UNIT 7: JOHN DRYDEN: EXTRACT FROM MAC FLECKNOE

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7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This unit aims at introducing you to one of John Dryden's great satirical works, Mac Flecknoe. In the course of reading this unit, you will also find some of the basic ideas that gave form to his works. The unit takes up a detailed discussion regarding certain ideas of Dryden as a poet and the representing society in which he lived. Thus, it is designed so as to enable you read your prescribed text, Mac Flecknoe, as a representative poem of the age.

7.2 INTRODUCTION

"MacFlecknoe" was published in 1682 and the poem was occasioned by the outcome of a series of disagreements, personal, critical and professional between Dryden and Thomas Shadwell, the playwright with whom Dryden had been on good terms for several years. Dryden's poem is directed against the Whig poet Thomes Shadwell. Dryden took his revenge

on Shadwell. Shadwell considered himself the successor of Ben Jonson, but often wrote inept and inferior plays. Shadwell argued with Dryden on the merits of Johnson's comedies, which he thought Dryden had undervalued. And that compelled Dryden to engage in severe attack on Shadwell. In 1678, a prolific writer, Richard Flecknoe died. Dryden considered the idea of presenting Shadwell (the self proclaimed heir of Ben Jonson) as the son and successor of Flecknoe, hence 'Mac' meaning son of Flecknoe, from whom he inherits the throne of dullness.

7.3 JOHN DRYDEN: THE POET

Let us explore the life and works of the poet before we go through the extract of the poem "Mac Flecknoe" in details.

7.3.1 His Life

John Dryden is the greatest literary figure of the Restoration, age and in his work, we have an excellent reflection of both the good and the evil tendencies of the age in which he lived. Dryden, the founder of the important dynasty of English poets, the acknowledged leader of many literary movements of his time, one of the most distinguished among poets was considered as the father of English criticism. He was born on August 9, 1631 in the village of Aldwinkle, Northamptonshire. His family were prosperous people, who brought him up in the strict Puritan faith and sent him first to the famous Westminster school under Dr. Richard Busby and later studied in Trinity College, Cambridge.

He made excellent use of his opportunities and studied eagerly, becoming one of the best educated men of his age, especially in the classics. But, he failed to show his literary ability till the age of thirty. But, by his training and family connections he was allied to the Puritan party, and his only remarkable work of that period was the 'Heroic Stanzas', which was written on the death of Cromwell:

His grandeur he derived from Heaven alone,

For he was great ere Fortune made him so;
And wars, like mists that rise against the sun,
Made him but greater seem, not greater grow.

In these four lines, taken almost at random from the "Heroic Stanzas", one can have the summary of thought, the preciseness and the polish that marked all his literary work. This poem made Dryden well-known, and he was in a fair way to become the new poet of Puritanism when the Restoration made a complete change in his methods.

He then came to London for a literary life, and when the Royalists were again in power he was with the winning side. In 1667, he became more widely known and popular by his 'Annus Mirabilis', a narrative poem describing the terrors of the great fire in London and some events of the disgraceful war with Holland; but with the theatres reopened and nightly filled, the drama offered the most attractive field to one who made his living by literature. Thus, Dryden started devoting his time to stage and agreed to provide three plays yearly for the actors of the King's Theatre. Thus, for nearly twenty years that period was considered to be his best period of life. During this period, he wrote *All for Love*, one of his best plays, to please himself, which was written in blank verse, while most of the others being in rimed couplets.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Write a few lines of John Dryden.

Q2. Mention one of the remarkable work of Dryden after he became allied to the Puritan party.

