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Institute of Distance and Open Learning

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Paper - I (ENG-2016)
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19th CENTURY POETRY



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BLOCK 1

Unit 1

Charlotte Smith: *Beachy Head* , *The Sea View*

Unit Structure :

1.1 Objectives

1.2 Introducing the Poet

1.3 Her Works (with special emphasis on her poetical compositions)

1.4 Critical Reception of the poet

1.5 Reading the Poems

1.5.1 Reading *Beachy Head*

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1.1 Objectives:

This unit introduces Romantic poetry with Charlotte Smith's poems. The unit seeks to furnish you to identify Charlotte Smith as one of the first Romantic poets who was a major influence to later Romantic poets and understand the various aspects of her poetry with two representative poems – *The Sea View* and *Beachy Head*.

The unit is designed to help you

- To *place* the poet in her proper historical age and 'context'
- To *understand* the nature of her literary preoccupations while highlighting those elements which enriched her body of work
- To *establish* the depth and durability of her poetry
- To *appreciate* the prescribed texts in their totality

1.2 Introducing the Poet:

Born in 1749, Charlotte Turner Smith was one among the first Romantic poets. She helped give shape to the “patterns of thought and conventions of style” for the period (Curran). The creation and perfection of this genre, which lasted from around the 1780s to the 1830s is typically attributed to William Blake, William Wordsworth, John Keats, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and these men have deservedly been a part of the literary canon since they first published their works. However, Smith not only paved the way for these poets by producing popular Romantic poetry throughout the first 20 years of this period, but also significantly influenced these male poets. In fact, perhaps the most well-known quote concerning Smith is one from Wordsworth in which he asserts her as “a lady to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be either acknowledged or remembered” and Coleridge affirms a similar sentiment when he mentions that he had learned the rules for his sonnets from Smith’s sonnets.

Smith was born on 4 May 1749 in London to a wealthy family. Her childhood was shaped by her mother’s death after which her father left England, leaving her and the other children with their unmarried aunt Lucy Towers. Lucy shared the popular view of her contemporaries on girl’s education believing that learning made women unattractive and that academics was more suitable for boys. She tried her best to inculcate social skills in her nieces so that they marry ‘well’. Charlotte, however, resented her aunt’s conventional standards and declared herself a rebel at a young age. At six when she started school in Chichester, her talent for drawing and poetry were noted. Her passion for drawing and her interest in botanical forms lasted all her life and later on matured into a philosophy. Her wide variety of poetry - fables, sonnets, children’s didactic poems etc. – are all strengthened by botanical scholarship, natural settings, and descriptive details of natural phenomena. At Kensington she attended a girls’ school where she received a typical education, learning mostly dancing, drawing, music and acting.

Smith's father being a spendthrift encountered financial difficulties which forced him to marry her to the son of Richard Smith, a Wealthy West Indian merchant. This marriage proved to be a deeply unhappy one for her as Benjamin was a violent, unfaithful and profligate man who wasted even a major part of his family legacy. Smith had to join her husband in a debtor's prison where she wrote and published her first book of poetry *Elegiac Sonnets and other Essays* in the year 1784. Its success allowed her to pay for her husband's release. In the year 1787, at the age of thirty-eight Charlotte Smith left her wasteful husband to support herself and her twelve children as a poet and novelist. Her disastrous marriage, the inevitable separation, the financial crunch throughout, the death of six of her children and even her declining health did not dampen her spirits as a writer whose contributions in every aspect of Romantic literature is worth remembering. Despite her profound influence during her times, Smith was forgotten and left from the canon for the better part of two centuries; in spite of her prolific writing and her warm public reception among her contemporaries, she was ignored and not discussed adequately.

1.3 Her Works:

In this section you will be introduced to some of the major works of Charlotte Smith. In 1784 she wrote and published her first work *Elegiac Sonnets and other Essays* when she was in King's Bench prison, a debtor's prison with her husband Benjamin Smith. Even before that when she was fifteen years old she had submitted few poems to the *Lady's Magazine*. After he was released from prison the entire family moved to France to avoid further creditors. In France she began translating works from French to English: *The Fatal Attachment*, a translation of *Prevosts Manon L'Escauit* 2 vols. She, then, moved to a town near Chichester and decided to write novels as they would fetch more money. Her struggle to provide for her children without having received any support from her husband or his family provided ample themes for her poetry and novels. Throughout her writing career, she preferred to identify

herself as a poet, in spite of having written a number of novels on sentimental, didactic and political themes. Some of her novels include *Emmeline: the Orphan of the Castle* 4vols. (1788), *Ethelinde or the recluse of the lake* 5vols. (1789), *Celestina: a Novel* 4 vols. (1791), *The Old Manor House* 4 vols. (1793), *The Wanderings of Warwick* (1794), *The Banished Man* (1794). Her novels contributed to the development of Gothic fiction and the novel of sensibility. She also tried to make a case for women rights and legal reforms for women through her novels. She wrote instructive books for children, the most well-known being *Conversations Introducing Poetry for the Use of Children*, published in 1804. Her career ended with her death and her last publications – *Beachy Head and Other Poems* and *A Natural History of Birds* – appeared posthumously in 1807.

Her most famous works include the extended poem *Beachy Head*, which is one of the best works of Romantic poetry and her collection of sonnets, *Elegiac Sonnets*. *Sonnets* was first published in 1784 and they were responsible in bringing back in fashion and transforming the use of the sonnet in the Romantic age. They were written during an incredibly difficult period in Smith's life during which she was confined to a King's Bench prison, a debtor's prison due to her husband, Benjamin Smith's gambling and other extravagant habits. The personal and profound emotion behind the poems is beautifully portrayed through these sonnets which became immediately successful. The subsequent demand for Smith's work, was enough to pull her and her husband out of prison. These sonnets, and Charlotte Smith's work in general, are what make her such an influential poet of the Romantic period. The sonnets wonderfully depict Smith's ability to convey her personal suffering and sadness through strict form and tight imagery in order to manifest the private as public or universal. The two volumes of the *Elegiac Sonnets*, contains 92 poems which, in a cohesive manner, tell a narrative of personal woe and anguish made public through the distant form of the sonnet. This collection of sonnets, with the absolute mastery of form and restraint displayed by the poet, created Smith as one of founders of Romanticism, influencing many Romantic poets.

SAQ

1. How did Charlotte Smith's early life shape her writing career?
100 words
2. Under what circumstances did Smith write and Publish *Elegiac Sonnets*? 80 words

1.4 Critical reception

Charlotte Smith was a renowned writer of her time, having published extensively both in prose and verse. As Paula R Backscheider observes, it was her achievements that inspired many women of letters to pursue a career of writing. Even though Smith is more widely acknowledged for her contribution to novel writing, her poetry played a modest part in the transition from Augustinism to Romanticism – and its influence on such poets as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats. Smith produced most of her poetry in a period which displayed complexities and hesitations that is typical of a hugely transitional phase. She prepared the way for the first generation of the Romantic poets while remaining indebted to Neoclassical writings for the impersonal ‘classical’ language and formal ‘urbane’ rationality of her poetry. It is owing to her contribution to Romanticism that Stuart Curran, the editor of her *Elegiac Sonnets* labels Smith as “the first Romantic when looked in retrospect” in his 1993 introduction to Smith’s poetry. She deserves a special mention for her significant contribution to the revival of the sonnet thereby sanctioning a movement away from ‘the poetry of the head’ and urban artificiality. Her subject matter and attitudes are apparently Romantic especially her treatment of Nature which at once becomes a metaphor for man’s moods as well as an external expression of his complex inner nature and aspirations. During her literary career she received constant and substantial attention and appreciation in the Reviews and periodicals from her contemporary poets, novelists and critics of literature. The *Elegiac Sonnets* alone succeeded even beyond Smith’s initial hopes becoming a

hugely influential collection of poetry grounded in the elegiac mode testifying to the fertility of Smith's imagination and her excellent poetic abilities.

In the early years after her death her work continued to receive widespread critical attention resulting in the publications of life histories with bibliographies and critical notes. Her poems too were anthologized frequently. However, by mid nineteenth century her achievements as a writer were mostly forgotten and she was reduced merely to a footnote in most histories of English literature, remembered only for her influence on Romantic novelists and poets. Only as a non-canonical woman writer was she mentioned in few works. Smith came to occupy only a decidedly minor and even obscure niche in the history of the novel and almost a forgotten poet. Critics noted her 'unpoetic' diction which they claim she inherited from her neo-classical contemporaries which, at times, made her verse more prosaic. Smith has also been criticized for her poor education, her single mother status and the pressures of making a living for her and her children through writing owing to her financially insecure position.

The twentieth century, however, saw a revival of interest in her works especially her poetry. It was in the year 2008 that Smith's entire prose collection became available for her readers which included her novels and the children's stories and instruction manuals. Her poetry came to be seen as a space for her where she finds the power and energy to cling to life, and to reveal her psychodynamics in her struggle in life. Paula Backscheider in her book calls her both 'an enabling writer' and a 'competitive presence with which to reckon'. Stuart Curran in his essay *Charlotte Smith and British Romanticism* writes about Smith's *Beachy Head*

"It is perhaps no distinct accomplishment simply to state that nature is self-fulfilling, but it is certainly one to create a world of such microscopically exact beauty in which no human, even the observer honoring it, can participate."

Curran appreciates the manner in which Smith poem emphasizes on the fact that "nature's particularity is the essential fact of its life" and that nature exists without reinforcing hierarchy exhibiting a remarkable unity

wherein each plant nourishes the other in one way or the other. Thus Smith's writing honors nature's 'irreducible alterity' (Stuart Curran).

Check your progress

- 1. How can we categorize Charlotte Smith's works?**
- 2. In what way did Smith contribute to the development of Romantic poetry?**
- 3. Why did Smith prefer to write novels?**

Stop to consider

Romanticism was the reaction against the philosophical and industrial rationality that had separated humanity from nature. In its most early form it emerged in the 1790's in Germany and Britain. The new preoccupations of the Romantics came to be sincerity, spontaneity and originality in opposition to the mechanical ordered reality of the preceding age. The writer/poet/artist now, instead of being viewed as a classicist, was a free spirit expressing his/her own imaginative truth. M.H Abrams in his seminal work of criticism *Mirror and the Lamp* states that eighteenth century Neo-Classicism regarded that art as a mirror held up to nature. On the other hand, the Romantics believed art could be a lamp illuminating inner qualities of nature not accessible to the objective eye, according to Abrams. In his *A Glossary to the Literary Terms* he writes regarding the Romantic poets thus:

To a remarkable degree external nature – the landscape, together with its flora and fauna – became a persistent subject of poetry, and was described with an accuracy and sensuous nuance unprecedented in earlier writers. (171-72)

Romantic poetry often deals with past events, exotic places drawing inspiration in abundance from folk literature, the literature of the Middle Ages and of classical antiquity among other things. The Romantic poets displaced humanity by external nature as poetic subject matter (You may refer to the two prescribed poems of Charlotte Smith in this context).

1.5 Reading the Poems

1.5.1 Reading Beachy Head

Beachy Head is a headland in East Sussex on the English Channel, consisting of chalk cliffs. It is the last of England that one can see on an out-bound journey. Smith's poem titled Beachy Head contains within its 731 lines an astonishing array of layers which takes into account history, science and literature connecting the past, present and future; which explores memories; oscillating between the old Enlightenment structure of order and method on the one hand and emerging romanticism with its emphasis on playful tropes rendering new meaning. The first ten lines of the poem ascribes the rupture in the topography to a supernatural being rather than to geological processes, although Charlotte Smith was well-versed in the natural sciences of her day. Lines 5 and 6 allude to the idea that this Island was once conjoined to the continent of Europe and was drifted away by an action of nature which results in "this green isle" being "eternally divide" (Line 10). These lines introduce the readers to a proliferation of ensuing binary oppositions: rock/sea; mariner/I; Fancy/reality; now/then; God/man etc. these dichotomies continue to make their strong presence throughout the poem. In the fifth stanza the poet refers to nature/reason divide:

From the rough sea-rock, deep beneath the waves
These are the toys of Nature; and her sport
Of little estimate in Reason's eye

The above lines indicate Smith's preference of nature and its wild, playful ways to reason's didactic outlook and organized ways. Reason in the eighteenth century Age of Enlightenment has always stood for the power of unaided human thought. Nature for Smith was not a reality which remained aloof playing no role in the life of mankind. Her romantic outlook was in reaction to the eighteenth century poetry's emphasis on reason and didacticism.

Smith introduces the Beachy Head panorama with the English Channel sprawling, before the speaker so that she beckons “Fancy” to explore each “rifled” bit of “shore”—while setting a bold poetic precedent: the Beachy Head locale appears immediately grand (“stupendous,” “sublime”), and so does the speaker, for realizing and savoring its greatness. Critics like Kari Lokke aptly asserts that this bold vastness is Smith’s subversion of “the commanding prospect view...of the social privilege of the male writer.” Unlike many of her male counterparts she does not place Beachy Head as if upon a stage while reenacting its vastness. Her gaze is that of an ecocritic who gives equal opportunity to the subject under consideration to ‘speak’ for itself. After Smith lingers once more on Beachy Head's panoramic vista by exalting “the dark blue wave,” and the “glorious sun”, avoiding mere objectification of nature, she concentrates her scope by also honing in on “the inmates of the chalky clefts” who fill the air “with shrill harsh cry,” seeking their food (14-23).

As the poem progresses, we get closer to the ‘lively’ inhabitants of Beachy Head. As the speaker moves from first describing the lifeless (but still ‘lively’) waves and sunshine to the many birds of the cliffs, she privileges neither. As this stanza comes to an end she presents “the lone shepherd and his baying dog” as they “drive to thy turfy crest” of their “bleating flock” (28-29), highlighting them as symbols of life and nature along with the cliff’s other inhabitants. The shepherd is presented as a solitary creature enjoying the company of his non-human partner, the dog, toiling through the birds’ squalls, his animal’s “baying,” and “his bleating flock.” On the one hand, Smith depicts Beachy Head as a stupendously lovely place, which is so lively and sublime, its living creatures are aware of its imperfections. They are still subjected to hard work, annoyance, and desperation of life and living. For Smith, Beachy Head (with all its human and non-human life forms) should not be regarded as an instrument to be exploited and gawked at for sentimentalism's sake, but should be seen as a "lively" companion to be sympathized with and regarded on its own plane of being. “In other words, her immediately active language has the effect of encouraging the reader to feel both the breaking tremor that eternally

divided Britain from the rest of Europe and for the distress of those who inhabit the green isle itself.”

The next lines intensify her need to present the reality of the slave’s exploitation – another human character Smith recounts in her narrative. Smith’s speaker emphasizes on the fact that Beachy Head’s passing ships depend upon slavery for profit.

They who reason, with abhorrence see Man,
for such gauds and baubles, violate
The sacred freedom of his fellow man

The reader, thus, is at eye-level with the forced process of the slave’s labor which is compared to the ‘rugged’ and ‘rough’ texture of the rocks and shells. In this manner, Smith instead of objectifying both the sea and the slave makes the reader encounter an emotion for the slave by employing apt imageries. Smith makes the slave a part of Beachy Head by acknowledging their lack of freedom to roam these cliffs. She also critiques British imperialism and the profit that the ‘regal crown’ earns from its imperialist ventures.

In the next four stanzas Smith gives a detailed account of the locale’s ancient but ‘lively’ history wherein she brings in references of the Normans (as ‘the new invaders’) and the battles they fought and the lands they conquered with the sea as a witness to this (124-133). The speaker very quickly moves from Scandinavian invaders to those from “the coasts of Provence and Sicily” moving on to Raoul and his enlightened rule. In lines 131-142 the speaker moves on to Taillefer’s song of Roland and sweeps through history rapidly thus supporting facts over fanciful imagery. Wars, Smith suggests, affects nature and Beachy Head stands as a microcosm of all the toils of its long-dead inhabitants who continually struggled to keep this place alive. Smith is both an Augustan here and a Romantic giving the readers the best of the two worlds.

