaf of Poems*; an essay titled "What Are We Waiting For?"; together with his *Selected Letters* (1992). He spent much time in the company of books and manuscripts while working as a chief librarian at the University of Hull. Larkin was much reserved and withdrawn in terms of his personality, shy of all recognitions that were bestowed on him which in fact saw him decline the offer to teach as a professor of poetry at Oxford in 1972 or even the honour of Poet Laureate in the year 1984. However, Larkin in the course of his lifetime had received

great honour and he was widely admired by his fellow poets, his readers, as well as, the literary circles for his remarkable contributions as one of the most prominent English poets.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What was the pseudonym under which Philip Larkin wrote?

Q 2: Name some of the major poets and writers that comprised the Movement Poets.

Q 3: Who coined the term "Movement" with regard to the "Movement Poets"?

Q 4: Write a few words on the origins and early life of the poet Philip Larkin.

Q 5: Mention the names of the four major volumes of Philip Larkin's poetry.

Q 6: What are the sources of the poems "Next Please" and "Ambulances"?

14.4 READING THE POEMS PRESCRIBED

In the following subsection, the summary of the poems "Next Please" and "Ambulances" has been provided with a supplemented glossary for both the poems.



Expectancy: hope that something will happen or occur.
Bluff: referring to a steep cliff or slope
Armada: a fleet of war ships
Haste: hurry
Wretched: in a very unhappy or unfortunate way

Next Please

Always too eager for the future, we
Pick up bad habits of expectancy.
Something is always approaching; every day
Till then we say,
    Watching from a bluff the tiny, clear
Sparkling armada of promises draw near.
How slow they are! And how much time they waste,
Refusing to make haste!
Yet still they leave us holding wretched stalks

Of disappointment, for, though nothing balks
Each big approach, leaning with brasswork printed,
Each rope distinct,
Flagged, and the figurehead with golden tits
Arching our way, it never anchors; it's
No sooner present than it turns to past.
Right to the last
We think each one will heave to and unload
All good into our lives, all we are owed
For waiting so devoutly and so long.
But we are wrong:
Only one ship is seeking us, a black-
Sailed unfamiliar, owing at her back
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake
No waters breed or break.



Balks: hesitate to accept an idea, thwart or hinder
Figurehead: carved bust at the prow of the ship
Heave: lift or drag with effort; movement
Devoutly: very sincerely or seriously

In the opening lines of the first verse, the poet directly addresses the central concerns of the poem by taking up the ways in which human life pivots around hopes and expectations. We are all caught up in the web of life, whereby we find ourselves constantly busy moving ahead towards the future with enthusiasm, brimming with bright hopes and perfect plans, no matter how challenging the present may seem. However, the poet expresses the opinion that too much of optimism with regard to the immediate future also tends to end up in futility as the future is always shrouded in mystery and more often than not, our plans can take unexpected turns where things do not necessarily turn up the way we expect them to and even worse, leading to the final turn of our lives i.e., 'death' for some of us, whereby even the slightest possibilities of our fulfilled hopes and expectations, plans and desires, dreams and wishes are rudely cut short once and for all. Perhaps, this is why the wise and the elderly always remind us that the key to a fulfilling life is living in the present and focusing on our blessings rather than continuously harping on the unknown future.

In the third line of the poem, the use of the word "something", therefore refers to 'death', and the poet notes that death is constantly gaining

on us with every passing moment through the days, months and years, as we flip through the calendars oblivious of the fact that death has the ultimate power to stop us short at any given moment. Regardless of this, it is only too natural a human tendency to wait for all the good things to fill our lives, in the hope of which we invest all our plans and efforts. We eagerly await the arrival of our long cherished hopes and dreams that many-a-times seem to elude us without ever taking the shape of reality. At other times, when such moments do actualise, we find it difficult to hold onto them, as they easily escape us like sand slipping through our hands. Thus, the poem conjures an image of the armada or fleet of warships that symbolically defines the promises, as well as, the challenges of our near future, which we eagerly await but which seems to delay its arrival by taking its own sweet time. The learner will perhaps agree that often in our wait for better things to come our way, we forget the beauty of living in the present and cherishing the here and now.

Thus, as the symbolic representation of the poet suggests, when the fleet of warships are almost near, so much so, that the fluttering sails and supporting ropes, as well as, its shining brass-work and the figurehead is clearly visible, the entire fleet suddenly and ironically is seen to change its course of direction in an instant. Instead of reaching land and dropping anchor, the ships are seen to move away without as much as stopping by for even for a short while. Similarly, our dreams and desires tend to elude us as well by often changing their usual course and thereby leaving us disheartened, disappointed and with several set-backs in life. Besides, even as the best of moments of which we dream and patiently work towards actualises or turns into our desired reality in the immediate 'present', such moments also melt away too easily before we are able to soak and relish in them completely. These then turning into immediate moments of the past% that is how swiftly time passes by where before we even realise, every single moment in the present is continuously transforming into a moment of the past. Thus, we all continue to live in a constant disillusionment whereby all our dreams and desires prove to be nothing but 'vanity' and 'death', which holds great power over our lives, proves to be the ultimate truth.

These lines of the poem reveal the irony of our lives where regardless of our desires, none of us stand exception to the uncertainty of life and where no form of life on earth can ever escape the unpredictability, as well as, inevitability of death. Thus, the poet describes a lone ship (in contrast to the fleet of ships) that is sure to land and drop its anchor. This silent ship with a black sail symbolically representing 'death' is slowly yet surely headed towards our lives, to take us away with some excuse or the other, at any moment without the slightest hint. There is no saying when, where and how death will make its final claim on us but that it we will also be visited is also certain. Perhaps, then the poet desires to convey his thoughts that even as we wait "devoutly" and with optimism towards gaining on life's best, it is best to realise that in the certainty of death there is nothing more important, necessary and blissful than living in the present, cherishing every single moment of our lives and celebrating life in every way possible before we arrive to the final turn of our lives.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: Mention the central concerns that are addressed in the opening lines of the poem "Next Please".

Q 8: What is the poet's opinion with regard to holding too much of optimism where the immediate future is concerned?

Q 9: What is considered the key to living a fulfilling life as described in the poem "Next Please"?

Q 10: Briefly define the irony of human lives as described in the poem "Next Please".

Ambulances

Closed like confessionals, they thread
Loud noons of cities, giving back
None of the glances they absorb.
Light glossy grey, arms on a plaque,
They come to rest at any kerb:



Confessionals: an enclosed stall in a church in which a person confesses his or her sins

Glossy: smooth and shiny surface

Plaque: an ornamental tablet fixed to a wall to commemorate a person or event

Kerb: a stone edging to a pavement



Strewn: be covered with untidily scattered things
Stretcher: a framework of two poles with a long piece of canvas slung between them, used for carrying sick, injured or dead
Stowed: pack or store something tightly
Recede: move back or further away
Cohered: hold firmly together
Random: done or happening without a deliberate order
Dulls: make or become less interesting or significant

All streets in time are visited.
Then children strewn on steps or road,
Or women coming from the shops
Past smells of different dinners, see
A wild white face that overtops
Red stretcher-blankets momently
As it is carried in and stowed,
And sense the solving emptiness
That lies just under all we do,
And for a second get it whole,
So permanent and blank and true.
The fastened doors recede. Poor soul,
They whisper at their own distress
For borne away in deadened air
May go the sudden shut of loss
Round something nearly at the end,
And what cohered in it across
The years, the unique random blend
Of families and fashions, there
At last begin to loosen. Far
From the exchange of love to lie
Unreachable inside a room
He traffic parts to let go by
Brings closer what is left to come,
And dulls to distance all we are.