7.3.2 His Works

It was gradually that John Dryden had become the best known literary man of London, and was rewarded with large financial returns. At fifty years of his age, Dryden turned from dramatic work to throw

himself into the strife of religion and politics and he started writing numerous prose and poetical treatises. In 1682, his Religio Laici (Religion of a Layman) appeared where he defended the Anglican Church against all other sects, especially the Catholics and Presbyterians. But three years later, when James II came to the throne and established the Roman faith, Dryden turned Catholic and wrote his most religious poem, “The Hind and the Panther”, where the Hind was a symbol for the Roman church and the Anglicans, as a panther, are represented as persecuting the faithful. And the other sects like Calvinists, Anabaptists, Quakers - were represented by the wolf, boar, hare and other animals, which gave the poet an excellent chance for exercising his satire. But, Dryden was accused of hypocrisy by his enemies.

The controversial and satirical poems are on a higher plane, though Dryden's satire often strikes us as cutting and revengeful, rather than witty. The best known of these and a masterpiece of its kind is Absalom and Achitophel, which is undoubtedly the most powerful political satire in the history of English language. Dryden takes the help of the Bible story of David and Absalom to ridicule the Whig party and also to revenge himself upon his enemies. The poem had enormous political influence and raised Dryden to the front rank of English poets. The best expression of Dryden's literary genius, however is found in 'Alexander's Feast,' which is one of the best in English literature.

Dramatist, critic, translator, Dryden was foremost a poet, and in poetry, he was primarily a craftsman. As Arthur Compton Rickett said, "Every age has a kind of universal genius and perhaps in no poet are his own words more truly verified than are these of John Dryden." Thus, Dryden's literary significance is threefold and is expressed in his prose, his dramas and his verse.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3. What is the characteristic of Dryden's controversial poems? Name any one such poem.

Q4. Why is Dryden's literary significance threefold?

7.4 THE TEXT OF THE EXTRACT

Mac Flecknoe

All human things are subject to decay,
And when fate summons, monarchs must obey.
This Flecknoe found, who, like Augustaus,young
Was called to empire, and had governed long;
In prose and verse, was owned, without dispute,
Through all the realms of Nonsense, absolute.
This aged prince, now flourishing in peace,
And blest with issue of a large increase,
Worn out with business, did at length debate
To settle the succession of the state;
And, pondering which of all his sons was fit
To reign, and wage immortal war with wit,
Cried: "It is resolved; for nature pleads that he
Should only rule, who most resembles me.
Sh -alone my perfect image bears,
Mature in dullness from his tender years:
Sh -alone, of all my sons, is he
Who stands confirmed in full stupidity.
The rest to some faint meaning make pretence,
But Sh -never deviates into sense.
Some beams of wit on other souls may fall,
Strike through, and make lucid interval;
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He said: but his last words were scarcely heard
For Bruce and Longville had a trap prepared,
And down they sent the yet declaiming bard.
Sinking he left his drugget robe behind,
Borne upwards by a subterranean wind.
The mantle fell to the young prophet's part,
With double portion of his father's art.

7.4.1 Explanation of the Extract

This is a satire on the poet, Thomas Shadwell, with whom Dryden had been engaged in along literary dispute. In Dryden's opinion, Shadwell had no understanding of the true merit of Ben Jonson, whom he professed to imitate. This dispute is the basis of Mac Flecknoe, Shadwell is portrayed as a complete dunce, and the poem takes a mock-heroic form.Richard Flecknoe was a poet and dramatist, of whose work Dryden had a very poor opinion. Flecknoe died in 1678, the year in which Dryden composed this satire. Shadwell was considered by Dryden to be a worthy successor (or son of, Mac) to Flecknoe.

It is a mock-heroic poem in which Dryden lampoons the inferior poet, MacFlecknoe, choosing Shadwell as his successor. The poem traces the hero's rise to stupidity deliberately following the style as well as taking the help of the Aenied and other epics.