Not only is Beachy Head’s past ‘lively’ (full of life) but the natural liveliness of Beachy Head’s animate kingdom in the present times is also

equally remarkable. Critics have observed the minutiae that Smith engages in whether it be details regarding human deeds which have an impact on Beachy Head or minute details of the flora and fauna in Beachy Head. As poet who is also a botanist-naturalist, Smith is capable of presenting to her readers a classic example of scientific poetry. She strews her entire poem with scientific nomenclature: coot (a type of crane) is "*fulicaaterrima*" (215); curlew (another common bird) is "*charadriusoedicnemus*" (232), and there are numerous other similar examples. Most of these scientific denominations are dedicated to Beachy Head's abundant flora, an interest she had from childhood onwards. As feminist critics like Judith Pascoe argues that Smith's botanical focus is one shared by a number of female poets of the time, and is one that defies the idea that "scientific interest is solely a male preoccupation and that female interest in the subject is unfeminine and even aggressively immodest."

Having made her readers well versed in Beachy Head's past and present and well equipped to advocate "fellow feeling, Smith next introduces the first of the poem's two "companions" – "the lone shepherd." Smith uses common Romantic images to inform about his agony – the non-human natural companions of pain and agony who act in tandem with human counterparts – the nightingale and the woodlarks (625-628). The shepherd himself speaks about his lovelorn state

Then leave me drooping and forelorn
To know such bliss can never me
Unless Amanda loved me (649-654)

Not only is he given a poetic voice to speak for himself but a hopeful end too; there are "some future blessings" for him in store in the form of 'Hope.' Smith's fascination for solitary figures will later on be shared by the other major Romantic poets who will go on to produce characters who are rebels and social outcasts like Prometheus, Cain, Don Juan and Satan among others.

Finally towards the end of the poem we come to the poem's most discussed character - the lone hermit – whose case is tragic in a way that

is meant to plague the impulses of anyone who may be “attentive.” The poet successfully creates unique kind of interdependence and fellow feeling among the living creatures of Beachy Head – both human and non-human. The hermit actually lives within Beachy Head, as an indispensable part of its nature, in distress which the poet laments and states within Beachy Head:

Dwelt one who, long disgusted with the world
And all its ways, appears to suffer life
Rather than live; the soul-reviving gale
Fanning the beanfield or the thyme heath
Had not for many summers breathed on him. (675-679)

The lone hermit is different from the lovelorn shepherd as the former’s pain is more acute and he suffers a kind of living death in winter (a winter that has no end). There is no possibility of the ‘lone hermit’ to move with hopeful ‘gale.’ He is in such a state primarily because he is aware of “human crimes” thus making him the perfect embodiment of all of Beachy Head’s companions:

And outraged as he was, in sanguine youth,
By human crimes, he still acutely felt
For human misery (688-692)

His death is inevitable at the end and he is finally swallowed by Beachy Head itself allowing the final culmination of nature (non-human) and humanity. “This hermit is the ultimate martyr and his legacy the ultimate instigator of fellow-feeling.”

The detailed observation including the minutiae that Smith engages in, the recurrent evocation of misery as well as the ‘hopeful’ end suggestive of the force of nature to recreate and rejuvenate itself:

That dying is the cause of charity
His spirit, from its earthly bondage freed,
Had to some better region fled for ever. (732-734)

At least in his death the hermit becomes one with nature and he is no longer separate from the topography of Beachy Head – his death results in the communion of man and nature.

Stop to consider

In *Beachy Head* Charlotte Smith refers, often skeptically, to scientific theories now almost universally accepted: that England was joined once to Europe (143-44); that chalk consists of fossilized crustaceans (158-9). She also refers to speculations on why remains of elephants' have been found in England: apparently mammoths had not been distinguished from the modern elephant (160-63). Charlotte Smith considered herself a very competent botanist, and severely dissociated herself from what she termed mere 'florists', who improved varieties of flora. The content of this poem exhibits her range of geographical and meteorological information as well as her wide range of reading.

SAQ

1. What are the types of human characters chosen by Smith in her poem *Beachy Head*?
2. What aspect of the non-human world is highlighted in this poem?

1.5.2 Reading *The Sea View*

The Sea View by Charlotte Smith expresses her fondness for nature and hatred of the wrongdoings of mankind in general. The purity and stillness of a seascape is pitted against the stormy ocean which stands for mankind's vulgar and hostile actions. The poem is an expansive vision of a coastal sunset that very abruptly shifts to a brutal naval battle. The poem uses the point of view of a shepherd to describe the sea and its surroundings. Smith creates a stark contrast between how the shepherd views the sea as a natural beauty and how he views the sea which is

suddenly overlaid by the violent behaviors of men. The poem begins with the image of a shepherd relaxing in the mountains and gazing at how the sea mingles with the sky from such an elevated position: “The upland shepherd, as reclined he lies.” Here the shepherd may be identified not just as a man who merely guards a group of grazing animals but also as an entity who stands for innocence, purity and the perfect harmony between nature and mankind. The shepherd in this remote location is in close communion with nature away from the hustle-bustle of urban life that mankind has created. His ‘reclined’ state is suggestive of a reconnection with nature which is one of the major concerns of British Romantic poetry of the nineteenth century. The shepherd here stands as a witness to a beautiful sunset illustrated by the poet using words like ‘celestial’, ‘purple radiance.’ This view is ‘celestial’ that is unearthly, belonging to the heavens and the sky above us, almost making this sunset divine and adding to the positive emotions experienced by the shepherd.

The “summer sun” sinks slowly as depicted by the poet – “slow” here stands in contrast to the fast paced and stressful life of mankind in urban landscapes. Because the poet chose to have the sun sinking slowly instead of quickly, this may imply the poet’s fascination for a peaceful and calm life compared to the stressful and fast paced city life. The next line describes what the sunlight looks like as the sun sets. The significance of the “purple radiance low” may lie in the richness of the purple colour and its association with royalty among other things. The word “low” in this description adds to the peacefulness of the sea which the poet captures which is “radiant” and “low” at the same time. The next line tells us how the sunlight shines on the water thereby making these waters glow like the celestial bodies which remain suspended above us.

Blaze on the Western waters

Note the use of the word ‘blaze’ here. It is used as a verb indicating what the sun is doing to the water. The Shepherd highlights the fact that the sun is casting a brilliant light onto the water as if the latter is on fire.

The rhyme scheme in the first eight lines of the poem depicts the same pattern of peacefulness and helps in creating a harmonious sea view. In the 7th and eighth lines the choice of adjectives to describe the sea such as

‘magnificent’, ‘tranquility’ and ‘wide’ express the notion that the sea is closer to Heaven than earth. Smith’s vision is both radiant and tranquil at the same time perhaps in anticipation of what is to come in the next part of the poem. From line 9 onwards Smith completely transforms her view exposing the readers to a negative blazon of the sea. The choice of words on the part of the poet too creates a strong sense of anger and resentment toward the actions of men who seek to disturb the natural beauty and tranquility of the sea. This sonnet was written shortly after war broke out between France and England in 1793. From viewing one of Heaven’s glorious works shimmering with celestial radiance, we, the readers on to witness the sea being contaminated by the blood of the combatants of an ensuing battle.

Stop to Consider

The France England war of 1793 was fought during the radical phase of the French Revolution. War broke out right after the execution of French King XVI on January 21, 1793. The French Revolution also called the Revolution of 1789 was a movement which denoted the end of the ancient feudal regime in France thus paving the way for huge political, social and economic reforms. The British Romantic poets of the nineteenth century were highly influenced by the Revolution inspiring them to incorporate the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity in their writings. Charlotte Turner Smith’s writings too reflected her take on the Revolution. However, the Revolutionary wars disillusioned her and led her to consider them as interventions in the harmonious relationship between nature and the human race, which is reflected in both *The Sea View* and *The Beachy Head*.

In the next line the opening word ‘when’ makes us, at once, aware of the time thus hurrying us into a battle where aggressive verbs such as ‘charged’, ‘move’, ‘flash’, and ‘pollute’ are used to describe the chaos of the war. The shepherd’s view now slides into the ghastly, terrible sea with the ‘red’ light of cannon shots, the ‘red’ of blood dripping from the

‘dying’ bodies of the unfortunate soldiers. The next few lines describe the ‘war-freighted’ ships that the shepherd sees further out in the ocean:

When, like dark plague spots by the demons shed,
Charged deep with death, upon the waves, far seen,
Move the war-freighted ships

By ‘plague spots by the demons shed’ Smith may refer to three points here:

- i. The ships are being compared to diseased sores which erupt in human bodies as a result of plague.
- ii. The ships created by human ‘demons’ are the carriers of disease and destruction. History tells us that plague travelled from one part of the world to another through water vessels. ‘Demons’ may refer to rats and other animals which survived inside the chambers of the ship and carried the deadly disease with them.
- iii. These words may be an allusion to one of the ten plagues in the Bible mentioned in the Book of Exodus.

The war ships, like plague infestation, thus, stand for death and the battle casts a dark shadow on them as they move on the waters fully loaded to ‘charge.’ These ships then take over God’s beautiful creation, fill it with violence, hatred and bloodshed, thus transforming the ‘magnificent’ and ‘tranquil’ scene to one that becomes ‘fierce’ and ‘red.’ It is because of human intervention that the pure waters are now ‘polluted’ with ‘blood’ from the ‘mangled’ dead bodies.

Stop to consider

The first great plague pandemic to be reliably reported occurred during the reign of the Byzantine emperor Justinian I in the 6th century CE. According to historians the outbreak began in Egypt and moved along maritime trade routes reaching Constantinople in 542 CE. The next half century saw the pandemic spread across all the port cities of the

Mediterranean. Modern researchers and scientists have established that rats which travelled in seafaring vessels and proliferated in the crowded cities of those times were the chief carriers of this deadly disease. You may relate this information to the phrase “*plague spots by the demons shed.*”

SAQ

1. How is rural life idealized by Smith in her poem The Sea View? 50 words
2. Mention at least two Romantic elements in this poem. 50 words
3. Why do you think the poet chose a shepherd here as the one who views the seascape? 30 -40 words

1.6 Summing up:

In the previous sections attempts have been made to give you an overall idea of Charlotte Smith’s contribution to English literature as a poet. In the introductory sections, I tried to estimate the contributions of Smith by referring to her specific qualities as a writer and the circumstances which helped her give vent to her creativity. The section on her works unveils the writer’s oeuvre, each work shaped by her convictions and her real life experiences. The emphasis is on reestablishing Smith as a Romantic poet...

Both the prescribed poems discussed in the following sections fall into the category of topographical poems. Charlotte Smith’s unabashed focus on Beachy Head’s flora and fauna once more illustrates not only her intellect, but also her ecocritical sensitivity. Appropriately, after her many lines describing these natural “inhabitants,” Smith’s speaker denounces those who merely exploit scientific “inquiry” for “the proudest boast” and “vanity” (390), and thus denounces those who consider their field separate from any moral reverberations. Smith— botanist, zoologist, and

compassionate poet—equates the human with the naturally inhuman throughout these "fragments," but especially emphasizes the kind interdependence between the land and those who tend to it at this fragment's end. Smith uses the intricacies of language, memory and history to devise a number of speaking selves in the form of competing voices which tend to coexist.

In both these poems Smith examines the vulnerability of the human race primarily because of his self-determined isolation from the natural world. She takes recourse to allusions to pastoral traditions both praising and undermining them with her emphasis on the binaries of majestic/pitiful, stable/unstable, peaceful/dangerous while describing the topographies of the sea and the chalky cliff in the poems discussed above. The isolation of the shepherd in *The Sea* view as well as the isolation and loneliness of the human characters depicted in *Beachy Head* is a reflection of a mental state that affected most Romantic poets after Smith. The sense of isolation and its deep relation to melancholia as a condition which was relevant to both the eighteenth century writers and the nineteenth century poets finds a central place in Charlotte Smith's poetry.

Check your progress

1. What aspects of Smith's poetry makes her one of the last Augustans and one of the first Romantics?
2. Discuss both the poems discussed here as topographical poems with a difference.

1.7 Glossary:

- i. Blank verse: Blank verse is a literary device defined as unrhyming verse written in iambic pentameter.
- ii. Didacticism: It is a term that refers to a particular philosophy in art and literature that emphasizes the idea that along with pleasure,

different forms of art and literature ought to convey information and instructions. Romanticism as a literary movement criticised the didactic texts of the Neo-Classical age overloaded with prescriptions and instructions.

- iii. Minutiae: It refers to minor or incidental details given in a precise manner. The poem *Beachy Head* abounds in such detailed observations and the poet successfully moves from one minutiae to another thereby suggesting the array that nature has for display in *Beachy Head*.
- iv. Topographical poem: It is characterized by the description of a particular landscape and very often the view of the landscape is from a height.

References & Suggested Reading:

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Unit 2

Charlotte Smith: *Beachy Head* , *The Sea View*

Supplementary Unit

Unit Structure :

2.1 Objective

2.2 How to approach Charlotte Smith as a poet

2.3 Smith's influence on other Romantic writers

2.4 Critical approaches to be kept in mind while reading her poems

2.5 Reading *The Sea View* and *Beachy Head*

2.6 A brief idea of other poems by Smith

2.7 Probable questions

2.8 Suggested Readings

2.1 Objective:

In the previous unit we discussed the life and works of Charlotte Turner Smith, identifying her as an influential Romantic poet whose contribution to British Romantic poetry was immense with special emphasis on analysing two of her poems, *The Sea View* and *Beachy Head*. This unit is designed keeping in mind a learner centric approach whereby you as learners will be further encouraged to *contextualise* and *critically analyse* the two prescribed poems for yourself and prepare for the examination.

2.2 How to approach Charlotte Smith as a poet

When Charlotte Smith died her reputation was established as a poet and novelist of sensibility. Her poetry had moved on from establishing the

parameters of a Romantic genre to interrogating Romantic form and structure towards the end of her life. As an author, she was a thorough and well-informed businesswoman as well as an innovator and compelling storyteller. The editions of Smith's poetry delve much deeper into the identity of the speaker of the poetry. This is partly because her poetry, especially but not exclusively the sonnets, offers a full-fledged Romantic subjectivity, an 'I' predicated on an acknowledgement of familiarity we are used to from reading Wordsworth and Coleridge. In addition to it "Smith's sonnets of loss and solitude were particularly expressive of a female character" and she can be seen finding a language for female experience within poetic conventions'. For editors of her poetry, Smith is a woman speaking from a specifically female position of need, loss, and sorrow, less an interventionist than a victim, less a chronicler than an *experiencer* of events.

Smith turns her feminine gaze at the materiality of nature and dedicates her poetic energy to the depiction of the minute details in the physical environment, which is particularly important for female poets. Smith is surprisingly skilful at combining her sense of beauty and scientific knowledge when detailing her descriptions of the botanical world. In her poems she opens up a new space of signification for herself where she can comfortably exert her agency and where she feels empowered (more empowered than she felt while raising her children all alone). Smith's engagement with sensibility does not echo what later Romantic poets demonstrate as her's is in tune with the humanitarian sensibility of the eighteenth century voicing out (whenever necessary) at existing class bias too. However, she is mostly successful when it comes to sympathizing with those in need as she seems to be able to find an emotional connection between herself and the vulnerable "others," who include peasants, immigrants, women and animals, because of her experiences as a victim of the legal system and patriarchy.

At the same time it may be noted that her earlier poetry, Smith seems to have her affiliations more with the genteel class that she was born into than with the unprivileged. She emphasizes this background in her

prefaces to attract a gentler group of readers. By the time she published her *Elegiac Sonnets*, however, she was no longer a member of the country gentry; her married life in spite of having eleven children was in jeopardy, she was imprisoned in the King's Bench with her husband. Still, in her Preface she created a title for herself: Charlotte Smith of Bignor Park, in Sussex, referring to her childhood home, which she left years ago, maybe in an effort establish her public image in a more positive way. The hardships that she faced after leaving her waster husband perhaps allowed Smith's sensibility to be shadowed by her harsh criticism of her society and humanity at large which makes her less a Romantic, according to a number of critics. Hence, sensibility, which should have a socially bonding function, is used as a means of social critique, which further accentuates Smith's alienation from her society. Finally, Smith challenges the Romantic subjectivity that can vouch for the entire humanity with prophetic insight (as is evident in the divergent subjectivities of Beachy Head). She tries to establish a strong and authoritarian poetic voice, in spite of the restrictions that she lived with. The authoritative voice that appears in the footnotes (which she uses a lot in her poetry), especially when displaying her knowledge of botany, is noteworthy.