Ambulances are commonly referred to medical-vans providing medical services, first aid and rushing the ailing or the suffering, victims of accidents, victims of natural calamities and medical patients in critical conditions to hospitals for timely medical assistance. In the poem, such ambulances are compared to enclosed spaces of 'confessionals' that are usually found in Roman Catholic churches, where believers or even the penitents who desire to make a confession are free to do so without the

slightest hesitation and thereby ease the burden of their hearts, shed their worries, rid themselves of guilt, renew themselves, as well as, their faith in God. During such a confession, a 'priest' who remains hidden, patiently listens to the confessions made by the 'penitent' who may or may not be visible to the entire congregation (depending on the provision or design of the confessional box) and the priest acts as the intercessor or mediator between the penitent and God. Similarly, the ambulances become closed spaces where the suffering or even the dying also tends to make their final confessions before they pass away.

This also brings into relevance the religious practice of the Extreme Unction, which is another Christian rite of the Roman Catholic Church whereby a priest administers the final rites of confession and prayers to the sick and the ailing or even the dying in their final moments. Thus, in the opening lines of the poem itself, we receive the images of the penitent, the sick and the dying which brings to our mind the magnitude or degree of suffering that such tormented souls do undergo. It portrays how ambulances rush through the cities, capturing the attention of people in the traffic or on the sidewalk with their loud sirens, making their way through the traffic and crowds on their emergency duties. The poet observes that sooner or later, ambulances arrive at each and every door and 'Death' arrives unannounced to claim someone or the other every now and then, leaving only as much as a gravestone and an inscription to the name and memory of the departed souls.

Again, it is only through rare miracles that at times even those who are almost fated to die find their lives spared, receiving a new lease of life yet again. Otherwise, 'Death' is defined as being merciless in its random choices and stands as 'the greatest leveler' as the bard William Shakespeare had famously noted, which in all its fairness reduces every single living being to dust at the tail end of life without exception. Another vivid image that the poet presents is that of a white faced figure (whose gender is not mentioned) who could well personify 'Death' itself or as the messenger of 'Death', shown to be too busy in stowing away stretcher-blankets and noticed by 'children' who spend nights on steps or by the

roadsides and even by 'women' while returning from their grocery shopping as part of their everyday work. Thus, while the poor kids are caught up with their own share of mundane realities in life and the women are preoccupied with their own mundane work, 'Death' too continues its own share of dull routine work.

Death is thus defined as a 'solving emptiness' which pervades ever bit of our lives which we often take for granted or ignore in every possible way for our own peace of mind. Perhaps, even as we live in denial, inside our own sweet bubble without realising that it could burst at any given moment without the slightest warning, it is the only way we can live more freely and sensibly, making sense of our existence and purpose in life. After all, it is pointless and unnecessary to live in the fear of death every single moment of our lives even as death may stare hard at us. The learner may certainly agree that instead of living in continuous dread that 'Death' is never too far from claiming us with finality, it is best to free our conscious minds from an such fear and to focus on the beautiful treasures that life has to offer. Perhaps, then ignorance is also blissful in so many ways, where being unmindful of death or preventing the fear of death from preoccupying our minds also enables us to live life to the fullest with freedom and fortitude.

In its closing lines, the poem describes how the deceased or the departed souls leave behind a sense of emptiness, in the lives of their families and friends, a void that can never ever be filled even with the passing of time. Thus, 'Death' arrives from door-to-door, family-to-family, person-to-person, being completely indifferent to 'Life' and the promises it holds for us all. Through the long formative years of our lives, building relationships, nurturing families and shaping every single phase of our lives, we are all fated to rest in eternal sleep. Eventually, this is how everything topples down in our lives like a house of cards, where all our accomplishments and acquisitions are reduced to nothing. However, even as our lives are inseparably tied to death, it should not prevent us from celebrating every moment of our lives, cherishing all our little joys with our loved ones and living like it were the last day of our lives, as one of the days will soon be our last.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 11: What are ambulances compared to in Larkin's poem with the same title?

Q 12: Briefly describe how a confession takes place in the Church with reference to Larkin's poem.

Q 13: What is described in the final lines of the poem?

14.5 MAJOR THEMES

The present subsection takes up the central themes found in the prescribed poems to which the learner may also add other such thematic concerns from his or her own reading as well.

Death:

Even as we forget this unwavering truth of life as mere mortals on earth, every day we are only that much closer towards our death. We naturally tend to forget or feel our own heart beats in the chaotic and busy lives that we all lead; forgetting that there is a beautiful rhythm of life in itself which can alter the ways in which we live and patterning our lives in accordance to the rush and chaos of the modern day in which we live. Despite the ticking of the clocks and 'time' that passes by in a flurry, the never-say-die spirit seated deep within us and the spring of beauty in the form of our lived moments, must define our sense of self-worth and the value of our experiences in life. In addition, just as the poet Robert Frost had noted, "The woods are lonely dark and deep, but I have miles to go before I sleep, miles to go before I sleep". With time, ageing and growing old, turning weak and suffering health is only a natural part of our lives and just as we are born, we are all destined to die as well. However, irrespective of our age, health conditions or any other concerns, we must live life to the hilt without ever giving up or surrendering to Death all too easily. Life is after all a gift from God.

Somehow, you all will agree that a sense of dread and gloom always pervades even the mention of death, which is one of the ultimate truths of our lives and also one of the most unpleasant ones. No matter how much

we live in denial, death is inevitable and in fact, the entire natural world is subject to the cycle of life and death. Death certainly arrives with the force of finality when it decides to claim lives, without the slightest mercy or the slightest consideration. Although, there is no saying when death chooses to arrive, yet sooner or later, it claims everyone, our loved ones, our acquaintances, us and every living being on this earth. Death overshadows everything as it takes away both our life-breath and the meanings that we pour into our lives reducing everything to nothingness.

Therefore, the only choice we have in our hands is to stir magic into our lives by living life in the right spirit, as well as, leaving our imprints in the world by doing something extraordinary and worthwhile for which we will be always remembered, as living in the hearts and memories of the living is the only way we can live on forever even after we are no more. Thus, as the titles of the poems suggests, Larkin takes up the central theme of 'death' where his intention is not to create a fear psychosis in the minds of his readers with regard to death, but rather to provide a scope of reflection, confronting it directly by highlighting the consciousness of human mortality together with the precious moments of life that is in our hands.

Living in the Present and the Beauty of Everyday Life:

Perhaps, in the hope of fulfilling our desires and accomplishing our dreams, we often forget that there is abundant beauty in and around us. Thus, if we are just a little more mindful of ourselves and our surroundings, even our 'everyday lives' which we often take for granted will also begin to feel fresh, lively and filled with positive energy– such is the precious gift of life. The wisdom with which we look into our inner selves and the lens with which we look at the world outside should always enrich and enlighten us. Life will never be a dull experience for anyone so long as he or she believes that we live once and once is good enough if we live in the right spirit. After all, it truly depends on our minds and our perspectives, which shape both our lives and personalities.

However, as Larkin notes in his reflective poems, people constantly live in the desire of acquiring and attaining more and more, so much so,

that they forget to count their blessings and relish the little joys of life. As a result, the immediate 'present', as well as, the beauty of everyday life loses importance to those who are continuously chasing the 'future' and its rewards. Many of us hardly seem to have any time to even experience the beauty of life as we become so focused on chasing their future dreams and desires rather than acknowledging and celebrating what we already have. While it is certainly important to have long term goals, to shape our desires, to work harder and be far-sighted, it is even more important to celebrate one's little joys and achievements, to enjoy hard labour and count all the blessings of life and thereby never lose sight of the immediate 'present'% the here and now, so that when death arrives to claim us, we do not have to look back at our lives in regret but rather a sense of fulfillment of having lived each moment to the fullest. Therefore, in essence, both the poems note that the key to a fulfilling life is living in the present and cherishing the beauty of the life force that sustains us all.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 14: Write a few lines on the theme of death in Larkin's poems.