Dryden's method, here is something very near to parody; he applies allusions, vocabulary, images and ceremony which arouse epic associations of grandeur, just to make his enemy helplessly ridiculous. Flecknoe, the king of dullness who is on the verge of death, looks for a successor and by virtue of his dullness Shadwell gets the approval. The poem begins with a philosophical and a mock-heroically significant reference to Emperor Augustus of Rome:

All human things are subject to decay,

And, when Fate summons, monarch must obey.
This Flecknoe found, who, like Augustus, young
was called to empire and had governed long.
(Line 1-4)

Although, compared with Augustus, Flecknoe's realm is 'the realm of non-sense' and his successor Shadwell is going to be 'mature in dullness' and only 'confirmed in full stupidity.' The rest of the poem develops by a pattern of mock-praise of poetic vices.

"The hoary prince in majesty appeared,
High on a throne of his own labours reared.
At his right hand our young Ascanius sat,
Rome's another hope and pillar of the state.
His brows thick fogs instead of glories, grace,
And lambent dullness played around his face."

For the contemporaries of Dryden, the term 'Flecknoe' symbolised 'Bad poets'. But the subtitle of the poem, A Satyr on the True Blew Protestant poet, TS, also hints at the attack on Shadwell's religious opinions too. Throughout the poem, Dryden attempts to expose Shadwell as a literary dunce. Shadwell's arrival in town is not greeted with any Persian carpets but with heaps of torn sheets from unread books-

"No Persian Carpet spread the imperial way,
But scattered links of mangled poets lay".

The aged monarch Flecknoe is seen seated high on the throne consisting of piles of books written by himself. Shadwell is proclaiming that he will maintain the rule of dullness in his kingdom till his death. Dryden also refers to the contagious nature of dullness. Then Flecknoe goes in for a meticulous exposure of Shadwell by first referring to his hard labour for five years in producing his most inferior play, *The Virtuoso*. When compared to the wit and brilliance of the contemporary Restoration playwrights like George Etherege, his inferiority is striking. While his tragic works make people laugh at him, his comic ones make them sleep, and his satires are considered as equally worthless.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5. Briefly explain the context of Dryden's extract

Q6. Explain with reference to context:

"No Persian Carpet spread the imperial way,

But scattered links of mangled poets lay".

7.5 POETIC STYLE

As a prose writer, Dryden had a very important influence on English literature in shortening his sentences and especially in writing naturally, without depending on literary ornamentation to give effect to what he said. Unlike other writers like, Milton, Browne or Jeremy Taylor, Dryden cared less for style. But, he took pains to state his thoughts clearly and concisely. The classical school, which followed the Restoration, looked to Dryden as a leader and with his prose, Dryden rapidly developed his critical ability and became the foremost critic.

Dryden's influence on literature can be summed up as follows: firstly, he established the heroic couplet as the fashion for satire, didactic and descriptive poetry. Secondly, he developed a direct prose style. Thirdly, he developed the art of literary criticism in his essays and in the numerous prefaces to his poems. Moreover, Dryden was quite successful in developing the qualities of ease, flexibility, and lucidity that he brought into English verse, particularly the satire. His dramatic verse at its best is eloquent and spirited and his non dramatic verse extraordinarily varied. And in his lyrics or his narrative verse, he is easy and dexterous, while in his didactic verse, he is a master.

The achievements of Dryden were accepted equally by his contemporaries as well as his successors. He became popular as he set the trend of discussing of the classics, his canons of taste and theoretical principles in his writings. He was also able to occupy a central place in the history of English criticism and prose in the context of the 19th century. His

controversial and open style influenced Matthew Arnold and later T.S. Eliot, who learnt from him the value of wide-ranging experience in creative writing. But, in 1923, Allardyce Nicoll in his book Dryden and His Poetry, did not even hesitate to ask an important question -'Why Dryden a poet?' on the other hand, Arnold in his essay, “The Study of Poetry” sees Dryden as a classic English prose writer having the qualities of an age of prose and reason. But, Samuel Johnson's criticism on Dryden is perhaps more right, when he said, 'What was said of Rome, adorned by Augustus, may be applied by an easy metaphor to English poetry embellished by Dryden, he found it brick and left it marble."