2.3 Smith's influence on the Romantic poets of the nineteenth century

Smith became a central source of inspiration for many, n this period of literary innovation, the most important of whom would be William Wordsworth, who not only read her extensively but also personally met her. The two were distantly related and Wordsworth visited Smith whom he admired as a Nature poet, a novelist with a passion for sublime landscape, and a fellow supporter of the French Revolution. Wordsworth had read her first edition of *Elegiac Sonnets* as a fourteen-year-old schoolboy at Hawshead. Several critics have pointed out that he continued to read her into the early years of the nineteenth century.

Wordsworth's fascination with Smith's work did not end with this visit. In 1827 William Wordsworth specifically asks Alexander Dyce to include Smith's poem "I love thee, mournful, sober-suited Night" into his anthology.

Dwelling on the similarities between Smith and Wordsworth, in her *Writing Romanticism: Charlotte Smith and William Wordsworth 1784-1807* Jacqueline M. Labbe argues that the interaction between the two poets was mutual, and Wordsworth and Smith used to read each other quite attentively, a collaboration which makes the two the co-founders of English Romanticism be seen as creating "a poetics as a joint project" (16). Labbe writes:

The Romanticism that comes to be written by Smith and Wordsworth starts out, in the 1780s and 1790s, by elaborating and commenting on models that had attained a literary currency by the century's end: using poetry to express and contain emotional states, demonstrating a perfect grasp of form, finding one's place within a community of writers. Their Romanticism, however, also talks back to these traditions and writes into being a curiosity about what, and how, poetry can mean that resonates throughout their period of co-writing (*Writing Romanticism* 15).

Labbe argues that Wordsworth and Smith are equally central to the formation of Romanticism and that their literary achievements were shaped and influenced by their readings of each other's work. Comparing Wordsworth's partnership with Coleridge to that with Smith, Labbe concludes that the latter pairing was a "cross-fertilization" as it was solely grounded on "a continuing meeting of minds and imaginations" (17). However, it is to be noted that Wordsworth alone was not influenced by her verses, women poets like Anne Bannerman, Amelie Opie, and Helen Maria Williams were all greatly indebted to Smith's experimentation with the sonnet form and her choice of subject and style. As Wordsworth put it, Smith was a poet "to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be either acknowledged or remembered." What Wordsworth said proved prophetic as she indeed influenced the creativity of other poets and

became largely forgotten by the literary history. By the early twentieth century she had been all but forgotten and was, largely, left on the periphery of Romantic literary tradition primarily due to her personal difficulties that were publically known; the story of her troubled life overshadowed her literary accomplishments, a problem which many women writers encountered.

2.4 Critical approaches to be kept in mind while reading her poems:

Charlotte Smith's writing occupy numerous critical spaces. It is imperative to study her as a Romantic and as a female poet/writer with an ecocritical outlook. In the last thirty years, Charlotte Turner Smith's pioneering contribution to the Romantic movement came to be recognised fully. Her influence on the Romantic writers especially William Wordsworth has already been discussed. Much of Smith's poetry is characterised by melancholy as it attempts to express a complicated grief; an attempt that places her as an important figure illuminating and shaping the possibilities of the lyric form. Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* was immediately acknowledged as having contributed significantly to the revival of sonnet tradition in the late eighteenth century. The sonnet had grown unpopular after Milton's death but regained popularity in the late eighteenth century with Smith's sonnets. Her training in art and the interest which lasted a lifetime found expression in her work especially *Elegiac Sonnets*. She constantly proved herself to be a poet of place and rural nature, significantly distancing herself from the urbanism of the eighteenth century poets evident in both *The Sea View* and *Beachy Head*. After a long period of critical neglect when in recent decades work on Smith came to be published, especially after the publication of her complete works between 2005 and 2007, she came to be regarded as "the first poet in England whom in retrospect we would call Romantic." Apart from her Romantic engagements, critics like Stuart Curran have highlighted

Smith's conscious involvement as a woman writer in engaging with the sonnet tradition. In trying to assess Smith as a Romantic poet I want you to reconsider the model offered by M.H. Abrams in *Mirror and the Lamp* in which he emphasises upon Romantic writers appearing to break with the past. In the previous unit too while discussing the prescribed poems I had opined that in Smith's case it is both innovation and a continuation with the past literary tradition. In the twentieth century, scholars are appreciating what Smith did in a time of transition. For one thing, she was responsive to the changes in literary taste and political events of her time, and she incorporated these into her writing in her own unique way. Secondly, she tried to show the world the different facets of herself in spite of societal pressure and limiting norms: she presented such different personae as the political misfit, the grieving mother, the strong author, the assertive botanist, and the sensible woman. Within the restrictions imposed on her, Smith tried to open up spaces of existence and empowerment for herself and she deliberately inserted details of her life to connect with her subject matter, and condemn the victimization of marginalized groups. Within the established premises of Romanticism, Smith definitely presents an alternative aesthetics with which a woman struggles to exist as a poet. In her poetic practice, she seems to be reversing the feminist maxim, the personal is political into the political is personal as she cannot help but openly reveal her political stance and sympathy for the distressed in her poem. However, in the eighteenth century it was not considered appropriate for a woman to occupy a political space or standing. To her, as it is to many others, war is not only inhumane and brutal, but also a universal disgrace to humankind as it interrupts with the regenerative process with which nature has been bountifully endowed. To Smith, the fact that mankind is capable of inflicting harm and destruction on its own kind is unacceptable.

2.5 Reading The Sea View and Beachy Head

The following points may be kept in mind while approaching the poems *The Sea View* and *Beachy Head*

1. These may be considered as topographical poems. Typically, topographical poetry describes and exalts a landscape or place. These poems became very popular during the 17th and 18th centuries. John Denham's 1642 poem "Cooper's Hill" established the genre, which peaked in popularity with Charlotte Smith's poetry followed by William Wordsworth's. In both these poems the landscape and the issues implicit in them though are initially registered by the poet's external sight later on become internalised and are subjected to inward contemplation of the soul. The poet thus lays bare her thoughts on nation-states, war and its aftermath, slavery, identity and the inclusion of multiple voices differing in opinions and perspectives. Unlike her eighteenth century contemporaries whose topographical poems centered on urban locales of power and often described cities and important monuments therein, Smith's poems (especially the ones under consideration) moved away from cities thereby highlighting pastoral landscapes and seascapes. However, in continuation with the eighteenth century tradition these poems especially *Beachy Head* connects scientific and geographical description to personal, historical and meditative thought. Wordsworth's famous poem "Tintern Abbey," may have been influenced by Smith's *Beachy Head*.
2. In her poems, nature is a perfect system that functions effectively, even though human beings cannot see or appreciate it and instead they are engrossed in destruction of themselves and the world around them. In this regard you may bring in the context of Sonnet LXXXIII, also titled "The Sea View." The poem opens with a shepherd figure placed on a mountain top, looking at the tranquil seascape beneath him. Everything in the

opening lines suggests peace and serenity: the shepherd is comfortably “reclined,” resting on the “soft turf that clothes the mountain brow” or the summer sun is gently setting “in purple radiance low.” In a canonical Romantic poem, we would expect the poetic persona to be transported to a childhood memory, reflect on a problem that has been troubling him, and resolve this issue with heightened awareness and maturity that he reaches after an authentic interaction with nature, which is the pattern classically followed in the great Romantic lyric. Here, in Smith’s sonnet, however, the poem takes an entirely different route as, the poem takes a violent toll when the speaker recalls the innate ferocity in humans:

Charged deep with deaths, upon the waves, far seen,
Move the war-freighted ships; and fierce and red,
Flash their destructive fire
The mangled dead And dying victims then pollute the

flood.

Ah! thus man spoils Heaven’s glorious works with blood!

(10-14)

Mirroring the dusk that she has just described, Smith now moves on to the dark side of humanity: further out, the shepherd notices ships of war which are bringing devastation and death for many. Let alone sensing the divine creative power in nature, in Smith’s poem, humanity brings destruction to “Heaven’s glorious works”; thus, contrary to the canonical Romantic poems, we see that the two realms – of man and nature – are distinctly severed from each other, just like the sea line separating the sky and the sea.

3. In *Beachy Head* Smith once again challenges the prevalent conceptions of nation and time, and dwells on the futility of war waged for the sake of glory and patriotism. Problematizing the concept of nationality by charting the history of Beachy Head which has been invaded by many different commanders throughout its troubled history, Smith explains that all those

glorious soldiers who died there are now lying side by side in the land where a peasant is grazing his herd. Hence, Smith concludes, the endeavour of the farmer is much more meaningful than waging war against an enemy who is in fact not so different from “us.” Smith further extends her criticism of nationalism by condemning colonialism, which enriches some at the expense of impoverishing others. Once again, she argues that the possession of material gains through abuse of power and exploitation is unethical and hence unacceptable. For Smith, all these materialist pursuits are in vain because the ultimate truth is in nature: humanity is not superior to nature, to her accepting and internalizing laws of life, and making peace with death is the ultimate human reality.

4. Charlotte Smith’s poems depict Reason/Nature dichotomy in a unique way which combines the organised rational outlook of the Augustans and the - Charlotte Smith preferred nature and its wild, playful ways to reason’s didactic outlook and organized ways. Reason in the eighteenth century Age of Enlightenment has always stood for the power of unaided human thought. Nature for Smith was not a reality which remained aloof playing no role in the life of mankind.
5. Smith’s poems need to be read for forwarding a gender critical eye which does not seek to ‘objectify’ and ‘reduce’ the subject in question instead focussing on the need to provide equal opportunity for the object gazed at to stand on its own. The seascape in *The Sea View* from the shepherd’s point of view and the chalky cliffs of *Beachy Head* represented through multiple narratorial interventions, graciously acknowledges the other’s distress thereby sharing a feminine privilege of compassionate feeling for the topographies in question

2.6 Other important poems

- i. The Emigrants
- ii. Written at the Close of Spring

2.7 Probable questions and suggested answers

1. What aspects of Smith's poetry makes her one of the last Augustans and one of the first Romantics?

Hints: a. Refer to the section "How to approach Smith"

b. You may refer to the difference in the Ages and contextualise Smith in her times which also was a transitional phase.

c. You need to discuss the two poems from the reason/nature dichotomy perspective giving adequate examples to show how Smith combines both a scientific temperament and Romantic playfulness in her approach towards nature. You may elaborate Beachy Head in greater detail. (Refer also to Unit I)

2. Discuss both the poems discussed here as topographical poems with a difference.

Hints: a. Refer to the section on topographical poetry discussed above

b. Make separate paragraphs for the two poems, The Sea View and Beachy Head

c. The Sea View – takes into account a seascape as seen by a shepherd. Like a typical topographical poem, the coastal view is from a height (The word 'upland' in the first line of the poem indicates this). The poem begins with a majestic vision of a coastal sunset before abruptly shifting to a brutal naval battle (the handiwork of humanity's greed to possess more and more). The poem uses the point of view of a shepherd to describe the beauty

of the sea and its surroundings as well as the blood-shed and misery caused by the war in the middle of the sea. Smith creates a stark contrast between how the shepherd views the sea as a natural beauty and how he views the sea which is suddenly overladen by the violent behaviors of men. The topography of the sea here is used to highlight the nature – human relationship from a Romantic perspective.

d. Beachy Head – Written at the end of her life and posthumously published in 1807, Charlotte Smith’s poem pays homage to the chalky cliffs of Southern England. This poem takes into account history, science and literature connecting the past, present and future; which explores memories; oscillating between the old Enlightenment structure of order and method on the one hand and emerging romanticism with its emphasis on playful tropes rendering new meaning. The first ten lines of the poem ascribes the rupture in the topography to a supernatural being rather than to geological processes, although Charlotte Smith was well-versed in the natural sciences of her day.

3. Comment on the depiction of nature in Charlotte Smith’s prescribed poems.

Hints: Nature is a significant category in Romantic poetry: it is a worldly representation of the divine creative power which helps humanity attain the long-lost connection with the transcendent realm through the power of imagination. As a threshold figure, Smith was not insensitive to the contemporary concept of nature and became one of the pioneering figures to incorporate lengthy nature depictions in her work, and innovatively associated these descriptions with the individual’s disposition. She saw nature as “alterity,” not because of her lack of love or appreciation of it, Curran argues that in Smith’s view, nature is an “intricately detailed ecosystem that across time and space transcends human control” (Curran, “Charlotte Smith and British Romanticism” 75-76).

SAQ

- What is Romanticism? Discuss in your own words the Romantic elements in Smith's poems with special reference to the two prescribed poems.
- Write a short note on Charlotte Smith and the sonnet tradition.

2.9 Suggested readings:

Hawley, Judith. 'Charlotte Smith's Elegiac Sonnets: Losses and Gains'. *Women's Poetry in the Enlightenment: The Making of a Canon, 1730-1920*, edited by Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain, St. Martin's, 1999, pp. 184–198.

Labbe, Jacqueline M. *Writing Romanticism: Charlotte Smith and William Wordsworth, 1784-1807*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Unit 3

William Blake: “The Echoing Green”, “The Little Black Boy” (Songs of Innocence), “Holy Thursday”, The Tyger” (Songs of Experience)

Unit Structure :

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introducing the Poet
- 3.3 His Works
- 3.4 Critical Reception
- 3.5 Context of Songs of *Innocence and of Experience*
- 3.6 “The Echoing Green”,
 - 3.6.1 Context of the Poem
 - 3.6.2 Reading the poem
- 3.7 “The Little Black Boy”
 - 3.7.1 Context of the Poem
 - 3.7.2 Reading the poem
- 3.8 “Holy Thursday”
 - 3.8.1 Context of the Poem
 - 3.8.2 Reading “Holy Thursday”
- 3.9 “The Tyger”
 - 3.9.1 Context of the poem
 - 3.9.2 Reading the Poem
- 4.0 Summing up
- 4.1 References/Suggested Readings

3.1 OBJECTIVES

The aim of the unit is to introduce the Romantic poet, **William Blake**, to you. Blake is considered to be the forerunner of the Romantic movement and his romanticism becomes apparent in his radical sympathies and general dislike of human authority, his interest in legend and antiquity, and the yearning for freedom and spiritual vision. Taking into

consideration the complexity of Blake's thinking the present unit aims to offer a reading of Blake, with its mixture of extremes in thought and work, the reception accorded to him through the century, and his place in the context of romantic poetry. We should take into consideration the fact that Blake eludes any final interpretation and the unit, in the same vein, also aims to encourage the spirit of new approaches to the study of Blake. By the end of your reading of this unit, you will

- *place* Blake in the English poetic tradition
- *explore* 'Romanticism' as a concept
- *uncover* new readings of Blake's poetry
- *evaluate* Blake's contribution to English poetry

3.2 INTRODUCING THE POET

William Blake was born in 1757. His father, James, was a successful London hosier and a Dissenter. Blake was educated by his mother, read widely in Shakespeare, Milton, Ben Jonson, the Bible but never got a formal education. At the age of fourteen he was apprenticed to James Basire, an engraver and stayed with him till he was twenty-one. His higher ambition landed him at the Royal Academy at Somerset House and in 1782, he married Catherine Boucher. In 1783 is to be seen the publication of his first volume *Poetical Sketches* while *Songs of Innocence* was published in 1789. Blake's distrust of human authority found expression in friendship with William Godwin and Tom Paine. Blake wrote two sets of prose aphorisms to illustrate his radical views. From 1793 he began to work on the 'prophetic books' and executed some of his most famous engravings including those for *The Book of Job and Night Thoughts* (Edward Young). *The Visions of Daughters Of Albion* (1793) introduced the figures of Blake's personal mythology and his other symbolic works followed. In 1800, Blake was taken up by the wealthy William Hayley to live at Felpham in Sussex (now West Sussex). These years in Felpham were soured by his arrest on trumped-up charges of sedition and Blake returned to London in 1803 to remain there for the rest of his life. At Felpham he worked on *Milton : A Poem in Two Books, To Justify the Ways of God to Men*. *Jerusalem* was

written between 1804 and 1820 and *The Ghost of Abel* came in 1822. Some of the other works of Blake are difficult to place in the chronology of his career and some works remained unknown until his papers were examined after his death. Blake was really a one-man-industry, designing, engraving and producing his own works making him one of the most difficult artists to assess.