Q 15: What is the only choice that we have in our hands before death comes to claim us?

Q 16: What happens if we are a little mindful of ourselves and our everyday lives?

Q 17: Why do many people hardly seem to have time to experience the beauty of life?

14.6 LARKIN'S POETIC STYLE

The poetry of Larkin broadly delves on various aspects of human life and more specifically on the elements of 'everyday life' with a depth of thought that often leaves the reader hooked to his poetry long after having read his verses. While reading his poetical works, one finds the scope of self-reflection and also experiences moments of self-confrontation given

Larkin's philosophical reflections and the compelling force of his poetical expressions on the profound truths of life and death. The poems "Next Please" and "Ambulances" are both similar in terms of their thematic concerns on the finality of 'death' much like some of Larkin's other poems on the same aspect such as "Aubade" and "Nothing to be Said" among a few others. Although, both these poems may seem gloomy given the seriousness of Larkin's chosen theme, yet they also bear an alternate approach towards life where despite being subject to the imminence, as well as, the inevitability of death, we may also be inspired to transcend our limitations and celebrate all our living moments in the right spirit. Thus, life is presented as not just a continuous approach to death but also as one good opportunity to live it to the best of our abilities.

In the economy of words, Larkin beautifully captures his reflections on these serious aspects of death and decadence with a sense of restraint and also a sense of revelation at the same time, which are often too easily brushed aside in our consciousness. Both these poems tend to tug and pull our emotions given the sensitivity of the aspects discussed and as we read into these verses many different thoughts concerning our lives trickle into our consciousness due to the fact that we can easily relate to what the poet tries to communicate. Before extracting the poet's message from these verses, the reader is met with the challenge of deciphering or figuring out the symbolical meanings evident in both the poems. Thus, Larkin in his characteristic style employs symbolical representations and rhetorical devices to capture and convey at the same time the core message of his poems to the reader.

For an instance, in the poem "Next Please", Larkin symbolically represents our hopes and expectations by the fleet of ships or the 'Sparkling Armada' or in another instance the lone ship symbolically refers to approaching 'death' which is again metaphorically described as "A huge and birdless silence." Similarly, in the poem "Ambulances", Larkin likens ambulances to confessional booths, which also holds countless stories and many such cases of death almost every day on a regular basis. The opening lines of the poems also indicate how the poet moves straight to the

core of his subject in a matter-of-fact manner for an instance "Next Please" opens with the lines "Always too eager for the future", that makes way for an important issue at hand that the poet desires to take up and delve into. Nowhere in these poems does Larkin mention the word 'death' and yet, in his brilliant style and poetical expression, as well as, the powerful restraint of his chosen words, Larkin portrays the serious aspects of life and death by casting them into symbolical representations, almost like codes to be deciphered. In fact, Larkin tactfully and at the same time poetically defines death as "a black –sailed unfamiliar", "so permanent and black and true" and as "something approaching quickly" without romanticising it and making his statement in a realistic manner.

Finally, with regard to his overall poetical style and language, the critical work titled *Philip Larkin: Poetry That Builds Bridges* (2006) by Sisir Chatterjee captures the credibility of Larkin as a poet and his distinct literary practices thus, "Nor is Larkin's poetry thoroughly romantic or staunchly classicist, but a bridge between these two major trends of poetry. The economy that characterises his use of language, the art of restraint that marks his articulation, the critical impetus that informs much of his poetry dealing with the public themes of contemporary concern, the insistence on the necessity of building poems on a rational structure, the formal framework of his verse built on the principle of tight stanzaic patterns, the regularity of the metrical form (which is predominantly iambic), and the ease of the natural, spontaneous rhymes which lend a rare neatness and evenness to the individual poems- all these are classical features that may be easily traced in Larkin's poetry" (349).

14.7 RECEPTION OF LARKIN

Larkin was a 'Movement' poet, and as mentioned in the introduction of the unit, the university educated English poets and writers who were known together as the 'Movement Poets' of the 1950s. Together they broke down the artistic and literary conventions of poetry in their time with their unique blend of literary practices that was further defined by the two major anthologies titled *Poets of the 1950s* (1955) and *New Lines* (1956). The

'Movement Poets' considerably differed from the literary practices of the prominent modernist poets such as T.S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound and moved away from merely capturing and projecting the complexities of modern world like them. However, the 'Movement Poets' were modern in their literary approach and essentially anti-romantic in their literary ideals, pitching their central concerns on reviving the charm of the rich literary tradition of English Poetry. It must be noted that in doing so, some elements of the romantic certainly seeped into the works of the Movement Poets even as they practiced restraint in terms of literary style, thematic expression and poetical expression.

In fact, Larkin who shared a similarity with poets like William Wordsworth, Thomas Hardy, Edward Thomas, A.E. Houseman and W. H. Auden was considered to have blended elements of both classicism and romanticism in his poetry. Larkin who wrote in the decades after the Second World War was well-versed with the pressing concerns of the times in which he lived and thus the bulk of his poetry contain aspects of life in the modern times. However, what is discernible or distinct in his works is maintaining the continuity of English Poetry with its traditional appeal, as well as, the presence of a universal appeal in his thematic concerns. His poetry is much realistic in nature with sufficient space or scope of contemplation, with a sense of seriousness and sincerity with regard to confrontation of truth instead of escaping it endlessly.

Larkin was also considered the most prominent poet among the Movement poets with his own distinct style of writing that has come to be referred to as the 'Lankinesque' style in English literature, characterising his serious and compact style of writing. While delving on the common themes of life, loss and regrets in post-war England (as was commonly taken up by his fellow poets), Larkin also added his own set of philosophical reflections, as well as, symbolical interpretations in his works. In fact, one can receive a glimpse of his deepest philosophical contemplations, as well as, his metaphysical speculations in the treasures of his poetry. Larkin's closest friend Kingsley Amis thus wrote, "I have never known him [Larkin] say anything he did not mean; you can be quite sure he does feel it- a

priceless asset to a poet, and a poet of sensation at that. The same quality ensures that when he has nothing to say he says nothing, which helps him not to write any bad poems." (see Chatterjee 353).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 18: Write a few lines on Larkin's style and language employed in his poetry.

Q 19: Write a short note on the practices on the Movement Poets of the 1950s.

Q 20: What was the distinct characteristic of Larkin's poetic style?



14.8 LET US SUM UP

After going through the present unit, you have gained an insight into the life and works of Philip Larkin while also having important ideas on the substance and the thematic concerns of his poems, "Next Please" and "Ambulances". Also, the discussions on the poetic style and language together with the critical reception of Larkin's poetry will provide the learner with a comprehensive idea on the literary practices of the 1950s and Larkin's own literary characteristics. After a detailed reading of the prescribed poems, the learner is also encouraged to further explore and enjoy the poetry and writings of Philip Larkin on your own.



14.9 FURTHER READING

Chartterjee, Sisir Kumar. (2006). *Philip Larkin: Poetry That Builds Bridges.* New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.

Lerner, Lawrence. (2010). *Philip Larkin Paperback*/. Northcote House.

Sarker, Sunil Kumar. (2009). *A Companion to Philip Larkin.* Atlantic Publisher.

Tandon, B. G. & Kalpana Rajaram. (Eds.). (2018). Philip Larkin A Critical Review of Selected Poems. Spectrum Books Pvt. Ltd.

14.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Larkin assumed the pseudonym of 'Brunette Coleman.'

Ans to Q 2: Some of the major poets and English writers were D. J. Enright, Donald Davie, Elizabeth Jennings, John Holloway, John Wain, Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest among a few others.

Ans to Q 3: The term 'movement' with reference to this close intellectual circle was coined by J.D. Scott who was also the editor of the *Spectator* magazine.