LET US KNOW

Heroic couplet: Heroic couplet is lines of iambic pentameter which rhyme in pairs: aa bb and so on. The adjective was applied in the latter seventeenth century, because of the frequent use of such couplets in heroic poems and plays. This verse form was introduced into English poetry by Geoffrey Chaucer and since then it has been used widely. From the age of Dryden through that of Dr. Johnson, the heroic couplet became the predominant English measure for all the poetic kinds.

Lampoon: Lampoon is the way, applied to a short satirical work or to a passage in a longer work, describing the appearance and character of a particular person in a ridiculous way.

Poetic Diction: The term diction signifies the selection of words in a work of literature. The poetry of almost all ages has been written in a special language, a poetic diction, which includes words, phrases, a stylized syntax, and types of figures, not usedin the ordinary conversation of the time.

Satire: Satire is the art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, indignation, or scorn. It differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter as an end in itself, while satire derides, i.e. it uses laughter as a weapon. It attemptts to juxtapose the actual with that of the ideal.

Allusion: Allusion is a work of literature, which means a brief reference,

explicit or indirect to a person, place or event or to another literary work or passage. Allusions play a vital role in Mac Flecknoe. For the modern day reader, MacFlecknoe is a very obscure poem. Dryden here uses the allusions that even speaks about phrases about John the Baptist. Dryden uses elevated words like 'glories' and 'grace', but the effect is of ridicule. And the representation of other contemporary poets is an epic device of presenting the principal characters.



7.6 LET US SUM UP

After going through the unit, the learner will be able to discuss the life and works of the poet John Dryden. The unit takes up an extract from Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe* and discusses the extract in details while also providing a detailed idea on the poetic style and technique employed in the poem. It is recommended that the learner tries to read the entire poem in order to gain a better perspective on the prescribed extract from the text.



7.7 FURTHER READING

1. Dryden. J. (1709) *Mac Flecknoe : A Poem*. OUP.
2. Dryden. J. (1924) *Mac Flecknoe* Clarendon Press.



7.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q 1: John Dryden is the greatest literary figure of the Restoration, and in his work, we have an excellent reflection of both the good and the evil tendencies of the age in which he lived. Dryden, the founder of the important dynasty of English poets, the acknowledged leader of many literary movements of his time.

Ans to Q2: His remarkable work of that period was the 'Heroic Stanzas', which was written on the death of Cromwell

Ans to Q3: The controversial and satirical poems are on a higher plane, though Dryden's satire often strikes us as cutting and revengeful, rather than witty. The best known of these and a masterpiece of its kind is Absalom and Achitophel, which is undoubtedly the most powerful political satire in the history of English language.

Ans to Q4: Dramatist, critic, translator, Dryden was foremost a poet, and in poetry, he was primarily a craftsman. As Arthur Compton Rickett said, "Every age has a kind of universal genius and perhaps in no poet are his own words more truly verified than are these of John Dryden." Thus, Dryden's literary significance is threefold and is expressed in his prose, his dramas and his verse.

Ans to Q5: This is a satire on the poet, Thomas Shadwell, with whom Dryden had been engaged in along literary dispute. In Dryden's opinion, Shadwell had no understanding of the true merit of Ben Jonson, whom he professed to imitate. This dispute is the basis of Mac Flecknoe, Shadwell is portrayed as a complete dunce, and the poem takes a mock-heroic form.Richard Flecknoe was a poet and dramatist, of whose work Dryden had a very poor opinion. Flecknoe died in 1678, the year in which Dryden composed this satire. Shadwell was considered by Dryden to be a worthy successor (or son of, Mac) to Flecknoe.



7.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Discuss the life and works of the poet John Dryden

Q2. Give a detailed explanation of the text of the extract taken from John Dryden's "MacFlecknoe"

Q3. Describe the poetic style employed in John Dryden's "MacFlecknoe"

Q4. Write a few lines on the following aspects:

a. Heroic couplet

b. Poetic Diction

c. Satire

d. Illusion

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