Blake's political stance is clearly evident from his writings and we can categorize him to be an instinctive radical completely at odds with the established tyrannical doctrines. Commonly labeled as a visionary, a rebel, Blake was certainly a man who lived through his time with radical beliefs and responded to social and political events like the French Revolution, or the repressive policy of the British Government (for fear of revolutionary activity at home), or rapid changes in social life as a consequence of developing industrialization. Excluding the social changes, Blake's literary career was also influenced by powerful minds like the German mystic Jakob Boehme, the Swedish missionary Swedenborg, Dante, Milton, Isaac Watts, and Charles Wesley. The influences of Jewish cabbalistic ideas, and the Bible are noteworthy in this regard and Blake exploited these materials to form the world of his poetry.

3.3 HIS WORKS

Coming directly from factors which influenced Blake's writing, we can categorise his poetry easily. Blake's works mainly deal with themes like the contrary stages of innocence and experience, social oppression, and the question of knowledge. An understanding of the complex mythology, symbolism, and prophetic utterances of the Bible is necessary for a proper appreciation of Blake's eclectic and syncretic works. Some of his works are *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789-1794), *Poetical Sketches* (1769-78), *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-3), *America* (1793), *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), *The Book of Thel* (1789), *The French Revolution* (1791), *The Book of Urizen* (1794), *Tiriël* (1789), *The Four Zoas* (1795-1804).

Poetical Sketches, of 1769 - 78, is Blake's first work to be published. *The Book of Thel* (1789) illustrates his early mysticism and use of emblems and *Tiriel* (1789), written in rhetorical free verse, presents a vision of the universe and a Blakean doctrine of Man. *The French Revolution* (1791) shows Blake's response to contemporary events. In *The Book of Urizen* (1794), we find the figure of Urizen, the representative of a negative God, functioning as the prime oppressor. Blake has already introduced the figures of his personal mythology - Urizen, the grim symbol of restrictive morality and Orc, the arch-rebel in *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793). The *Book of Los* (1795) presents the rebellion against Urizen by the indignant Los and Orc, the embodiment of revolution. The theme of oppression and its thwarting dominates *America* (1793). In its sequel *Europe : A prophecy*, it is Orc's mother Enithorman who breeds revolution and also checks it. Perhaps *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is the most important work for an understanding of Blake's prophetic visions. The work voices his revolt against all accepted values and is prefaced by a poem 'The Argument' revealing the corruption of the path of truth by false religion. *The Four Zoas* presents the fully developed mythology concerning man and his destiny.

SAQ

What are the general features of Blake's life-history ? (30 words)

.....

What are the possible sources of the names of Blake's 'characters'? (20 words)

.....

What were the grounds of Blake's opposition to social oppression ? (40 words)

.....

3.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION

Blake's writing was not well received during his life time, but his fame started to grow before his death and the nineteenth century witnessed a gradual rise in his fame. The Rossettis adopted his works, Swinburne wrote the first substantial critical essay on him, and Yeats with his colleague, E. J. Ellis, published the annotated edition of his work. During the twentieth century, Blake's reputation was highlighted by two major books - *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) by Northrop Frye and *Blake : Prophet against Empire* (1969) by David Erdman. Erdman focuses on the historical study of Blake's writing and Frye traces the complexities and symmetries of Blake's mythic system. Other scholars have conducted different studies on Blake including his political attitude and gender politics and we hope for more critical materials on Blake in the coming years.

Romanticism & Poetry

How do we understand 'Romantic' writing ? We group together six English poets, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, and Keats; the German writers Friedrich Hölderlin, Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, Novalis, Ludwig Tieck, the brothers Schlegel, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, and bring in the French Chateaubriand, Mme de Stael, and Pierre-Simon Ballanche to identify a common thread, "Romanticism".

A.O.Lovejoy, the historian of ideas, argues for the use of "Romanticisms" to stress the diversity within the attitudes collectively named thus. René Wellek, the critic, argues for a holistic view of Romanticism. To sum up this discussion, we can observe that it is not a unified movement with a clear agenda but can be described as an attitude of intellectual orientation visible in music, literature, painting, criticism, and historiography in Western civilisation in the period 1780-1840.

As a movement liable to be described as the 'Counter-Enlightenment', Romanticism emphasised the subjective, the imaginative, the personal, the emotional, the spontaneous, the visionary, and the transcendental. Uninhibited self-expression was glorified as against the heritage of the Enlightenment which upheld the values of calmness, harmony, balance, order, rationality and idealization, all associated with neo-classical attitudes and the rationalism and physical materialism of the eighteenth century.

The word 'romantic' and its associations came to circulate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and referred to the poetic realm of medieval romance and that which was bizarre, picturesque and fantastic. The term, "gothic", identified these tendencies in English but 'romantic' became the stable term of reference only towards the end of the nineteenth century. The markers of Romanticism include an appreciation of the beauty of Nature, exaltation of emotion over reason, the senses over the intellect, the heightened examination of human personality, moods, mental capacities, a preoccupation with the idea of the self and genius, the idea of the hero and the hero's turmoils and struggles, the artist as supreme creator distinguished by a strong current of individualism and creative spirit.

In England, Romanticism found an early expression in the writing of William Blake whose personal mythology and symbolism dramatizing the interaction of different psychic components and of religious and socio-historical energies coupled with the castigation of established authority and principles of rationality and a prophetic voice paved the way for later poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge.

3.5 CONTEXT OF SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND OF EXPERIENCE

Songs of Innocence and of Experience was written between 1789 and 1794 and it shows the two contrary states of the human soul forming a kind of dialectic suggestive of the progress towards matured experience through an untarnished innocence. Blake here combines the nursery-rhyme rhythms, moral primness and hymn-like simplicity to show the transition from the state of Edenic innocence to the state of adult response to the world with a hope of future regain of the convivial joys of childhood. *Songs of Innocence* focuses on the challenges to and corruptions of the innocent state while *Songs of Experience* is more satirical, and even sarcastic in tone.

(Thus far, from previous SLMs of GUIDOL)

3.6. The Echoing Green

3.6.1. Context of the Poem:

The poem “The Echoing Green” was published in 1789. It appeared in *Songs of Innocence*, which is a collection of illustrated poems by William Blake depicting a world that is not tainted by corruption. This poem was inducted into *Songs of Innocence* as the speaker is an innocent child playing in the “Echoing Green” park. The poem is divided into three stanzas. The poem essentially represents the cycle of life. The speaker describes an entire day in the “Echoing Green” park. The first stanza is a depiction of youth as children are seen to be playing in a merry atmosphere welcoming the season of “Spring”. The second stanza describes the old age where old men and women in the park recall their glorious childhood days in the park. The third stanza describes ‘death’ as the speaker paints a gloomy evening in the “Echoing Green” park. The children are tired after play and returns to their respective homes. The activities of the children and old people come to a halt as the park is engulfed by darkness.

3.6.2. Reading the Poem:

William Blake’s poem “The Echoing Green” is an appreciation of nature. In the first stanza, the speaker draws a beautiful picture of the “Echoing Green” park. The speaker is a little boy who plays in the park. He describes the ecstatic nature around him. The sun rises in the morning and brightens up the sky. The sun makes the sky happy as dawn bids farewell to dusk enabling the blue sky to shine. The Church bells ring happily to welcome the season of spring. Blake makes a reference to birds in the park who participate enthusiastically to welcome the season. The skylark, thrush and “birds of the bush” sing songs loud along with the Church bells. The speaker plays sports amidst this cheerful environment in the “Echoing Green” park.

The second stanza draws attention to John who is an old man. He has grey hair and seems to be happy. He is not worried about the predicaments of life. He seems to have negotiated and learned to accept life with its vitality. He is present in the “Echoing Green” park with his old friends. The image of Old John sitting under an oak tree symbolizes

his mature age. The Oak tree is regarded as one of the toughest and most long lived trees in England. In English landscape, the oak tree stood at the centre of many villages. William Blake uses the oak tree to symbolize as the protector of innocence. All old folks present in the “Echoing Green” enjoy watching the children playing in the park. The old people become nostalgic about their youthful days. They share the reminiscences of their early days in the “Echoing Green” park. Though the early days are not described in a detailed manner, we can come to the conclusion that they were joyful. We get to know that Old John and his friends too spent their childhood in the park.

SAQ

- 1.How does William Blake describe the different periods of life in his poem? (40 words)
- 2.How are the closing moments of the day different from the vibrant morning? (30 words)

In the last stanza, the speaker describes the closing moments of the day in the “Echoing Green” park. As the sun starts to set in the West, the advent of dusk creates a gloomy atmosphere. The little children playing throughout the day have become tired. They did not seem to be happy as they had to stop play for the day. The way nature’s creation i.e. birds go to rest in the nest at dusk, children are taken by their mothers, sisters and brothers to their home. At dusk, the “Echoing Green” becomes dark as there is no light and no one plays in the field.

3.7.The Little Black Boy

3.7.1.Context of the Poem:

The poem “The Little Black Boy” was published in *Songs of Innocence* (1789). The poem can be regarded as a serious critique of racism and slavery. In fact, when William Black published this poem, slavery was legal in England. The speaker is a little black boy whose blackness makes him feel inferior to white people. His mother tries to

console him by appreciating blackness as a divine gift of God which brings solace to people's lives. In the final stanza, the boy imagines and hopes for a divine world which is devoid of racial prejudice. William Blake made illustrations for his poems as well. In the illustration to this poem, we can see a little black boy with his mother under a tree. The boy points his finger upward and the sun appears eastward. Blake paints these illustrations to give a visual idea of the poem.

3.7.2. Reading the Poem:

The poem "The Little Black Boy" deals with the issue of racism. The speaker is a little boy whose skin colour is black. In the first stanza, the speaker says that he was brought up in the Southern wilderness by his mother. Despite having a black skin colour, he claims that he possesses a white soul. This assertion is disheartening as he attempts to come to terms with his skin colour. He tries to assert that he is similar to a white English child who resembles an angel. The speaker's endeavour to associate himself with whites indicates that he must be a victim of racial discrimination. He feels that white skin is associated with positivity and holiness. This is the reason for which he says that he is devoid of light and sunken in darkness.

However, the child remembers the lessons imparted by his mother. His mother loved him unconditionally. He remembered that his mother kissed and made him sit on her lap. She used to point eastward and make the speaker look towards the rising sun. She said that God lives in the source of light and radiates heat in the world. All the elements of nature derive joy and comfort from sunlight during morning and noontime. His mother said that God put him in this world with "black bodies" and "sun-burnt face" to provide shade to others. The mother's statements are words of consolation but truthful. She tries to make her child understand that black skin is a divine gift of God. As the black bodies are compared to a cloud which bears the sweltering heat providing shade to people, black skin is priceless. She assures him that they will be free to rejoice like lambs of God once the souls will bear the heat of the sun completely. This longing for freedom implies that the little boy must be a slave. Nevertheless, he takes the lesson from his mother positively and believes her words.

In the final stanza, the speaker seems to be optimistic about his future. The stanza is written in future tense. This indicates that the speaker is hopeful. He says that he will shelter the English boy from the heat of the sun until he is freed from the white cloud. This indicates that in the place of God, there shall be no racial prejudice. He hopes that they will lean in joy upon their “father’s knee”. The speaker refers to God as the father of himself and the white English boy. He is waiting eagerly to live in a world which is devoid of racial discrimination. The distinction between blacks and whites shall be absent in the lap of God. However, the speaker hopes that he will be loved by the white boy. This means that the black boy wants to be accepted and loved by people.

Stop To Consider

Romantic Age

Romantic age is largely characterized by the power of imagination. It focuses on the wide avenue of human imagination which seeks to establish a relationship between the individual mind and the natural world. For you, it is important to remember that romanticism necessarily interrogates on the issue of meaning and perception. Romantic poetry has an inclination or to put it better- a strong interest towards Nature. As a result of this, most of the poets belonging to that age were known as Nature poets. In addition to that, romantic poetry claimed that the world of feeling and imagination transcends history as it offers access to a new realm of meaning. The gamut of romantic poetry stands as a celebration of imagination by denouncing reason, social restrictions, or traditional limitations. The romantic poets desired to write on the pastoral setting which as a way of life was rapidly disappearing at that point of time. The concept of romance went through a whole range of change in order to encapsulate ideas of fancy and imagination. What was typical of romantic poetry consisted in consistently dealing with flights of poetic imagination. Romanticism as a movement had varied histories in different countries of the world. It is for you to understand that the meaning of romanticism kept changing depending upon the field of study one was interested in. Poets like Wordsworth, Shelly, Keats, Coleridge downrightly rejected being called ‘romantic’ as they considered the label quite offensive. However, they thoroughly believed that the power of human mind lies in imagination and not reason. According to the torchbearers of romanticism, one’s imagination should be

liberating to the extent of being able to create a structure of meaning for oneself. Romanticism therefore values imagination of the individual human mind, originality of ideas, and forms of expressions more over reasoning abilities.

3.8. Holy Thursday

3.8.1. Context of the Poem:

“Holy Thursday” was published in *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in 1798. William Blake included “Holy Thursday” in *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. The poems present contrasting viewpoints of a ceremony on the Ascension Day (Holy Thursday) where orphans of London’s charities marched to St. Paul’s Cathedral. The poem included in *Songs of Innocence* presents a description of the ceremony with colours. However, the poem in *Songs of Experience* is a social critique. It exposes the real conditions in which the orphans lead their lives.

3.8.2. Reading the Poem:

In order to understand the poem “Holy Thursday” (*Songs of Experience*), we have to understand the context in which it was written. During the Ascension Day (Holy Thursday), orphans of London were washed up and dressed colourfully. As they marched to St. Paul’s Cathedral, they resembled the river Thames, flowing gently and gracefully. This picture is described in “Holy Thursday” (*Songs of Experience*) in a detailed manner. However, Blake feels that appearance is not same as reality for the children. In this poem, Blake exposes the dark truths associated with these children. He poses a series of questions in the poem. In the first stanza, Blake questions whether the sight of children living in acute poverty and misery can be regarded as a Holy sight. England might be a land of prosperity with the advent of Industrial revolution but the presence of usurers and corrupt people have made the life of children miserable. In the second stanza, the critique of the events on Ascension Day becomes clearer. The hymns of children in the

Church have been referred to “trembling” cries. He questions whether songs of joy are possible in a land of poverty. In fact, he strongly asserts that it is a land of poverty. In the third stanza, Blake throws light on the life of the poor. The lives of these destitute children are not similar to the privileged ones. He says that the sun does not shine on them. Sun is a symbol of prosperity for William Blake. He uses this symbol in the poem “The Little Black Boy” as well. The destitute children live in an area of darkness. They do not have proper food to eat. This is implied by the reference to “bleak and bare” fields. The children tread a path with thorns. Their lives are filled with hurdles and impediments. This is also a reference to Christ who was made to wear a crown of thorns as he walked towards his crucifixion. The poet says that orphans are shadowed by “eternal winter”. Winter marks the end of the seasonal cycle. Unlike Spring, which symbolizes strength and vitality, “winter” symbolizes despondency and death. In the final stanza, William Blake states that there is no room for hunger, poverty or diseased minds in a country where there is sunshine and rainfall. Sunshine and rainfall are signs of prosperity and positivity. He feels that the world of the orphans is devoid of sunshine and rainfall. In this way, this poem can also be seen as a critique of England.