Ans to Q 4: Philip Larkin was born in the year 1922 at Warwickshire, England and raised by Sydney Larkin and Eva Larkin together with his elder sibling Catherine Larkin. He began his formal education at King Henry VIII School where he spent his formative years from 1930-1940 following which he studied English Literature at St. John's College, Oxford till 1943.

Ans to Q 5: Larkin's four major volumes of poetry were namely *The North Ship* (1945), *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974).

Ans to Q 6: Larkin's poem "Next Please" is taken from the second volume *The Less Deceived* and "Ambulances" is taken from his third volume *The Whitsun Weddings*.

Ans to Q 7: In the opening lines, the poet directly addresses the central concerns of the poem by taking up the ways in which human life pivots around our hopes and expectations.

Ans to Q 8: The poet expresses the opinion that too much of optimism with regard to the immediate future also tends to end up in futility… …the future is always shrouded in mystery… …our plans can take unexpected turns where things do not necessarily turn up the way we expect them.

Ans to Q 9: The key to a fulfilling life is living in the present and focusing on our blessings rather than continuously harping on the unknown future.

Ans to Q 10: These lines reveal the irony of our lives… …regardless of our desires, none of us stands as an exception to the uncertainty of life… …none can ever escape the inevitability, as well as, the unpredictability of death.

Ans to Q 11: Ambulances are compared to enclosed spaces of 'confessionals' that are usually found in Roman Catholic churches… …believers or penitents desiring to make confessions are free to do so without the slightest hesitation… …thus, they can ease the burden of their hearts, shed their worries, rid themselves of guilt, renew themselves and their faith in God.

Ans to Q 12: During such a confession, a 'priest' who remains hidden patiently listens to the confessions made by the 'penitent'… …the priest acts as the intercessor or mediator between the penitent and God… …similarly, the ambulances become closed spaces where the suffering or even the dying also tend to make their final confessions.

Ans to Q 13: In its closing lines, the poem describes how the deceased or the departed souls leave behind a sense of emptiness in the lives of their families and friends, a void that perhaps can never be filled even with the passing of time. Thus, 'Death' arrives from door-to-door, family-to-family, person-to-person, being completely indifferent to 'Life' and its promises.

Ans to Q 14: Refer to 14.5

Ans to Q 15: Death overshadows everything as it takes away both our life breath and the meaning of life… …the only choice we have in our hands is to stir magic into our lives and to live it in the right spirit… …leave our imprint forever by doing something extra ordinary and worthwhile.

Ans to Q 16: If we are just a little more mindful of ourselves and our surroundings, even our 'everyday lives' also begin to feel fresh and lively… …the wisdom with which we look into our inner selves and the lens with which we look at the world outside should always enrich and enlighten us… …life will never be a dull experience for anyone so

long as he or she believes that we live once and once is good enough if we live in the right spirit.

Ans to Q 17: Many people hardly seem to have any time to even experience the beauty of life as they become focused on chasing their future dreams and desires rather than acknowledging and celebrating what they already have.

Ans to Q 18: Refer to section 14.6 of this unit.

Ans to Q 19: The Movement Poets of the 1950s broke down the artistic and literary conventions of poetry… …they considerably differed from the literary practices of the prominent modernist poets such as T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound… …they moved away from capturing and projecting the complexities of modern world… …the Movement Poets were modern in their literary approach and essentially anti-romantic in their literary ideals, pitching their central concerns on reviving the charm of English poetry.

Ans to Q 20: While delving on the common themes of life, loss and regrets in post-war England, Larkin added his own philosophical reflections, as well as, symbolical interpretations in his works… …he also blended classicism and romanticism in his poetical works to a great extent.



14.11 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1. Discuss the life and literary contributions of the English poet Philip Larkin.

Q 2. Give a detailed explanation of the poems "Next Please" and "Ambulances" from your own reading of the poems.

Q 3. What are some of the major themes that emerge from the text of the poems "Next Please" and "Ambulances"?

Q 4. Describe the poetic style and language employed in the prescribed poems by Philip Larkin.

Q 5. Explain with reference to context:

a) "Always too eager for the future, we
Pick up bad habits of expectancy.

Something is always approaching; every day."

b) "Closed like confessionals, they thread
Loud noons of cities, giving back
None of the glances they absorb.
Light glossy grey, arms on a plaque,
They come to rest at any kerb:
All streets in time are visited."

c) "And sense the solving emptiness
That lies just under all we do,
And for a second get it whole,
So permanent and blank and true."

Q 6. Write short notes on the following:

a) The Movement Poets

b) Philip Larkin as a Movement poet

c) Idea of 'Death' in the poems "Next Please" and "Ambulances" by Larkin.

Q 7. Provide a critical reception of Philip Larkin's poetry.

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UNIT 15: SEAMUS HEANEY: "AFTER A KILLING"

UNIT STRUCTURE

15.1 Learning Objectives

15.2 Introduction

15.3 Seamus Heaney: The Poet

15.4 Reading the Poems prescribed1

15.5 Major Themes

15.6 Heaney's Poetic Style

15.7 Reception of Heaney

15.8 Let us Sum up

15.9 Further Reading

15.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

15.11 Possible Questions

15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of the Irish poet Seamus Heaney
- explain the main aspects of modern poetry in terms of Heaney's poetry
- interpret the poem "After a Killing" in terms of its different aspects
- identify the themes that consist in the concerns of Heaney as a poet
- discuss the poem in its nuanced totality

15.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the last unit of the course on modern poetry. In this unit, you will read about Seamus Heaney, and one of his most important poems "After a Killing". The intensity of the Irish experience is portrayed in most of the works of Heaney, who was born on April 13, 1939 on a family farm in Northern Ireland, about thirty miles northwest of Belfast. The Catholic family into which he was born was also part of the majority that lived in the local

area in relative harmony with their Protestant neighbours. Yet since an early age, Heaney felt the tension between these protestant groups and himself because of their divergent views on politics and religion, and their different languages and literary traditions. The present poem is the first of a three-poem series "Triptych", and refers to the killing of the British Ambassador Christopher Ewart-Biggs in July 1976 by the Provisional Irish Republican Army. A bomb was placed under his car, and Ewart-Biggs and his secretary Judith Cook were killed in the attack. This was one of the many acts of violence taking place in Ireland (both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland) perpetrated by both Catholics and Protestant groups on each other since the 1960s. However, by the time you finish writing this unit, you will find that besides telling the story of a murder, this poem also beautifully exemplifies Heaney's art of poetic writing.

15.3 SEAMUS HEANEY: THE POET

In the following subsections, you will get to read briefly about some aspects of Heaney's life and works.

[The following biography of Heaney is derived largely from Andrew Haggerty's account of the poet's life in *Great World Writers: Twentieth Century. Volume: 4*, ed. Patrick M. O'Neil, New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2004, pp. 559-574, and from another such account at http://www.gale.cengage.com/free_resources/poets/bio/heaney_s.htm, and for the more recent events in the poet's life, from a biography of the poet at http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/211]

His Life:

Seamus (pronounced *Shay*-mus) Justin Heaney (*Hee*-nee) was born on April 13, 1939, near Ulster, Northern Ireland, to Patrick and Margaret Heaney, at the 50-acre farm called Mossbawn that they owned. He was the oldest of nine children. Apart from being a farmer, Heaney's father was also a successful cattle trader. The family belonged to the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. He attended St. Columb's College, a boarding school in the city of Derry, in 1951, and in 1957 entered Queen's University of Belfast,

graduating in 1961 with first-class honours in English literature. This education gave him access to the English, Irish, and American letters, giving him a firm grounding in Latin, Anglo-Saxon, and Irish Gaelic. This is what enabled him to skilfully translate Old English, Irish, and Greek classics to English. Heaney earned his teacher's certificate in English in 1962 from St. Josephs College of Education, Belfast, after which he taught at the secondary level for a year and returned to St. Joseph's as a lecturer in English. In 1966, however, Heaney joined Queens University.