SAQ

1. Do you think the little black boy is happy in the end of the poem? (40 words)
2. What are the symbols used in the poem? (30 words)

Stop to Consider

Symbols Symbols play an integral role in poetry writing. A symbol can be anything- a person, an object, an event, a thing, or an action that has much more to offer other than their literal meaning. In poetry, certain symbols are commonly made use of. However, specific symbols used to convey a definite meaning about an imaginative idea or concept sheds light on the various aspects that the poet wants to focus on. The word symbol is a derivative of the

Greek verb *symbolleîn* which means ‘to throw together’, and its noun *symbolon* meaning ‘mark’, ‘emblem’, ‘token’, or ‘sign’. Out of the numerous types of symbols, ‘conventional’ and ‘literary’ takes away a larger chunk of the pie. The conventional use of symbols in poetry highlights the inherent tone or meaning of the poem whereas literary symbols delve deep into the speaker’s inner state of mind to inform the readers of his/her thoughts. In the words of Coleridge, “a symbol is characterized by a translucence of the special (i.e., the species) in the individual”. In William Blake’s poem “The Tyger”, the word ‘tyger’ symbolizes the world of experience. Similarly, in poetry across different ages, symbols have been potently employed to represent various ideas, emotions, expressions, thoughts of individuals etc. When it comes to romantic poetry, symbols of nature abound in every corner of a poet’s imaginative style of writing. Symbols add to the effect of providing different forms of interpretation for the readers. It invests a sense of depth and meaning to the poems.

3.9. The Tyger

3.9.1 Context of the Poem:

The poem “The Tyger” was published in 1794 in his collections *Songs of Experience*. This poem is reportedly one of the most anthologized poems in English literature. The poem can be seen as a counterpart of William Blake’s poem “The Lamb” published in *Songs of Innocence*. The “Tyger” (Tiger) and lamb are contrasting creatures in terms of appearance and manners. The poem is intended to celebrate the contraries in nature. Though the tiger is fearful and ruthless, Blake wants the readers to look at it with overwhelming wonder. The entire poem is an extended query

3.9.2 Reading the poem:

In the first stanza, the poet introduces the readers with the frightful creature. The tiger is addressed by the poet and wonders about the Supreme Being behind its creation. The tiger’s skin glows in the dark

making it appear like fire. He questions what immortal 'Being' could have created the tiger with such geometrical perfection. The 'immortal eye' having the vision of creating such a fearsome animal is seen with admiration by the poet. In the subsequent stanzas, the sense of admiration for the creator of tiger continues. His query is to know the location where the tiger's fiery eyes were forged. He wonders whether it was in "distant deeps or skies". He feels surprised that the creator could actually dare to aspire to create the tiger. He tries to think about the "hand" which controlled the fire of the tiger. The fire is associated with tiger. The smoke of the flames is a blinding one. The poet is in awe thinking that such hands exist which can hold the fire of the tiger. The poet assumes that the creator is an artist. The muscular body of the tiger is a blissful design. The shoulders which could twist and turn to mould the design are powerful. The possessor of such shoulders and art is seen with astonishment. He also wonders if the creator was afraid to behold the sight of tiger's heart beating in rhythms. In the fourth stanza, the poet draws our attention to the tools which might have been used by the creator to frame the frightful symmetry. The poet thinks about the hammer, chain, furnace and anvil which were used to create it. These are also references to the Industrial Revolution where these tools were widely used. The furnace where the brain of the tiger was forged is seen with admiration. The poet is almost surprised to think about the existence of tools which could hold the deadly claws of the tiger. Blake's imaginative insight gets maximum expression in the penultimate stanza. He says that the stars threw their weapons down and flooded heaven with tears at the frightful sight of the tiger. He questions if the creator was happy to see His own creation. He questions whether the creator of the lamb and tiger is the same entity. Though Blake seems to pose questions to the reader and asking them to make a conjecture about the creator of lamb and the tiger, he implicitly hints that God created both of them. It is an attempt to establish the existence of binaries on Earth. The poem ends with a reference to the tiger burning bright in the night and the poet wondering about the creator again the last stanza.

Check your progress

1. Write a critical appreciation of the poem “The Echoing Green”.

(Hint: Passage of time from morning to dusk is the change from youth to old age)

2. How is “The Tyger” representative of the world of experience?

(Hint: *Songs of Experience* is contrary to *Songs of Innocence*. Compare it with “the Lamb” by William Blake)

3. Do you think “Holy Thursday” is a criticism of organized religion?

(Hint: Orphans marching to St. Paul’s Cathedral are crying. The depiction of their suffering through the poem should be mentioned)

4. How is racism and slavery depicted in “The Little Black Boy”?

(Hint: The speaker is a victim of condemnable racism and slavery. Write about the black boy’s predicament and the way he finds his life different from the white English boy)

'Innocence' and 'Experience' distinguished

Finally, you have to consider Blake's choice of names for two states of existence. Why does he oppose 'experience' to 'innocence'? Are the two states naturally opposed? Or do you think Blake is making a distinction proposed by religion? Is 'experience' related to the original sin of knowledge which led to Adam and Eve's fall from Paradise?

3.9 SUMMING UP

Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is an important work which contains some of Blake's most cherished ideas. The use of symbolism, language, syntactic structure helps to categorise Blake the

romantic in a nutshell. The innocence of 'Holy Thursday', the pain of oppression of 'London' and the powerful vigour of 'The Tyger'-these are the issues that characterise the romanticism of Blake, one of the brilliant writers of the Romantic period. While ending at this juncture we can say that Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is a true manifestation of the ideas under whose influence he worked.

4.0 GLOSSARY

A. 'Holy Thursday'

Lamb: Lamb is a typical Blakean symbol related to the joyous state of ignorant bliss of innocence. He has a poem called 'The Lamb' and lamb is the most innocent of God's creation. According to Blake the image of the lamb reflects a divine aura and he uses this image to ask questions about the whole of creation.

B. 'London'

1. Blood on palace walls: According to David Erdman, Blake uses blood as an apocalyptic omen of mutiny and civil war involving regicide.

2. Mind forg'd manacles: To quote David Erdman: "The phrase 'mind-forg'd manacles' may mean that people are voluntarily forging manacles in their own minds."

C. 'The Tyger'

1. 'The forests of the night' - The forests is an ancient Platonic symbol for material life.

2. 'In what distant deeps of skies.'

Burnt the fire of thine eyes' - One possible interpretation can be of Prometheus who stole fire for mankind. He is a symbol of revolution for the Romantics. He is also linked with Blake's Orc, the spirit of revolution.

3. 'In what furnace was thy brain?' - The furnaces are related to Los, the spirit of creation working in the furnaces to forge a new world.

4. 'When the stars threw down their spears' - Urizen (who created man) is associated with the mechanistic forces of the stars. In *The Four Zoas*, we see Urizen weeping over the anguish he has created-- 'the stars threw down their spears and fled naked away.' (*Vala or The Four Zoas*, K 311).

4.1 REFERENCES/SUGGESTED READINGS

Ford, Boris (ed.). *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature* (Volume 5: From Blake to Byron). London, New York, Australia, Penguin Books, 1982.

Ously, Ian (ed.). *The Wordsworth Companion to Literature in English*. London : Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1994.

Sengupta, Debjani and Cama, Shernaz (ed.) *Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge*. Delhi : Worldview Publication, 2004.

Sanders, Andrew. *The Short Oxford History of English literature* (second edition). New York : Oxford University Press, 2000.

Here are some URLs on the Internet which you may find useful:

- www.gailgastfield.com/Blake.html
- <http://virtual.park.uga.edu/~wblake/home1.html>
- <http://www.upword.com/blake/>
- <http://www.mythosandlogos.com/Blake.html>

Unit 4

William Blake

Supplementary Unit

Unit Structure :

4.2 Objectives

4.2 How to approach William Blake and his Poems

4.2 Other Important Poems by William Blake

4.3 Probable Questions and Suggested Outline of Answers

4.4 Important Books, Essays, Materials on the Poet

4.5 Suggested Readings

4.1 Objectives:

After reading this unit, you will be able to

- Approach William Blake and his poems
- Learn about other poems by Blake
- Answer questions relating to Blake's poems
- Find clues to other important resources to enhance your understating of Blake

4.2 How to approach William Blake and his Poems:

William Blake (1757-1827) was born in Soho, London. His father worked as a hosier. He left school at ten years of age but learned the art of reading and writing by then. Thereafter, he was admitted to Henry Par's drawing school. He was also educated by his mother Catherine Blake at his home. Blake's family were English Dissenters. They were basically Protestant Christians who separated from the Church of England. They are also called English Separatists. His early years laid the foundation stone for a stellar career. At an early age, he

began to engrave copies of drawings of Greek antiquities provided by his father. In this way, he became familiar with the works of Raphael, Michelangelo, Maarten van Heemskerck and Albrecht Durer. He was apprenticed to James Basire and later became a student at the Royal Academy. His apprenticeship enabled him to become a professional engraver. He was an engraver by the bookseller Joseph Johnson. In the Royal Academy, Blake rebelled against painters such as Rubens. He was against the ideas of Joshua Reynolds on his views of art. Blake disliked Reynolds' oil paintings and preferred classical precision of Michelangelo and Raphael.

He was influenced by the mysticism of Emmanuel Swedenborg but remained largely unrecognized during his lifetime. Blake respected the Bible but spoke against the organized religion and Church of England. In one of his famous works "Jerusalem", he mentions the 'dark satanic mills' of the industrial revolution. This is also one of the reasons for which he has been accepted as a poet of the Romantic age. Many of his poems are subjects of nature. His use of symbols and images in his poems are exemplary. The views of William Blake were idiosyncratic. His contemporary writers considered him mad precisely for this reason. A reader is most likely to find philosophical underpinnings in his works. He was tremendously influenced by the French and American revolutions.

William Blake (1757-1827) was a religious, political and artistic radical. He was a printmaker and an English poet. His outstanding paintings are a result of his joining as a student in Henry Parr's drawing school. His skilful artistry in painting and words made him a part of literary as well as art history. Blake's poetry and illustrations have been reportedly derived from Blake's visions. He claimed to have seen Ezekeil- a Prophet. The visions have been translated into designs with word and picture. This is why many critics referred to him as a visionary. Blake practiced relief etching to produce his poems and paintings. This process of painting is also called "illuminated painting". It involves writing of the texts on copper plates using an acid resistant medium. He created many works of art using this process. The meanings of his poetry are multilayered. It demands individual interpretation for a proper understanding. One may find many biblical references in his poetry. This is mainly because Bible is one of his sources of inspiration. His ideas are eclectic and syncretic. They are derived from a broad spectrum of issues and sources. He combines different cultures and tradition. His poems are replete with imageries, symbolism and prophetic utterances. This is what makes William Blake a pertinent as well as a complicated poet to be dealt with.

Let us understand Blake's use of symbols in some of the poems. Blake makes references to the "Sun" in *The Little Black Boy*. The sun is a symbol of imagination. It is associated with the Divine vision and Divine Family. In the poem "The Tyger", we find a plethora of symbols. The tiger is the symbol of wrath. Apart from this, it also symbolizes the divine and artistic creation. The "wings" referred in the poem symbolizes aspiration as the creator dares to create such a frightful creature. Similarly, in its contrary poem, "The Lamb", the lamb symbolizes Jesus Christ. It represents innocence and purity.

William Blake wrote *Milton* (1804) where he identifies himself with the author of *Paradise Lost*. He declares that Milton was a true poet belonged to the Devil's party without knowing it. Blake celebrated the existence of contraries and opposed ways of feeling. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, William Blake said that 'Without Contraries is no Progression'. He was aware about the industrial and commercial developments that were going on during the age. The control of organization over individuals was seen as a threat to the individual soul. These aspects found expression in Blake's poem "London" where he refers to these systems to be the result of 'mind-forg'd manacles'. The river Thames has been given a royal charter as well. In this respect, William Blake can be seen as a poet commenting on the social condition of the time. He gave importance to childhood days and celebration of nature.

William Blake married Catherine Boucher. She was an illiterate woman. However, Blake taught her the art of reading and writing. She helped him in printing the well known illuminated paintings years later. Blake did not have any children. He tried his hands on establishing print shops with a friend named James Parker. This endeavour did not bear him good results. This is the reason he had to live his life as an engraver. He became an illustrator for books and magazines. Blake also taught his brother Robert in drawing, painting and engraving. However, Blake lost his brother during the winter of 1787. In this event, Blake claimed to have seen the spirit of his brother rising to the ceiling. He even said that his brother Robert taught him the art of printing. It is on the basis of this procedure Blake printed his *Songs of Innocence*. This is the reason why Blake is called a visionary poet. Blake's work *Poetical Sketches* (1783) imitates classical models. The poems protest against war, tyranny, and King George III's treatment of the American colonies.

His popular collection of poems *Songs of Innocence and Experience* is seen as a children's book as well. This is mainly due to the illustrations. Being a radical, William Blake was associated with radical thinkers such as Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft

was one of the pioneers of Feminist movement. Blake defended Romanticism by favoring imagination over reason. He believed that poetry should be written from inner visions rather than observations of nature.

According to the critics, Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" (1790-93) is a satire on the established Church and the State. He also attacks Emanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish philosopher whose ideas once attracted his interest. Blake moved to the seacoast town of Felpham and worked until 1803 under the patronage of William Hayley. He taught himself Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Italian, so that he could read classical works in their original language. In Felpham he experienced profound spiritual insights that prepared him for his mature work, the great visionary epics written and etched between about 1804 and 1820. *Milton* (1804-08), *Vala, or The Four Zoas* (1797; rewritten after 1800), and *Jerusalem* (1804-20) have neither traditional plot, characters, rhyme, nor meter. They envision a new and higher kind of innocence, the human spirit triumphant over reason. Blake believed that his poetry could be read and understood by common people, but he was determined not to sacrifice his vision in order to become popular. In 1808 he exhibited some of his water colours at the Royal Academy, and in May of 1809 he exhibited his works at his brother James's house. Some of those who saw the exhibit praised Blake's artistry, but others thought the paintings —hideous and more than a few called him insane. Blake's poetry was not well known by the general public, but he was mentioned in *A Biographical Dictionary of the Living Authors of Great Britain and Ireland*, published in 1816. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who had been lent a copy of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, considered Blake a man of "Genius," and Wordsworth made his own copies of several songs. Charles Lamb sent a copy of *The Chimney Sweeper* from *Songs of Innocence* to James Montgomery for his *Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boys' Album* (1824), and Robert Southey (who, like Wordsworth, considered Blake insane) attended Blake's exhibition and included the *Mad Song* from *Poetical Sketches* in his miscellany *The Doctor* (1834-1837). Blake's final years, spent in great poverty were cheered by the admiring friendship of a group of younger artists who called themselves — The Ancients. In 1818 he met John Linnell, a young artist who helped him financially and also helped to create new interest in his work. It was Linnell who, in 1825, commissioned him to design illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the cycle of drawings that Blake worked on until his death in 1827.

In his *Life of William Blake* (1863) Alexander Gilchrist warned his readers that Blake "neither wrote nor drew for the many, hardly for work'y-day men at all, rather for children and angels; himself 'a divine

child,' whose playthings were sun, moon, and stars, the heavens and the earth." Yet Blake himself believed that his writings were of national importance and that they could be understood by a majority of men. Far from being an isolated mystic, Blake lived and worked in the teeming metropolis of London at a time of great social and political change that profoundly influenced his writing. After the peace was established in 1762, the British Empire seemed secure, but the storm wave begun with the American Revolution in 1775 and the French Revolution in 1789 changed forever the way men looked at their relationship to the state and to the established church. Poet, painter, and engraver, Blake worked to bring about a change both in the social order and in the minds of men.

One may wonder how a child born in moderate surroundings would become such an original artist and powerful writer. Unlike many well-known writers of his day, Blake was born into a family of moderate means. His father, James, was a hosier, one who sells stockings, gloves, and haberdashery, and the family lived at 28 Broad Street in London in an unpretentious but "respectable" neighbourhood. Blake was born on 28 November 1757. In all, seven children were born to James and Catherine Harmitage Blake, but only five survived infancy. Blake seems to have been closest to his youngest brother, Robert, who died while yet young. This was the personal life of William Blake.

In order to understand his poems, we have to know about his involvement in the political activities of the time. It is a shocker that he was not involved actively in any established political party. However, his poems became a rebellion against the abuse of power by upper class people. He protested against the wars which ended the innocent lives mercilessly. He was also sensitive towards the industrial revolution. Another pertinent point is that he was opposed to slavery. This gained expression in his poems like "the Chimney Sweeper" and "The Little Black Boy".

The poems prescribed in the syllabus- "The Echoing Green", "The Little Black Boy", "Holy Thursday" and "The Tyger" are from his collection of poems *Songs of Innocence and Experience* published in 1789. The sub title of the poem appeared as "Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul". It must be noted that two different worlds were presented in the world of "innocence" and "experience". The innocent lamb stands in sharp contrast to the fearsome tiger of experience. Similarly, the blissful songs of children in the poem "Holy Thursday" (*Songs of Innocence*) become trembling cries in "Holy Thursday" (*Songs of Experience*). This entire collection of poems can be regarded as a celebration of contraries. Blake proposition is not an outright rejection of evil. He attempts to establish that both binaries exist

in the world. The world of innocence and experience are opposed ways of feelings. William Blake's idea of binaries was probably inspired by a German Philosopher named Jacob Boehme who stated that God the Father had two wills- good and evil. The former will is loving and the latter wrathful. The dualities are not always in contradiction.

In the history of literature, William Blake is given a respectable position in Romantic Literature. His imaginary insights in the creation of pictorial poetry is worthy of appreciation. His love for natural objects is undeniable as many elements are subjects of his poetry. However, there are critics like Northrop Frye who thought that William Blake doesn't quite fit in the Romantic Age. He pointed out Blake's interest in allegory and satire. The employment of satire achieved its zenith during the time of Alexander Pope. The poem "Holy Thursday" is satirical as he throws a scathing attack on the society. Apart from this, he wrote poems on social criticism. For example: London or The Chimney Sweeper. Even allegory became anachronistic by the 17th century. These characteristics were hardly features of Romantic poetry. Fry regarded William Blake as an interruption in literary canon. He even labelled him as a "literary freak".

SAQ

- What makes William Blake a visionary poet? (40 words)
- What are "illuminated paintings"? Explain in the context of William Blake. (30 words)

Stop to Consider

Nature

The English Romantic period contains descriptions of nature in varying degree across the many forms of poetry. Almost every romantic poet held nature as the subject of their poetry. The romantic poets envisaged ideas of love, beauty, imagination, emotions in the light of nature. They focused on nature at large and the perspectives attached to it. The sights, scenes, and bounty of nature were explored by almost every poet in their poems. Romantic poets were deeply inspired by nature. As a result of this, their poems were more about celebrating nature drenched in its different dimensions. They used the power of poetry to acquire meaningful insight into the conditions of human life through the vehicle of nature. Keats is considered to be one of the greatest romantics of all

times. His poems are fraught with imageries of both real and artistic forms of nature. As an artistic and intellectual movement, romanticism employed ‘nature’ as a dominant theme to digress from traditional beliefs of Neoclassicism.

4.3 Other Important Poems by William Blake:

As stated above, the prescribed poems in the syllabus are from the collection of *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. It is an absolute imperative to read the immediate counterparts of the poems.

The poem “Holy Thursday” included in the prescribed poems has been taken from *Songs of Experience*. However, the world of experience has been portrayed in sharp contrast to the world of innocence. Let us try to understand the poem. The poem represents the same Ascension Day based on which the version of *Songs of Experience* is written. The Ascension day was also referred to as Holy Thursday. It was the day when many orphans belonging to London’s charity school participated in a march towards the divine Saint Paul’s Cathedral. They were singing on their way which sounded like hymns. The entire event is represented positively. All the children were wearing colourful clothes of red, blue and green. Their procession towards the river Thames appeared like a river. Blake refers to these children as innocent. They looked like a multitude of “lambs” raising their innocent hands. Their voices reached the heaven as they sang. The guardians of these poor children on earth sit beneath them. The entire poem throws light on the public display of affection towards these poor children. This setting is in stark contrast to the poem “Holy Thursday” in *Songs of Innocence*.

Stop to Consider

The Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution and Romanticism was considered a close knit circuit in Europe as the latter emphasized nature over industry. In a way, it played an important role in the birth of Romanticism. The Industrial Revolution was responsible for creating uproar in the fabric of social customs and traditions. It brought drastic changes to the country’s landscape within a short span of time. Unemployment was on the rise following the Industrial Revolution. Several farmers and agricultural

laborers were out of work as increasing mechanization of both land and industrial factories took over due to the onset of 'enclosure movement'. These led to changes in the socio-economic scenario as people suffered from acute poverty. Apart from that, the Industrial Revolution also heralded in revolutionary ideas to significantly alter the political order of the country. It further led to the destruction of rural areas with the expansion and demand of production from the factory units. Poets like John Keats, William Blake, William Wordsworth, and P.B. Shelly pointed out the rampant corruption, abuse of children, destruction of nature, and urbanization that were happening around through their work of art. Child Labor, which was seen as a common evil during the Industrial Revolution, was hugely criticized by the romantic poets. William Blake's poem "The Chimney Sweeper" depicts little children who were forced to go to work risking their lives. They were deprived of their childhood and made to live in deplorable conditions. In response to the alarming rate at which Industrial Revolution was hampering lives of the common people, poets of that era published works as a direct form of criticism towards it.

To understand William Blake's notion about the social problems, we can read his poem "The Chimney Sweeper" which was published in two parts. This poem throws light on the issue of child labour which a result of the industrial revolution. The houses had chimneys and they needed to be cleaned. Children of young age were hired as chimney sweepers for cleaning the. Many children also died due to suffocation and adverse lifestyle. In the poem published in *Songs of Innocence*, the chimney sweeper innocently says that his mother died when he was very young. He was sold by his father when he could hardly utter the word "weep". He became a chimney sweeper as his family was poor. In the second stanza, the child talks about his friend Tom Dacre whose head was shaved. The speaker consoled him that soot cannot spoil his hair while climbing the chimneys. Little Tom had a dream where they were locked up in a cell. An angel appeared with a bright key in hand and set them all free. He saw himself bathing the river and shinning in the sun. The poem ends with Tom waking up from his dream and going to work. Nevertheless, he was happy to go to work after the beautiful dream. This poem highlights the innocent life of the chimney sweepers who lead a life of regimentation and slavery. The poem, "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Songs of Experience* was written in contrast to this poem. This poem begins with a dark introduction of the chimney sweeper. The child is unrecognizable with the amount of soot he is covered with. More than a child, he is just a black figure appearing among the white snow. The

unidentified speaker asks the child about his whereabouts with a sign of authority in order to get a response. The child says that his parents have gone to the Church. This shows the reality of chimney sweepers where they are left on their own. William Blake criticizes the entire society and religion in this matter. Not only his family but the entire society is to be blamed for his condition. The child gives a distressing response to the question of the speaker. He said that he was happy enjoying in the heath and played in the snow. This is the reason why he was forcefully converted into a chimney sweeper. The child is conscious about the dangers involved in cleaning chimneys. He says that the people have clothed him in death. During those times, many children died of suffocation while cleaning chimneys. This is an evidence of the fact that the cleaning chimney is not a noble job. He says that he was “taught” to sing the notes of sadness. Despite the harsh conditions on which the child thrives, he tries to sing and become happy. However, in reality he is filled with sadness. The authority thinks that they have done no harm to him by making a chimney sweeper. They are seen to pray God, priests and kings.

The poem “The Tyger” should be read along with “The Lamb” by William Blake. The poem contains many questions. The speaker is a child who is intrigued by the innocent lamb. It is a conversation between a child and a lamb. Though the lamb does not answer any of his questions, it is in a conversational tone. In the first stanza, the little child posits a series of questions which are answered in the second stanza. He questions the lamb if he knows the creator behind his existence. The child believes in the presence of a divine entity who delivered the lamb with clothing of delight and a beautiful skin. The lamb is an innocent animal whose voice and presence makes the valleys happy. In the last stanza, the little child says that the creator is known by the name of the lamb. The lamb represents God who is meek and mild. He is also associated with child. The child finds an affinity with the lamb. He happily declares that God is called by his name and the lamb. In the end he bestows his blessings on the lamb. This poem is in sharp contrast to the tiger that is fierce and powerful. Though lamb and tiger are different, they thrive on the same earth. William Blake did not write his poems to showcase one as a blessing and other as a curse. Instead, the existence of both the creatures is necessary for nature to exist. It is a celebration of nature rather than a rejection.

Another important poem is “A Poison Tree”. This is a psychological poem. In this poem, the speaker recalls being angry about a friend. When he expressed his anger in front of another friend, his anger subsided. On the other hand, when he was angry at an enemy, he

decided to hold the anger. This made the speaker angrier about the enemy. The anger served as a plant in a garden which was nourished with elements of fear and tears. The speaker tried to hide his anger by subjecting himself to all sorts of deceptions. These tactics did not help him recover from his madness. The anger increased further to the point where it became a full grown tree with a bright apple. This apple borne out of hatred and anger was poisonous. It lured the enemy to consume it. The enemy snuck into the speaker's garden in the dead of night and consumed it. In the end, the speaker finds him lying dead beneath the tree. This psychological poem is one of the most anthologized poems of Blake.

Stop to Consider

Satire

According to M.H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 'satire' can be described as "the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation." In a satire, it is usually the prevailing vices or follies that are ridiculed or scorned at. Satire, as an art form, reached its pinnacle with the writings of literary giants like John Dryden, Alexander Pope, and Jonathan Swift. The work of a satirist is to correct or censure things that are supposedly detrimental to the society. Therefore, satire is a "kind of protest, a sublimation and refinement of anger and indignation." The history of satire can be traced back to the Greek poets of the 6th and 7th century BC with figures like Hipponax, Archilochus who extensively wrote savage and malicious satires. However, the greatest of all amongst the Greek satirists was Aristophanes who used his satires to ridicule and abuse the different types of vices and follies in several of his plays. According to Paola Ugolini, satire extends from classical antiquity to the present times, making it a multifaceted and almost timeless genre. In addition, it encompasses not only a vast variety of literary forms, in both prose and verse, but also of modes of expression: while "satire" is most often understood as pertaining to literature, it actually ranges from literary works to the visual arts and to performances. The tone of satire, too, can be extremely varied, spanning from polite amusement to angry invective. The variety of the genre has resulted in a very broad usage of the term satire: as pointed out by Alvin Kernan, "the word 'satire' has come[. . .] to be the general term for any kind of

writing which attacks, directly or indirectly, something which is hated or feared”.

4.4 Important essays, books, materials on the Poet:

1. Eaves, Morris. *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

This book will help you to understand William Blake as a Romantic poet. It will acquaint you with William Blake's circle, illuminated paintings and his involvement in history. There are entries on Blake and religion. There are explanations on works like Jerusalem and Milton. There is also a glossary of terms, names and concepts in Blake.

2. Damon, S. Foster. *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake*. Dartmouth College Press, 1965.

The foreword to the entries, entitled as “Blake as Conceived: Lessons in Endurance” will help you grasp S Foster Damon's agenda behind writing this book. You can search for the symbols of your poem in this book. It will provide you a holistic understanding of the terms. It will also show you how Blake uses the same symbols in different poems carrying different meanings.

3. “The Revolutionary Vision of William Blake” by Thomas J.J. Altizer published in *The Journal of Religious Ethics*. Vol.37, No 1 (Mar. 2009) pp.33-38

This article will help you to understand Blake's insight about Christian Churches. It is an understanding of Blake's renewal of Christian ethics done by a subversion and negation of Christian moral and theological traditions.

4. “Issac Watts and William Blake” by V. DE S Pinto published in *The Review of English Studies*, Vol. 20, No 79 (Jul, 1944), pp. 214-223

This article will help you understand the difference and similarities between William Blake and Issac Watts. The latter was a poet and educationalist of the 18th century. The article focuses on Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and explores the similarities with Issac Watts' *Divine Songs attempted in Easy Language for the use of Children*.

5. Poetry and Design in William Blake by Northrop Frye. “*The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 10, No 1 (Sep, 1951), pp. 35-42.

Northrop Frye called William Blake a ‘literary freak’. His assessment about Blake made him believe that he did not exactly belong to Romantic Age. This article is a comment on Blake’s genius as a person who could write and paint equally well.

4.5 Probable Questions and Suggested Outline of Answers:

1. Discuss William Blake’s use of symbols in the poems.
(Hint: Symbols are integral part of Blake’s poetry. Symbols: Sun, Tyger, etc.)
2. Comment on William Blake as a painter and a poet.
(Hint: William Blake published ‘Illuminated Paintings’. His words are decorated. Show how he is a blended artist.)
3. Why William Blake is called a Pre-Romantic poet?
(Hint: Blake’s use of Satire. Satire was mastered by Alexander Pope. It was in vogue in Augustan Age. Blake published *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in 1794; before publication of *Lyrical Ballads*)
4. How does Blake use repetition in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.
(Hint: Repetition used in the poem “The Tyger”)
5. Comment on the depiction of childhood in Blake’s poems.
(Hint: Loss of childhood and depiction of innocence in “The Little Black Boy”. The deplorable condition of the orphans in “Holy Thursday”)
6. Can you explain Blake’s views of religion from the prescribed poems?
(Hint: The satire against organized religion in “Holy Thursday”)
7. Do you think William Blake is a social critic? Give reasons.
(Hint: Social and political upheaval during Blake’s period)
8. Do you find the impact of Industrial Revolution in Blake’s poems?
(Hint: Romantics reacted against Industrial Revolution. They sought refuge in nature. Many of Blake’s poems are about nature. Tools of industrial England are mentioned in “The Tyger”)
9. Blake’s poems are also considered as poems for children. Explain.
(Hint: Use of simple sentences, rhyme and rhythm. Exploration of childhood)
10. Write a critical appreciation of “The Tyger”, “The Echoing Green”, “Holy Thursday” and “The Little Black Boy”

11. How does William Blake treat slavery and racism in his poems?
(Hint: Write from “The Little Black Boy”)
12. Comment on the use of satire by William Blake.
(Hint: Write the meaning of satire. Satire used in “Holy Thursday” to attack organized religion and society)
13. Write on the treatment of nature in Blake’s poems.
(Hint: Imageries, symbols of nature used in the poems. The objects of nature are subjects of his poetry)
14. Why did Blake use alliteration in his poems?
(Hint: “Tyger, Tyger”, “burning bright” “distant deeps”, “began to beat”)

4.6 Suggested Readings:

G. E. Bentley, editor. *William Blake: The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 157-160

Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (1947, rpt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), pp. 3, 147.

Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965)

Morse Peckham, “*Toward a Theory of Romanticism,*” *PMLA* 66 (1951), pp. 5–22

Unit 5

Mary Robinson's 'To the Poet Coleridge' and 'London's Summer Morning'

Unit Structure :

5.1 Objectives

- 5.2 Introducing the poet
- 5.3 Overview of her Work
- 5.4 Critical Reception
- 5.5 Reading the poem "To the Poet Coleridge"
- 5.6 Reading the poems "London's Summer Morning"
- 5.7 Summing Up
- 5.8 References and Suggested Reading

5.1 Objectives

This unit introduces you to Mary Robinson, her life, and her poetry. The unit tries to ascertain her place in the literary tradition as well as in the society in which she lived and wrote. It also aims to throw light on the reasons for the renewed interest in her work. Robinson produced a huge body of work in the last decade of her life, the very same decade that saw the birth of Romanticism. That made her one of the participants in the phenomena called Romanticism. To this end, attempts have been made to not read Robinson's poems in isolation but as interactions with other poets' works, especially that of Wordsworth and Coleridge. The unit is designed to help you in reading the prescribed poems "To the Poet Coleridge" and "London's Summer Morning", both of which open up questions about intertextuality.