While at Belfast, Heaney became acquainted with writers like Derek Mahon and Michael Longley, who, like Heaney himself, would later emerge as major Irish poets. During this period, Heaney's first volume of poetry, *Eleven Poems*, appeared in 1965. In 1966, he published *Death of a Naturalist*, which made him visible to an international audience, winning among other prizes the E. C. Gregory Award in 1967. In the meantime, in 1965, Heaney married Marie Devlin, and their sons Michael and Christopher were born in 1966 and 1968, while their daughter Catherine was born in 1973.

Partly because of the Troubles erupting in Northern Ireland (discussed later in this unit), in 1972, Heaney, resigned from his job at Queen's University and moved from Belfast to the Southern part of The Republic of Ireland (Glanmore in County Wicklow). Another reason that he cited for this move was the desire to test himself as a poet without resorting to the security of an academic job. An encouraging factor for this was his experience as a visiting lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1970 and 1971, and also the success of his third volume of poetry, *Door into the Dark* (1969).

While living at Glanmore, Heaney made his living through freelance writing and invitations to read and lecture both at home and in the United States of America. In 1975, he once again returned to teaching at Carysfort College in Dublin, where he was made the head of the English department the next year. At this time, he also shifted from Glanmore to Dublin. However, Heaney continued to voice his concerns in his poetry regarding the situation of his homeland, i.e. Northern Ireland. In *North* (1975), Heaney addressed the Troubles directly, attracting controversy and criticism but also praise and admiration. *North* won several awards, including the Duff Cooper

Memorial Prize. His next work, *Field Work*, appearing in 1979, also addressed the roots of political and sectarian violence in the Northern Ireland.

Heaney was awarded an honorary doctorate in 1982 by Queens University as a sign of a more general recognition as an important modern poet. He left Carysfort in 1981 to Harvard University as a visiting professor. In 1985 at Harvard, he was appointed the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory. In 1989, Oxford University made him the professor of poetry for five-year tenure, and in 1995, Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. Apart from *Field Work* and the earlier collections, his major works include *Station Island* (1984), *The Haw Lantern* (1987), *Seeing Things* (1991), *The Spirit Level* (1996) and *Electric Light* (2001). He also published collections of essays and miscellaneous writings like *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978* (1980), and *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose, 1971–2001* (2002), as well as a rendering of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, entitled *The Cure at Troy*, produced by the Field Day theatre group (founded by the Northern Irish playwright Brian Friel and the well-known actor Stephen Rea) in 1990.

In the 2000s, and after Heaney wrote two more collections of poetry, namely—*District and Circle* (2006), and *Human Chain* (2010). Very recently in June 2012, Heaney has received the Lifetime Recognition Award from the Griffin Trust for Excellence.



LET US KNOW

Bernard O'donoghue in his introduction to *Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* writes:

"When Seamus Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, the citation famously paid tribute to his combination of 'lyrical beauty and ethical depth which exalt everyday miracles and the living past'. This captures with remarkable economy not only Heaney's pre-eminent strengths, but also the two imperatives between which his own commentary and the criticism of him have fluctuated. In the Preface to *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971– 2001* Heaney described the choice between the ethical and the aesthetic again, quoting from his

Foreword to the prose collection *Preoccupations* in 1980: 'How should a poet properly live and write? What is his relationship to be to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world?' By quoting the earlier Foreword verbatim, Heaney was making it clear that his abiding concerns have remained unchanged."

His Works:

Heaney is a poet who deliberately adopts a clear personal voice to articulate extremely political themes, primary among them the troubled Northern Ireland and the violence that it experienced in the peak of the Troubles (discussed later in this unit) and that still has not been fully resolved till date. At the same time, rural Ireland, and particularly his own experience at his family's farm, is prominent in his poems, especially those that were written early in his career. In one of his most famous poems "Digging", Heaney introduces a metaphor that frequents his poetry:

"Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it."

Digging here relates to digging into his own memory, into his family lineage, into his and Ireland's past, and into the "deeper levels of legend and myth which shape the character of the people of his country." (Carter and McRae: 446). This is a strategy for exploring solutions to troubles in Ireland, but it also implies the poet being a witness to the capacity of violence of humans that almost approaches the 'primitive' (not necessarily negative in this case but incorporating the sense of being deep-rooted and belonging to a pre-colonial, pre-modern way of life).

Even before he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, Heaney was regarded as one of the finest poets writing in English. It was his volume *North* that established Heaney's early reputation. There, he goes back to the Nordic and Celtic roots of Ireland in order to account for the imperial conquest of this culture through the English language. In *Field Work*, Heaney presents his impressions of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and uses the

theme of the pastoral in order to reinforce the severity in which violence enters into people's private lives and transform the home itself into a locus of terror and death. The mythical and the religious also collaborate with the pastoral, as aptly demonstrated in "Triptych", from which the present poem is derived. By this time, Heaney was also incorporating matters relating to the finding of bog bodies in Northern Europe (as well as P. V. Glob's book on them titled *The Bog People* that came out in the 1969) and in Britain into his 'bog poems', most notable among them being "The Tollund Man". The bog bodies, claimed to be killed as ritual sacrifices by Glob, were of people belonging to ancient cultures, and for Heaney, became apt metaphors of the present-day victims of the Troubles in Ireland.

In his essays and other prose writings (in such collections as *Preoccupations*) and lectures, including "Crediting Poetry", his Nobel Prize lecture, Heaney is perceptive though at times tending to be polemical. Key themes in these writings are the role of a poet and the purpose of poetry, the dynamics between the community and the individual, the working of memory in shaping one's ideas of place and nationhood, the language used to evoke their setting, and so on. Two of Heaney's most well known essays, "Englands of the Mind" and "The Redress of Poetry" that address these issues are discussed later in the unit. In all this, there is the crucial assertion of Irishness that is characteristic of most modern writing in Ireland, Whether in the North or in the Republic.

Heaney's first volume after winning the Nobel Prize was *The Spirit Level*, which brought together the spiritual and pragmatic sides of the poet. Here, Heaney illustrates "how, growing up a Catholic in a divided province, then becoming an emblematic exile in England and America, has given him the capacity to voice images of universal healing rather than division, to find 'personal solutions to a shared crisis, momentary stays against confusion'" (Carter and McRae: 447). The volume *Opened Ground* (1998) collects his poems written between 1966to 1996. His translation of *Beowulf* was also well-received, as was the subsequent volume of poems, *Electric Light*.



LET US KNOW

Following is a List of Key Works of Heaney

Poetry:

1965 *Eleven Poems*

1966 *Death of a Naturalist*

1969 *Door into the Dark*

1972 *Wintering Out*

1975 *North*

1979 *Field Work*

1980 *Poems, 1965-1975*

1984 *Station Island*

1987 *The Haw Island*

1990 *New Selected Poems, 1966-1987*

1991 *Seeing Things*

1966 *The Spirit level*

1999 *Open Ground: Selected Poems, 1966-1996*

2001 *Electric Light*

2006 *Distance and Circle*

2010 *Human Chain*

Essays and Criticism:

1975 The Fire i' the Flint: Reflections on the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins

1980 Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978

1988 The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings

1995 The Redress of Poetry

1995 Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture

2002 Finders Keepers: Selected Prose, 1971-2001



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What is the most important political theme that runs as an undercurrent in Heaney's poetry? What is the meaning of 'Digging'?

Q 2: What is the significance of Heaney's prose writings as reflected through his *Preoccupations?*

15.4 READING THE POEMS PRESCRIBED

"After a Killing"

There they were, as if our memory hatched them,
As if the unquiet founders walked again:
Two young men with rifles on the hill,
Profane and bracing as instruments.

Who's sorry for our trouble?
Who dreamt that we might dwell among ourselves
In rain and scoured light and wind-dried stones?
Basalt, blood, water, headstones, leeches.