The simple dictionary meaning of the word 'intertextuality' is the relationship between texts, especially literary ones. Two texts are intertextually connected when the meaning of one is shaped by the other.

With these objectives in view, the unit is designed

- to *read* the prescribed poems.
- to *situate the poet* within the context of British Romanticism alongside her male peers.
- to *understand* the whole purpose of reading ‘recovered’ literature vis-à-vis the canon.
- to *appreciate* the work in its totality.

5.2 Introducing the Poet

Something that we cannot say of Mary Robinson is: “Here’s a poet who needs no introduction.” If you are familiar with the names of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Percy Shelley, and Keats whose highly anthologized poems you must have read at some point or the other as part of your syllabi but not the lady in question, it is not without a reason. Literary criticism for until much of the twentieth century had been an essentially male-centric domain. Mary Robinson and her female peers, like Charlotte Smith who is the other female poet prescribed in this paper, were victims of exclusion because the very process of British canon formation favoured male writers. This matter will be further discussed under the ‘Critical Reception’ section.

Mary Robinson (1757? – 1800) was introduced to the late eighteenth century English public as an actress before she turned to writing poetry. It is this tension between her identities as an actress (and whatever came in its wake) and an author that informs how her early readers perceived Robinson and her work.

Hers was a sensational life. Married at 15 to Thomas Robinson she ended up in a debtors' prison because her husband was a gambler and had incurred huge debts. It is in prison that she began writing poetry to kill time. Those first pieces composed in prison went into her debut two-volume collection of poetry *Poems* published in 1775.

Stop to Consider

The idea of the canon is a list of books that are taken to be the best that has ever been written in the literature of a particular language, books that stand the test of time. When it is said that the process of canon-formation is faulty or biased against women, it suggests that women have always been writing but were not adequately represented or appropriately judged.

To make your own personal assessment of this ‘accusation’ against the

canon, go back to your English literature textbooks from school onwards. See for yourself whether the male authors you read did not outnumber the female ones. Also, try to get hold of a copy of *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* edited by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar to get yourself acquainted with an alternate tradition of writing by women.

While some of the best literature ever produced (irrespective of gender) were written from prison or under the most adverse conditions, you may take note that historically women have always written from confined spaces – the confines of home, the kitchen, and the body. Writing from prison may not be too different an experience.

In December 1776, she made her debut on the English stage as Juliet with David Garrick's company Drury Lane. Her actor's career took off in no time (an actor can catch the eye of the public much quicker than a poet can). She was seen in leading roles, and nine times she played a Shakespeare heroine. It was in December 1779, playing the role of Perdita from *The Winter's Tale* that Robinson bewitched the Prince of Wales, the future king George IV. She agreed to become the Prince's mistress for a promised sum of £20,000. She never received the sum though, and faced acute financial crisis all her life. There followed a string of liaisons with famous men, but the name 'Perdita' stuck to her years after she was abandoned by the Prince. And surrounding this name her public image was being created through gossip columns and satiric cartoons that represented her as a sexually licentious woman, beautiful but scandalous.

By the time she was thirty, she was left crippled either due to a miscarriage or rheumatic fever (accounts vary on this). In her thirties she took to writing vigorously mostly to sustain herself. Writing was her major source of income. It was from 1778 that she resumed writing, sending regular verses to newspapers. You need to take note of the fact that she wrote under multiple pseudonyms like Laura Maria, Sappho, Oberon, Tabitha Bramble, and each of these pseudonyms exploited different voices and modes of writing. There was such variety and multiplicity in these voices that critics have not been able to articulate a singular quality that can be called 'Robinsonian'. Because of the multiple poetic identities she did not fit into the stereotype of the romantic poet as 'natural, authentic, and spiritual' (*Introduction*, 20) However, her originality in style and stylistic inventions is undebatable. She was a regular contributor to the *Morning Post* where Coleridge and

Wordsworth were contributors too, but her juniors in the craft. In the end of 1799 she succeeded Robert Southey as the Poetry Editor of the *Morning Post*, an office she held until death cut her life short in 1800. We will read in greater detail about her work in the section that follows.

SAQ

Does Robinson conform to the popularly accepted image of the Romantic poet as ‘natural, authentic, or spiritual’? (50 words)

.....
.....

Why is it important to place Mary Robinson against the backdrop of British Romanticism while reading her work? (30 words)

.....
.....

5.3 Overview of her Work

According to Wordsworth’s famous definition (in the preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, in 1802) poetry is "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Romanticism has a preoccupation with spontaneity and inspiration, and its theories refer to the mind, emotions, and imagination of the poet, trying to answer exactly where a poem originates from. Echoing Wordsworth's "overflow", Mary Robinson called some of her key poems of the 1790s "effusions"— spontaneous and passionate outpourings.

As mentioned in the previous section, Mary Robinson’s first poems were written in prison and published in a two-volume collection titled *Poems* in 1775. Thereafter, there was a long hiatus in which she acted on the stage, became the future king George IV’s mistress, and took all the wrong turns that led her away from poetry. In 1788, she resumed writing poetry and sent her verses to various newspapers. Some of those poems, which she wrote under the pseudonym Laura Maria, were collected in her *Poems* of 1791. Most of these poems were written as poetic

exchanges with ‘Della Crusca’, the adopted pseudonym of the poet Robert Merry. This is the reason why Robinson’s early poetry is termed by critics as written in the Della Cruscan vogue.

The Della Cruscans were a circle of European late 18th century sentimental poets founded by Robert Merry. The movement garnered a lot of criticism because of its sentimental excesses, its insincere and affected nature, and exaggerated sensibility.

Robinson was highly original in matters of technique. Although she exploited some of the staple poetic forms like Spenserian stanzas, sonnets, and odes, she also invented hybrid forms. An example of a poem that employs hybrid stanza forms is “To the Poet Coleridge”. Her collection titled *Sappho and Phaon*(1796) brought about a sonnet renaissance in eighteenth century England with its series of Petrarchan sonnets. She was also an accomplished practitioner of the blank verse. The prescribed poem “London’s Summer Morning” is a good example. *Lyrical Tales* (1800) was the last collection published in her lifetime. One cannot miss the obvious reference to Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* that the title alludes to, although the poems were not written in simple imitation of the poems in the *Ballads*. Reportedly, the collection was published just a month prior to the second edition of *Ballads*, and Wordsworth was not happy.

Mary Robinson and Charlotte Smith can be credited with the reinvention of the lyric in the eighteenth century. Wordsworth was not the one who ushered in the new personal poetry that celebrated the ‘I’ and blurred the conventional distinction between the poet and the speaker. Mary Robinson and Charlotte Smith reached their before him. However, what appeared novel and distinct in a man was boring and used-up in case of the women poets. Critics have always censured women writers for being too personal or confessional.

Call it healthy competition or literary rivalry, a lot of borrowing and lending of meter, subject matter, and poetic images went on between Robinson and her two male contemporaries Wordsworth and Coleridge. This is further elaborated in the sections that directly deal with the poems.

The most read and most talked about of her writings, other than her poems, is Robinson's *Memoirs*, published posthumously in 1802. It will give you access to the poet's mind, her thoughts on her work, her life, her social circle, and her times.

Stop to Consider

Memoirs may be seen as a conscious project on the poet's part to repair the damage that her public image of a scandalous and gossip-ridden woman had brought upon her literary identity. In her own words: "Ah! How little has the misjudging world known of what has passed in my mind." Through her *Memoirs* she was consciously presenting a curated self-portrait, refashioning and preparing herself for posterity. The huge poetic output in the last ten years of her life also point to the fact that she was laboring hard to secure her position as a poet.

5.4 Critical Reception

As previously mentioned in the 'Introduction' section, until much of the twentieth century, and to a certain extent even some years ago, British romanticism was synonymous with the five male poets Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, Keats (with Blake as a later addition). Critical standards in the past failed to or did not wish to recognize female literary-artistic accomplishment. While a few woman authors like Mary Ann Evans, the Bronte sisters, Jane Austen, did manage to secure a place in the canon, some of them wrote under male pseudonyms, and none of them got fame the easy way. Whether you agree to it or not, a man and a woman writer of equal genius never get equal recognition. Parity of talent between the genders does not guarantee parity of fame.

Stop to Consider

Women writers, until recently, were hardly represented in anthologies or academic discourses. Renewed interest in female authors like Robinson or Smith is an outcome of the feminist project. Elaine Showalter's 'gynocriticism' (*A Literature of their Own*) was one of the earliest organized methods of rediscovering lost women writers or digging up obscure or unpublished texts. One of the most influential books that sought to repair the damage by introducing unknown or lesser known women authors since the middle ages to the twentieth century was *The Norton*

Anthology of Literature by Women, in two volumes, edited by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, originally published in 1985. This book, quite naturally, has an entry on Robinson. A few other notable books with entries on Robinson are *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* edited by Stephen Greenblatt, and Janet Todd's *Dictionary of British Women Writers* (1989).

If we go by the accepted chronological divisions of English literary history, then Mary Robinson is not a Romantic poet per se, but a pre-romantic, if you will. The British Romantic movement was formally launched with the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. And Mary Robinson died in 1800. She first published her *Poems* in 1775, almost a quarter of a century before Romanticism took off. In her own time she was widely read, although it is doubtful how many took her craft seriously. Of her contemporary readers, the poet Coleridge has, on more than one occasion, expressed his admiration for Robinson's poetry, especially its technical virtuosity. He has endorsed her poems to be included in an anthology by Southey, calling her 'a woman of undoubted genius' (*Letters* 1: 562).

Judith Pascoe observes in her "Introduction" to the only modern edition of Robinson's selected poems: "Robinson the poet was also Robinson the fallen woman. (20)" her poetic identity and literary achievement were always overshadowed by her sensationalized life. Always part of gossip, the notoriety associated with her public figure came in the way of poetic fame. Though she was a leading poet of her time, lack of critical attention over time had made her lapse into obscurity.

Stop to Consider

In Robinson scholarship, the name of Judith Pascoe is significant because it helped revive interest in the forgotten poet. The volume she edited titled *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems* (Broadview Press, 2000) is the first modern critical edition of Robinson's poetry with selected poems, with their publication histories, select manuscript letters, and also an appendix of her literary exchange with Coleridge.

In "Mary Robinson and Your Brilliant Career" Judith Pascoe shares her experience of taking up this editorial venture. She says how, during her research, there was absolute dearth of material. There was no modern edition of her poems that she could buy in a bookstore, only a facsimile edition of *Lyrical Tales* (1800). She scribbled notes sitting in libraries. She

retrieved some of her letters from lesser known archives in the New York Public library.

All this is to drive home the point that there were literally cobwebs of Mary Robinson's poetry before Judith Pascoe recovered her from the dingy shelves of public libraries. While there was an overabundance of critical material on Wordsworth (even on his walks), that has shaped how generations of readers perceive his work, the same was absolutely zero in the case of Robinson.

In the second phase of renewed interest with such scholarship as Pascoe's, Robinson's work has begun to assume a central place in discussions on Romanticism. It will do you good to note that Robinson was positioned somewhere in a transitional phase where her poetry anticipated the romantic turn. Because of her positioning she is a crucial figure for understanding the mutating form of English verse from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. Contemporary scholars of Robinson opine that there was much in Robinson's poetry that the Romantics, especially Wordsworth and Coleridge, have inherited. While it is interesting to note that the most productive years in her poetic output was the 1790s. In the concluding phase of her career she also made a conscious attempt to align and associate her poetry with that of the Lake poets. You will read more of this tendency in the sections that deal with reading the poems prescribed.

The entry on Robinson in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* says: "For much of the twentieth century, scholars singled out five poets— Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Percy Shelley, and Keats, adding Blake belatedly to make a sixth—and constructed notions of a unified Romanticism on the basis of their works. Some of the best-regarded poets of the time were women—Anna Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson—and Wordsworth and Coleridge (junior colleagues of Robinson when she was poetry editor of the *Morning Post* in the late 1790s) looked up to them and learned their craft from them. (1)"

Check Your Progress

1. Why is it difficult to discern an aesthetic in Robinson's poetry that can be termed 'Robinsonian'?

Hint: She wrote under multiple pseudonyms like Laura Maria, Sappho, Oberon, Tabitha Bramble.

2. In which phase of her literary career was Mary Robinson most actively writing poetry to secure her position as a poet?

Hint: She made a conscious effort to inscribe her poetry into the same terrain that the Lake poets occupied.

3. How did Robinson experiment with poetic forms?

Hint: Lyric, sonnet, hybrid forms

4. How did Mary Robinson's public image affect the critical reception of her work?

5. How has a modern edition of Mary Robinson's poetry by Judith Pascoe contributed in restoring the place of Robinson in the Romantic tradition?

5.5

5.5.1 Context of "To the Poet Coleridge":

The poem is a reading of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan". It was written in October 1800 as a tribute, sixteen years before "Kubla Khan" got into print. Robinson, being a part of Coleridge's exclusive coterie of friends with whom he had literary exchanges, had read the poem in manuscript form. Coleridge had drafted the poem around 1797. When Robinson's poem appeared in the *Morning Post*, the allusions to Coleridge's poem would not be comprehended by its readers, and the direct quotations might have appeared to them like cryptic messages they found hard to decrypt. "Kubla Khan" would not be made available to the public until 1816.

The poem is a part of the poetic dialogue of six poems that ensued from the end of 1797 to 1800 between the older poet Robinson and her junior Coleridge cutting across genders and generations. By this time Robinson was in the final lap of her career, while Coleridge's career was ahead of

him. They were both contributors to the *Morning Post*, and read each other's work and on several occasions put their admiration for each other's craft in writing.

There is evidence of their mutual admiration in Robinson's *Memoirs* and Coleridge's letters. You may take a look at the first two volumes of *Collected Letters: Samuel Taylor Coleridge (6 vols.)* edited by Earl Leslie Griggs, Clarendon Press, 1966-71.

In many letters to Robert Southey, Coleridge endorsed the poetry of Robinson (*Letters* 1: 562, 576, 589).

The dialogue was initiated when in response to Robinson's "Ode to the Snow Drop" (published in the *Morning Post* on Dec 26, 1797) Coleridge composed "The Apotheosis, or the Snow Drop" (January 3, 1798). Her two verse tributes to Coleridge date from October 1800, just two months before her death. The first was written on the birth of Coleridge's second son, and titled "Ode, Inscribed to the Infant Son of S. T. Coleridge, Esq." The other October poem is the one currently under discussion. As mentioned earlier, Robinson used to adopt several pseudonyms while writing poems, and *To the Poet Coleridge* was published under the pseudonym Sappho. Robinson is often termed by her scholars as the British or English Sappho (after the Greek female poet of antiquity whose unrivalled poetic genius got her the title of "Tenth Muse"). The verse dialogue is brought to a close by Coleridge with two posthumous 'tributes' to Robinson. The first, "Alcaeus to Sappho", seems rather insensitive because it is a paean to the physical beauty of the once beautiful Robinson who is now an invalid. To make matters worse, this is not a freshly composed poem. Coleridge recycled a cancelled Lucy poem to offer his tribute to Robinson. In Coleridge's final tribute "A Stranger Minstrel", he adopts a patronising stance as he welcomes Sappho to Mount Skiddaw, legitimising her presence there among the Lake poets. This poem too, however, seems flattering and insincere, not at all a serious recognition of Robinson's poetics.

5.5.2 Context of "London's Summer Morning"

The poem is one of Robinson's city poems or poems describing the urban street scenes from London of the 1790s. While reading these poems you should keep in mind that Robinson, living in 18th century

London, had two limitations— the one imposed by gender, the other imposed by physical disability. In the society of her time, gender determined a lot of factors, travelling through the world being one of them. So, while a Wordsworth could roam about freely following the dictates of his heart and wherever his feet carried him (critics have pointed out that Wordsworth's walks positively influenced his poetry), there would be restrictions on the movement of his female contemporaries. Taking walks or strolls was not an expected or socially sanctioned mode of travel for ladies. Pascoe comments: "Neither constitutional nor financial advantage served to offset the danger and scandal of a woman walking(Spectacular Flaneuse, 165)." Secondly, and more specifically to Robinson, the fact that she was paralysed waist down ruled out all possibility of going for those free, solo walks which her male counterparts enjoyed. She moved about the city extensively, however, in elaborate carriages, and it is this perspective of looking out at the city through the carriage windows that she brings into poems like "London's Summer Morning".