In that neuter original loneliness
From Brandon to Dunseverick
I think of small-eyed survivor flowers,
The pined-for, unmolested orchid.

I see a stone house by a pier.
Elbow room. Broad window light.
The heart lifts. You walk twenty yards
To the boats and buy mackerel.
And today the girl walks in home to us
Carrying a basket full of new potatoes,
Three tight green cabbages, and carrots
With the tops and mould still fresh on them.

You have read that this poem tells about Ewart-Biggs who was killed in an attack. This was one of the many acts of violence taking place in Ireland (both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland) perpetrated by both Catholics and Protestant groups on each other from the 1960s. Inspired by the American civil rights movement over the course of the 1960s,

Catholics, who were a minority in Northern Ireland, began to demonstrate against the unequal treatment they received from the Protestant Unionist government. These protests grew in intensity, and in 1969, the British troops were called in to impose order. The ensuing conflict became known as "the Troubles" which also saw the emergence of the terror outfit the Provisional IRA. The Troubles were characterised by guerrilla violence on the one hand, and extreme counterproductive security measures by the Unionist forces on the other. The Irish nationalists believed that there should be no British presence on the island of Ireland while the Unionists, who were largely though not exclusively Protestant, believed that Northern Ireland should remain part of the United Kingdom. While Heaney himself is Catholic and has expressed some cautious sympathy for Irish nationalism (and thereby aligning himself in a way with Yeats and the Irish struggle for independence in the early decades of the 20th century), he is extremely conscious of the all-pervasive nature of the violence which knows no sides.

Heaney suggests that the victims of the Troubles are much like the ancient victims of pagan sacrifices (referring to the bog bodies that were recovered in Ireland and Northern Europe during the 1960s). In both societies, violence has become normalised in that the victims are seen as ritual sacrifices or martyrs for the cause. However, Heaney finds this normalisation disturbing since in celebrating their deaths as martyrs they become part of a pattern and, lose their value as individuals. Heaney's poetry (like the present poem) explores the dilemmas of public mourning and remembrance through the use of the elegiac voice which is at the same time self-questioning:

> "Who's sorry for our trouble?
> Who dreamt that we might dwell among ourselves
> In rain and scoured light and wind-dried stones?"

The two young men brandishing their rifles are seen in terms of the killers of Ewart-Biggs, but also bring back to memory the violence of the struggle for independence; but now the violence is too immediate and too real to be idealised.

Heaney's comments on Hughes and the other poets discussed in his essay "Englands of the Mind" (in *Preoccupations*) can be seen as applicable to himself too. When he talks about the continuity of an older England unique to each of the three poets with the present England, it can be by extension applied to Heaney's own imagining of Ireland as well. When Heaney looks at Ireland in "After a Killing" it is not merely Northern Ireland that he visualises but many different Irelands, chief among them the Ireland that was united in the pre-independence era as well as a mythic Ireland that evokes a sense of origin and rootedness:

> "In that neuter original loneliness
> From Brandon to Dunseverick
> I think of small-eyed survivor flowers,
> The pined-for, unmolested orchid."

Dunseverick is a place near the Giant's Causeway in County Antrim, Northern Ireland, and Brandon is a village on the northern coast of the Dingle Peninsula in County Kerry, a county in the south-west region of Ireland (i.e. the Republic of Ireland). Thus, it becomes evident that the 'Ireland of the mind' visualised by Heaney is one that does away with political boundaries that split the initial nation as thought of by early Irish nationalists. This imagined Ireland is one, which is both resilient but at the same time ideal and exotic, implying the unreachability and untenability of such an ideal in the long run. At the same time, such a figuration allows Heaney to establish connections between the past and present and between places and the emotional connection people have with them.

Another aspect of Heaney's vision of Ireland is the importance he lays on place names and their ability to evoke the past and connect one's personal memories of a place with the cultural memory attached to it. Here the place names Brandon and Dunseverick accomplish this, as can be seen from the above reading. This refers predominantly to one's instinctive sense of connection with a place that cannot be explained through clear rational terms. However, more than the latter, this intuitive relation goes far deeper in one's psychic and emotional experience of a place than a more

superficial rational relationship. However, the two may not be in conflict with each other at all times, though there remains a little tension between the two. The rational experience of a place fixes it within the ambit of the local, the immediately palpable, and the present, while an intuitive experience or sense of connection brings with it aspects of the mythic and the legendary. In this sense, the two are complementary, as can be seen in the superimposition of a primitive, original Ireland on the now-split territory of Ireland and Northern Ireland in the present poem. Heaney discusses at length this aspect in his essay "The Sense of Place" (also in *Preoccupations*):

I think there are two ways in which place is known and cherished, two ways in which may be complementary but which are just as likely to be antipathetic. One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other learned, literate and conscious. In the literary sensibility, both are likely to co-exist in a conscious and unconscious tension... (Heaney: 131)

Again, Ireland in Heaney comes across as a feminine entity (as critics like Patricia Coughlan and Raphael Ingelbien have pointed out). In "After a Killing", this can be seen in the pastoral scene that closes the poem with a hope for peace and a return to one's organic relatedness to nature. This scene foregrounds the young woman carrying fresh produce, making her a figure approaching the classical image of Ceres as well as a mythical projection of Ireland.

From Heaney's perspective, the poet has a certain role to play in a society torn apart by violence, like that of Northern Ireland. This is a tricky role since Heaney believes that while poetry and poets should remain outside of the actively and aggressively political, they cannot and should not do away with an awareness or the consciousness of the political. While the poet is unable to offer political solutions, nevertheless s/he can explore the historical, mythical and psychic roots of a crisis in order to investigate its hidden causes. Poetry becomes a space where such an introspection can take place, where critical issues can be examined. In this, Heaney visualises the nature of poetry as being socially responsible but at the same time, creatively free. This idea is explored in such an essay as "The Redress of Poetry":

"Poetry...is arbitrary and marks time in every possible sense of that phrase. It does not say to the accusing crowd or to the helpless accused, 'Now a solution will take place'; it does not propose to be instrumental or effective. Instead, in the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we wish to happen, poetry holds a attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves." (Heaney in Andrews (Ed.): 119).

Something of this can be seen in the poet's question as to who would take responsibility for their troubles (in "After a Killing"). Taken in association with the second section it not a question directed at an outsider but is directed at oneself, and at one's own community. This demands a self-examination, which will be the only way out of the seemingly irretrievable solution.

For Heaney, in spite of all political burdens contemporary poets like him carry, "poetry cannot afford to lose its fundamentally self-delighting inventiveness, its joy in being a process of language as well as a representation of things in the world" (Heaney in Andrews (Ed.): 119). The purpose of the poet in times of violence such as can be seen in Northern Ireland is to remain somewhat apart so that s/he can interpret the hidden roots of the violence s/he observes. There is a tremendous responsibility in this that is not to be avoided, which is why Heaney is critical of the intelligent and educated middle-class who try to gloss over the sheer violence of the Troubles by either turning a blind eye to them or by veiling it with blasé talk (see for example this aspect in the Sybil's comments in the second section of "Triptych"). Everyday language undergoes a failure in such a case since it lacks the ability to adequately explain such violence and therefore, it is the poet's task to arrive at such a language, so that through it the necessary conditions for peace and reconciliation as well as negotiation can be articulated.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Do you think that the poem "After a Killing" was inspired by a real act of killing?

Q 4: What are Heaney's views on deaths and violence?

Q 5: Do you feel that Heaney is distinctively conscious of his sense of place?

15.5 MAJOR THEMES

The following are some of the dominant themes in the poem about which you are reading in this unit.

The Past:

Heaney frequently explores the manner in which the past can haunt the present. In "After a Killing" the present killings and the picture of the two young men with rifles immediately conjures in the poet's mind the similarly violent past of Ireland during its struggle for freedom from British rule. This is not necessarily negative; in fact, the retrieval of the past is at times seen as a strategy through which one can explore the identity of the Irish nation that is at the centre of the Troubles. It also suggests the coming together of the personal and the communal (in the sense of belonging to the community). In this context, "digging" and the bog become dominant tropes of the retrieval of different layers of the past. There is no single or homogenous past but a repository of different cultural practices at different points of time, and the poet, in unearthing that history, is like an archaeologist who digs up from within the bog layers and layers of artefacts belonging to different cultures at different periods but buried and preserved within single place. This digging into the past is in order to disinter truths about the present, about one's family and community, and about nature. Heaney's attempt at constructing the Troubles as ancient and tribal in origin (refer to that extract from the poem) can thus be placed into this context. At the same time, Heaney maintains an attitude of reverence to the past as well.

LET US KNOW



Heaney read in 1969 *The Bog People* by P. V. Glob, a study of perfectly preserved bodies belonging to the Iron Age in the peat bogs at Jutland in Northern Europe. Glob's book carried photographs of the dead people, who were thought to be victims of ritual sacrifice. The first of Heaney's poems to reflect on these images was "The Tollund Man" in *Wintering Out*, in which he imagines visiting Aarhus where the bodies are kept. Heaney however felt uncertain about uncritically equating these bodies with the victims of the Troubles, echoing the common dilemma for the Northern Irish writer – "if they wrote about the violence, they were accused of exploiting suffering for their artistic purposes; if they ignored it, they were guilty of ivory-tower indifference".

Nature in Heaney's Poetry:

For Heaney nature is wild and unexplainable and may sometimes appear beautiful or comforting, but it can also be grotesque and alien. Terry Gifford argues that Heaney uses natural imagery "not only as subject matter but as his medium for thinking" (Gifford: 101). The poetic process that creates tensions through poetic devices like sounds and metaphors (see Heaney's Nobel lecture entitled "Crediting Poetry" available at the Nobel Prize website) embody these life-sustaining energies within nature itself. Gifford argues that it is this tension and access to nature that create "the warmth and compassion of poems of love and grief that emerges from Heaney's retreat to what his wife calls the 'wilderness' of Glanmore" that is "the pastoral source of poems that are to be read in the context of the killings and bigotry of contemporary Ireland" (Gifford: 101). This pastoral is significantly qualified by Heaney. Finally, Heaney's nature imagery can be read as representing "organic processes of dissolution", i.e., death as a natural process and part of a cycle, and therefore it is through natural imagery that a demand is made to "confront corruption ('the melt of shells', the internment camp, the tank, the interrogator, the killer, that all appear in *Station Island*)" (Gifford: 102).

The Pastoral:

A related theme in Heaney is the presence of the pastoral in his poetry. A number of Heaney's poems focus on farm chores and labour, such as "Digging". Through these descriptions of rural workers and their tasks and through the contemplation of natural phenomena Heaney "[celebrates] the life force through earthly things" (Haggerty in O'Neil Ed.: 569). However, Heaney's description of the pastoral does not emphasise its benign nature; rather, he shows how nature can be repellent and disillusioning:

> "Who dreamt that we might dwell among ourselves
> In rain and scoured light and wind-dried stones?"

However, this has a therapeutic effect on the poet since through this the speaker attains greater knowledge of himself and of the world around him. The pastoral at one level seems to guarantee a safe return to that mythical "original neuter loneliness" without the presence of violence and at the same time assures a peaceful present and another return to the organic life of a rural agricultural environment in the last two stanzas of "After a Killing". However, this return is not all that it seems – this is the significant qualification of the pastoral's retreat to older values and an older, more organic and peaceful way of life in Heaney's poetry. The apparent peacefulness of these two stanzas is qualified by the presence of the two gunmen in this part of "Triptych" that is immediately followed by diverse expressions disillusionment with regard to society, politics and religion articulated in the second and third part of the series. Thus in this poem, it is the anti-pastoral that dominates, undercutting the pastoral images and the conventions that they seem to evoke.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: How, according to Heaney, does the sense of a past influence a poet?

Q 7: Explain Heaney's views on nature.

15.6 HEANEY'S POETIC STYLE

Heaney adopts a deliberately casual style in his poetry, especially in his early poems, which is fore grounded by the 'I' (i.e. a first-person speaker) narrating an experience or event in a rural background in Northern Ireland. This gives a minimalist aspect to the manner in which serious issues like the Troubles and violence in Northern Ireland are approached. By adopting such a technique, Heaney is able to convey the pervasive effect of politics, violence, history, and the past on everyday lives; the general or the public becomes more and more enmeshed with the particular and the personal. Due to this, Heaney's poetry remains highly personal, as he regards the poet's role as someone who necessarily needs to negotiate between the public and the private, the political and the personal, myth and everyday realities, and so on. This is all the more necessary in the particular context of violence in Northern Ireland, which erupted primarily due to political reasons, making it imperative for the poet to retain his political consciousness even in a seemingly apolitical poetic style.

Many of Heaney's poems are elegiac in nature and commemorates people and places known to the poet as well as those who have been the faces of the Troubles by becoming victims or sites of acts of terror (such as can be seen in his volume *Field Work*). As a poet who emphasises the role of memory and the act of remembering (both private and public) this is a significant feature of Heaney's poetry. At the same time, Heaney is very careful in the design of a poem as well, and revisits traditional forms like the sonnet. Moreover, Heaney demonstrates an astute use of sounds and rhythms through his use of poetic devices rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and so on. Heaney also self-consciously brings in a regionalism in his poetry by using the landscape and imagery from not only his native Northern Ireland but the entire island comprising it as well as the Republic of Ireland. The use of Catholic imagery as well as classical imagery is also significant in Heaney as is the rural landscape that is constantly foregrounded in his poetry. With the last can be associated the element of the pastoral, which, however in more addressed in terms of theme than of form, since the form has now become more or less defunct in our present times (see Terry Gifford's *Pastoral* in the Routledge New Critical Idiom Series).

15.7 RECEPTION OF HEANEY [Adapted from O'Donoghue's "Introduction" in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*]

Death of a Naturalist (1965) immediately established Heaney as a major new poet, writing with brilliant linguistic power and evocativeness. He was also seen as a regional poet, talking mostly about his country upbringing in County Derry. In his *New Statesman* review of *Death of a Naturalist*, Christopher Ricks said: "the power and precision of his best poems are a delight, and as a first collection Death of a Naturalist is outstanding." Again, C. B. Cox in the *Spectator* stated that the poems exuded "the soil-reek of Ireland." The next book, *Door into the Dark* (1969), confirmed this reputation still further. In The *Times Literary Supplement*, Douglas Dunn said of this volume, "the poems were 'loud with the slap of the spade and sour with the stink of turned earth." Ricks however, cautioned Heaney that he "would 'have to reconcile himself to the fact that *Door into the Dark* will consolidate him as the poet of muddy-booted blackberry-picking", i.e., a poet primarily concentrating on rural landscapes and themes. His *Wintering Out* (1972) also met with the raised expectations of critics – for example, the Irish critic Neil Corcoran called it "the seminal single volume of the post-1970 period of English poetry", but by now, Heaney's strengths were mostly seen as the same: "exactness of description and evocation." However, this volume also emphasised place names in the many poems that centred on specific places in Ireland (see Heaney's essay "The Sense of Place" in this regard). Again, a significant perspective emerged in this volume which was a striking departure from the previous volumes–it was a keener sense of a political context that underscored the troubling times the poet was writing in. In the words of Seamus Deane, "although 'political echoes are audible in *Death of a Naturalist* and in *Door into the Dark*, there is no consciousness of politics as such, and certainly no political consciousness until *Wintering Out* and *North*'".

The critical reception of Heaney (after *North*, 1972) became less unanimous and effusive, and many critics, like Seamus Deane and Terence Brown, saw guilt as a major element in the poet's "self-characterisation".

For example, Ciaran Carson in his review of *North* in the *Honest Ulsterman*, said that "Heaney had laid himself open to the charge (in fact Carson did not literally level it himself) of being 'the laureate of violence – a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing…the world of megalithic doorways and charming noble barbarity'". However, Anthony Thwaite in *The Times Literary Supplement* saw it as "a superior continuation of the linguistic and descriptive virtues in the earlier books, with 'all the sensuousness of Mr. Heaney's earlier work, but refined and cut back to the bone'". Robert Lowell, in the *London Observer*, saw the volume bringing out "'a new kind of political poetry by the best Irish poet since W. B. Yeats'". The controversy regarding *North* was primarily what has been seen as "'the aestheticisation of violence', a charge most famously made in Irish poetry against the conclusion of Yeats' 'Easter 1916', that, in the bloody fighting in Dublin, 'a terrible beauty is born'".

By the late 1970s, when his new volume *Field Work* came out, Heaney was attempting a different kind of style and subject. This book was seen as a delayed response to the Bloody Sunday massacre of 1972, and an explanation for Heaney's shifting from Belfast to Glanmore in the Irish Republic, seen as an act of escapism by many. But by 1979, he wanted to start anew, as he told his interviewer James Randall: "'in the new book Field Work, I very deliberately set out to lengthen the line again because the narrow line was becoming habit…I wanted to turn out, to go out, and I wanted to pitch the voice out … a return to an opener voice and to a more – I don't want to say public – but a more social voice.'" The antithesis here was "not so much between public and private as between two kinds of public position: the political and what he calls the social". From this point onwards, Heaney's writing became increasingly linked to this kind of self-commentary. Heaney's next books, *Station Island* (1984) and *Sweeney Astray* (1983), are again deeply concerned with" issues of public answerability and guilt".

By this time, criticism of Heaney became more wide-ranging. On the one hand, Heaney's work was seen in more general terms as a continuation of "the Yeatsian conflict between artistic freedom and public responsibility." On the other, though the critic Declan Kiberd argued that "a virtuous political standpoint is not simply a matter of claiming to be in doubt".

Neil Corcoran also published an essay on this aspect of Heaney. *Sweeney Astray* dealt with issues of poetic vocation, religious duty, and public responsibility. In 1988 Heaney's *The Government of the Tongue*, his most concentrated critical book, explored yet again the rights and obligations of the writer, whether in the East or the West. It also brought to mind the critical debate "about Heaney's place as poet: whether he ought to take a more or less committed stance towards Irish politics". In *Seeing Things* (1991), Heaney took a decisive position regarding artistic freedom, privileging the marvellous over the ordinary. Again, the principle of balance was the central concern of his Oxford lectures, delivered as Professor of Poetry between 1989 and 1994, and published as *The Redress of Poetry*, the title essay of which has been discussed earlier. From the next book *The Spirit Level* (1996) onwards, Heaney became increasingly pessimistic, especially in relation to politics both local and global. His *Electric Light* in 2001 is "dominated by the pastoral genre; but it is pastoral seen as a grim politics". It is also "dominated by tragedy", and comprises "eclogues (a forum for political debate as well as the bucolic) and elegies".

At this time, Heaney was also translating *Beowulf*, which came out in 1999, and was one of his most acclaimed successes. *District and Circle*, which was published, was seen as reinforcing "the death-shadowed theme, with much of the book taking place in the Underground or afterlife". Heaney's poems have also been the subject of feminist criticism, with critics like Patricia Coughlan taking issue with Heaney's projection of Ireland in terms of a passive woman.



15.8 LET US SUM UP

As you finish reading this unit, you must have understood that the intensity of the Irish experience is best portrayed in the poem "After a Killing" which help in recounting the tension between the Catholics and Protestants that resulted in many acts of violence both in Northern Ireland, and in the Republic of Ireland. You have read about the life and work of Seamus Heaney

and must be now aware of how to place a poem like "After a Killing" in the larger contexts of Heaney's experiences in Northern Ireland. This poem also beautifully exemplifies Heaney's art of poetic writing in which the general or the public becomes more and more enmeshed with the particular and the personal. Regarding the major themes of the poem, you have learnt that Heaney frequently explores the manner in which the past can haunt the present. Besides, the political underpinning in the poem, the use of the idea of nature as 'wild' and the use of the pastoral, are some other important aspects of this poem. As is so explicit in the poem "After a Killing", the role of memory and the act of remembering (both private and public) are significant features of Heaney's poetry.



15.9 FURTHER READING

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15.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Heaney clearly articulates his views regarding the troubled Northern Ireland and the violence that it experienced… …"Digging", is used as a metaphor that frequents his poetry… …it relates to digging into his own memory, into his family lineage, into his and Ireland's past, and into the deeper levels of legend and myth which shape the character of the people of his country.

Ans to Q 2: It is in these prose works that Heaney reflects on the role of a poet and the purpose of poetry, the dynamics between the community and the individual, the working of memory in shaping one's ideas of place and nationhood, the language used to evoke their setting, and so on. Two of Heaney's most well-known essays, "Englands of the Mind" and "The Redress of Poetry" address these issues in detail.

Ans to Q 3: Yes… …the poem was inspired by the killing of Ewart-Biggs during the violence between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland perpetrated by both Catholics and Protestant groups… …the Catholics (like Heaney) were a minority in Northern Ireland, began to demonstrate against the unequal treatment they received from the Protestant Unionist Government… …in 1969, British troops were called in to impose order… …the troubles were characterised by guerrilla violence on the one hand and extreme counterproductive security measures by the Unionist forces on the other.

Ans to Q 4: Heaney suggests that the victims of the Troubles are much like the ancient victims of pagan sacrifices… …in both societies violence has become normalised in that the victims are seen as ritual sacrifices or martyrs for the cause… …Heaney finds this normalisation disturbing since in celebrating their deaths as martyrs they become part of a pattern and, lose their value as individuals…. … "After a Killing" explores the dilemmas of public mourning and remembrance through the use of the elegiac voice which is at the same time self-questioning:

Ans to Q 5: Yes… …Heaney's lays stress on place names and their ability to evoke the past… …Place names like Brandon and Dunseverick

accomplish this… …in case of Heaney this relation goes far deeper in one's psychic and emotional experience of a place than a more superficial rational relationship…. …the rational experience of a place fixes it within the ambit of the local, while an intuitive experience or sense of connection brings with it aspects of the mythic and the legendary.

Ans to Q 6: Heaney frequently explores the manner in which the past can haunt the present… … "After a Killing" present the picture of the two young men with rifles… …this immediately conjures in the poet's mind the similarly violent past of Ireland during its struggle for freedom from British rule… …the past also suggests the coming together of the personal and the communal… …digging into the past is a way to disinter truths about the present, about one's family and community, and about nature.

Ans to Q 7: For Heaney, nature is wild and beautiful, but also alien and unexplainable… … Terry Gifford states that Heaney uses natural imagery "not only as subject matter but as his medium for thinking"… … "Crediting Poetry" embodies the life-sustaining energies within nature itself… …use of the pastoral is significantly qualified by Heaney.



15.11 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Comment critically on Heaney's use of the pastoral in his poetry in the context of the violent troubles in Northern Ireland that he witnesses.

Q 2: Analyse the use of memory and the past in the poetry of Heaney.

Q 3: How does Heaney approach the idea of Irishness in his poetry? Give a critical account with relevant examples from his poems.

Q 4: What is the meaning of 'digging' in the context of Heaney's poetry?

Q 5: Heaney is a poet deliberately adopts a clear personal voice to articulate extremely political themes. Discuss.

*** ***** ***



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