Stop to consider

"To the Poet Coleridge" cannot be fully appreciated unless you read it alongside Coleridge's "Kubla Khan". You are advised to read these poems in parallel, and make a comparative study. Locate the images that Robinson picks from Coleridge's text. See what she does with those images. How does she rework motifs or metaphors? Compare their poetic visions. Make your own assessment of both poems accordingly.

Robinson's city poems, that is, her poems on London, cannot be read in isolation. So many before her and so many thereafter, have written on London. Her London poems automatically enter that discourse. There are as many Londons as there are poets who write about this city – Blake's London of the chimney sweepers, Swift's gloomy London with bloody entrails of butchered animals ("A Description of a City Shower"), and there's Wordsworth London, just to name a few. Try to find out what's different, if at all, in Robinson's London.

5.6 Reading the poem(s)

5.6.1 Reading “To the Poet Coleridge”

In “To the Poet Coleridge”, Robinson poetically inscribes herself in the imaginative space conjured by Coleridge in “Kubla Khan.” She participates in Coleridge’s vision, shares in his dream. She imagines the poet Coleridge walking her around the “NEW PARADISE”, the dome of pleasure. She aptly recognises this paradise as 'imagination's boundless space', and wishes to explore this space for herself, traversing through its length and breadth with the male poet as her guide:

RAPT in the visionary theme!

SPIRIT DIVINE! With THEE I'll wander (1-2)

In her poem she appropriates some images and motifs from this paradise, while adding some fantastic details of her own imagining. Robinson’s colourful detailing renders the poetic landscape of “Kubla Khan” even more beautiful. She adds blue glassy streams and blue lawns to this paradise. She adds a network of ‘gossamer’ threads to the ‘mighty fountain’ of “Kubla Khan”.

Robinson hopes to drink from the same fountain arising from ‘that deep romantic chasm’ that Coleridge drank from. Generously calling him ‘Genius of Heav'n-taught Poesy’(line 52), she grants Coleridge the much sought status of the visionary poet, reiterating the Romantic idea of creative spontaneity as a divine gift, not a skill to be acquired but innate and instinctual. She is inspired in turn, and takes on the role of the damsel with the dulcimer.

This identification seems complete in the following lines:

She sings of thee, O favour'd child

Of Minstrelsy, sublimely wild!(69-70)

The damsel's song becomes one with Robinson's own song of praise for Coleridge, and his 'minstrelsy'. Both the damsel’s song and Robinson’s poem have the same musical quality to it:

In cadence rich, in cadence strong

Proving the wondrous witcheries of song! (63-64)

The poem finds Robinson extending a collaborative hand towards Coleridge in particular, and by extension forging a community with the Lake poets in general. Eugene Stelzig observes: "Her October 1800 poems to Coleridge are her final gesture to position herself for posterity by allying herself and linking her work and poetics with those of the talented younger generation whose poetry she admired (120)."

For many readers and reviewers who came across the poem only after 1816, "Kubla Khan" remained unintelligible. Some like Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt dismissed it as nonsense verse. Robinson's poem is not just the first published response to "Kubla Khan" but also the most insightful among the contemporary reviews. She seemed to grasp something of its theme and meter that most of Coleridge's contemporary readers missed.

Robinson's poem can be considered the earliest commentary on the metrical standards of "Kubla Khan". In his preface to "Kubla Khan", Coleridge claims that the poem is a fragment composed in a state of opium-induced delirium, and that he could not finish the poem once the inspiration left him. This claim of his echoes a statement by Robinson in her *Memoirs* where she claims to have composed the poem "The Maniac" after having taken "nearly eighty drops of laudanum"(qtd. in Pascoe, *Introduction* 32). Both "Kubla Khan" and "The Maniac", however, are carefully crafted poems with much attention given to rhyme and meter. No matter what Coleridge came to claim about the poem being unfinished, Robinson read it for what it was— a conscious act of poetic creation achieved in a most experimental stanzaic variation.

It will do you good to consider the studies done on the 'fragment' as a poetic sub-genre in its own right within Romanticism. A lot of mythbusting has been carried out by scholars and critics against the Romantic rhetoric of the inspired poet and unconscious composition.

To quote Coleridge himself, Robinson 'had an ear' for music in poetry (in a letter to Southey Coleridge had praised Robinson's poem 'The Haunted Beach' for its highly original meter) Coleridge was most struck by the formal structures of Robinson's poetry than its content, by her metrical inventions and her highly original style. It is this originality and uniqueness that reveals itself in her ode 'To the Poet Coleridge'. "Women Romantic poets have been dismissed by twentieth century

critics as minor writers who are metrically conventional and imitative, but Mary Robinson is at least one who boldly defies this stereotype."(D. Robinson, 4)

The metrical construction of Robinson's poem, similar to "Kubla Khan" in experimentation, yet different in its combination of metrical devices, sheds more light on the formal structure of Kubla Khan. She opens the poem using the folk meter, also called hymnal stanza. The first 12 lines are written in the hymnal measure (with the quatrains rhyming abab, cdcd, efef). The next ten lines (13-22) are composed of rhyming couplets with iambic tetrameter lines, except line 16 which is an iambic pentameter line. Lines 23-26 are again written in the hymnal measure. If you look carefully, lines 13-26 form a sonnet within poem itself (somewhat distorted) because it fulfills the seven-rhyme requirement of a sonnet. The rest of the poem alternates between hymnal measure and rhyming couplets. Her choice of metrical devices shows that she was giving Coleridge a tough contest. Going a step further, she ends her poem with an Alexandrine. Robinson highlights the structure of Kubla Khan by making her response an equally compelling and competent exercise in prosody. By this she suggests what critics would fail to see for more than a century— that Kubla Khan is not a fragment but complete in itself.

- **hymnal stanza/folk meter:** a stanza of four iambic lines (quatrain) rhyming abab or abcb
- **meter:** the rhythmic pattern of a poetic line, mostly counted with the sequence of syllables in a poetic line.
- **iamb (adj. iambic):** a metrical foot consisting of one unstressed(short) syllable followed by one stressed (long) syllable. A line of 5 iambic feet is iambic pentameter, and so on.
- **Alexandrine:** a 12-syllable iambic line with major stresses on the sixth and the last syllable

Daniel Robinson commenting on the form of Robinson's poem, says that Robinson "construct[s] five distinct but highly irregular stanzas, which... demonstrate her comprehension of the verbal texture of "Kubla Khan." Within the stanzas themselves, Robinson toys with form much in the same way Coleridge does — but far less obliquely, so she can expose the metrical game Coleridge is playing." (Daniel Robinson, 6)

SAQ

In what ways is “To the Poet Coleridge” a commentary on “Kubla Khan”? (50 words)

.....
.....

What are the metrical devices Robinson employs in her poem? (50 words)

.....
.....

In what ways does Robinson’s form and technique highlight or challenge that of Coleridge in “Kubla Khan”? (50 words)

.....
.....

5.6.2 Reading “London’s Summer Morning”

Judith Pascoe argues that Wordsworth's London is a city seen through the eyes of a tourist from the countryside. Robinson on the other hand was brought up in London from age ten and was very much a part of the urban spectacle. While Wordsworth was a distanced observer, Robinson was both observer and observed, spectator and spectacle. In these poems, Robinson the public spectacle becomes Robinson the poet-spectator, occupying the position of both object and purveyor of an urban gaze (165). Her affair with the Prince of Wales and subsequent liaisons with famous men had made her the talk of the town so much so that she could not remain unnoticed. Renowned artists of her time painted her; her portraits and caricatures were easily recognizable items of London's cultural life. Being a stock figure of London public life and susceptible to public exposure, Robinson cheerfully embraced her role as "the most attractive object in a large urban display" (Spectacular Flaneuse 166).

Because of her flamboyant public identity, she was painted both by satirical artists as well as renowned painters who made high art portraits of her. During this period she was painted by Joshua Reynolds, Gainsborough, Hoppner, Romney, among others.

You may refer to Perry, Gill. "The British Sappho: Borrowed Identities and the Representation of Women Artists in Late Eighteenth-Century British Art." *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1995, pp. 44–57. *JSTOR*.

A miscarriage in the early 1780s left her crippled and heavily dependant on carriages. Though in huge debt all her life she always kept luxurious carriages because it was an indicator of social status. Although she was the Prince's abandoned mistress she didn't want to forsake the status it gave her. She was also highly addicted to the attention the carriage brought her. Framed within the carriage's window she could draw the attention of passersby. The carriage window also provided her with a vantage point to look at the city, however delimiting that might be. The limitations of a carriage denies the rider the wide panoramic sweep available to Wordsworth standing upon Westminster bridge. Critics have said that Swift's "A Description of the Morning" and "A Description of a City Shower" are precursors to Robinson's "London's Summer Morning" replete with urban detailing. But it will be interesting to draw a comparison between this poem and Wordsworth's "Upon Westminster Bridge". While the London of each poet might have been unrecognizable to the other, readers can draw a different perspective if the two poems are placed together like a diptych. Although Wordsworth's poem was composed on a later date (1802) than Robinson's (1800) read alongside Robinson's poem describes a scene that would necessarily follow Wordsworth's, when his sleeping city would be roused from sleep. Arranged chronologically, the events in Robinson's poem would follow the scene described by Wordsworth. The 'silent, bare' early morning London of Wordsworth gives way to busy streets reverberating with shrill metallic sounds and tradesmen's cries in Robinson's London. The soft 'first splendour' of the sun rising over Wordsworth's London hardens by the time it reaches Robinson's city: 'now the sun/darts burning splendour on the glittering pane.' The 'smokeless air' of Wordsworth's city is heavy with 'sultry smoke' in Robinson's. Wordsworth's 'sleepy houses' are replaced by a 'sleepy

housemaid'. London glides from the realm of nature to that of the human. Wordsworth's London wears 'like a garment the beauty of the morning'. In Robinson's urban cityscape 'beauty smiles with industry' in shops. Wordsworth shows 'the mighty heart of London... lying still'. Robinson shows that mighty heart all animated, sprung to its feet, up and about.

Since the carriage window does not offer a panoramic view, Robinson gives us snippets of a noisy and bustling city arranged as if in a montage. The poem is so much about the very act of looking that there are pairs of eyes other than that of the poet-speaker:

In shops (where beauty smiles with industry)
Sits the smart damsel; while the passenger
Peeps through the window, watching every charm.
Now pastry dainties catch the eye minute
Of humming insects, while the limy snare
Waits to enthrall them.

Peeping passersby fix their gaze on the smart damsel inside the shop, while insects fix their 'eye minute' on pastries. This is a setting where everyone is watching everyone else. "This is a Foucauldian realm where everyone is subject to the focus of another's gaze...If no single individual can evade the gaze, it is equally true that none of them are excluded from training their own gaze on others (Spectacular Flaneuse 168)." Moreover, the 'gay merchandise' at display hints at capitalism's blinding choices in the heyday of British imperialism.

The poem being a picture of a busy marketplace is inevitably preoccupied with business as well as 'busy'-ness. The word 'busy' appears thrice in the poem — 'busy sounds', the housemaid's 'busy mop', and the poet's 'busy dreams'. The streets are populated by men and women from different occupations, though primarily from the working class— chimney boy, housemaid, dustman, tinmen, trunk makers, cork-cutters, vegetable vendors, lamplighter, pot-boy, old-clothes-man, porter. This shows how they are an integral part of the country's economy.

Dustman: the waste collector

Old-clothes-man: In the London of that time there was a trade in old, second-hand garments

Pascoe comments: "While Robinson perhaps romanticises the London marketplace, she grants to women a centrality in the urban street that had historically been denied them (Spectacular Flaneuse 168)." In Wordsworth's London women are mostly absent or muted, and when present they are mostly from the margins — prostitutes or actresses (as in book seven of the Prelude). At a time when women were invisible from politics, commerce, and excluded from public life in general, Robinson depicting women in action in the middle of the London marketplace appears deeply liberating.

Check Your Progress

1. What are the contrasting images of a London morning you find in "London's Summer Morning" Wordsworth's "Upon Westminster Bridge"?
2. Which section of the London society peoples the streets in Robinson's poem?
3. How much or how little have women been represented in the poem?
4. How does the poem foreground the matter of the gaze? How is the poet-speaker involved in the ways of looking and being looked at?

5.7 Summing up

In the previous sections attempts have been made to introduce you to Robinson, to situate her in a context, – the one provided by British Romanticism – and to read her work alongside her male peers. The 'Introduction' section gives you an idea of her life, her relationships, her disability, and her public image, and acquaints you with the circumstances that led her to poetry. The 'Overview' and 'Critical Reception' sections make an attempt to give a general idea of her work, and to connect her work to her life. It has been argued here that critical standards in the past negatively affected how future generations would

perceive the work of women. Sparse critical attention given to Robinson's work is one of the primary reasons of her having to suffer an obscure poetic afterlife. It has also been argued that scholarship such as Pascoe's has recovered Robinson's literature. Robinson's work has now begun to assume a central place in discussions on Romanticism. Robinson was positioned somewhere in a transitional phase where her poetry anticipated the romantic turn. Because of her positioning she is a crucial figure for understanding the mutating form of English verse from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. Contemporary scholars of Robinson opine that there was much in Robinson's poetry that the Romantics, especially Wordsworth and Coleridge, have inherited. Through a close reading of the poems prescribed, matters of intertextuality have been foregrounded. At the same time, attempts have been made to establish Robinson's strengths as a poet, her technical virtuosity, powers of imagination, and the vast formal range of her works.

5.8 References and Suggested reading

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Unit 6

Mary Robinson

Supplementary Unit

Unit Structure :

6.1 Objectives

6.2 How to Approach the Poet

6.3 Important Poems that You should Read

6.4 Probable Questions and Suggested Answers

6.5 References and Suggested Reading

6.1 Objectives:

After reading this unit, you will be able to

- Learn how to read Mary Robinson's poems
- Learn about other important poems by the poet
- Answer questions relating to her poems

6.2 How to Approach the poet

Mary Robinson's literary career as a whole was carved out of a tumultuous life. She wrote despite personal chaos, or may be because of it. Her personal history and public image cast a long shadow on her literary career and had a bearing on her critical reception. While approaching the poet or reading her poems it is important to place her in the London public life, she being an active, urban member of it. It is also

necessary to situate her against the backdrop of the Romantic movement because she was most active in terms of literary output in the same years that the first generation of Romantic poets were giving shape to what would later be called Romanticism. While doing so, it is important to bear in mind that for more than 200 years women poets like Mary Robinson and Charlotte Smith were not granted a space in academic courses or anthologies alongside Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, Keats, and Blake. You are reading these poets because they have been recovered by scholars, and their place restored.

You need to proceed with the knowledge that these female poets ushered in the era of personal poetry, a break from the detached and objective poetic spree of the Age of Enlightenment. Romanticism is indebted to them for the revival of such poetic forms as the sonnet and the lyric, and for redefining the 'I' in personal poetry. It is suggested that the metrical or prosodic features of Robinson's poetry be paid attention to while reading her poems.

The noted Robinson scholar Judith Pascoe observes that Robinson's poems record the cultural and aesthetic shifts of her time. Like someone who wants to stay updated on all the newest trends in town, she too tried her hands at the latest poetic trends. This made her an active participant in the literary preoccupations of her time. This is a significant reason as to why there has been no attempts so far to give a singular definition to Robinson as a poet. From time to time she kept adapting to the literary environment in which she found herself. Because she adopted different pseudonyms while experimenting with different styles, her poetic personae were widely disseminated or scattered. You could say that Robinson deliberately picked her disguises. Her first poems were written in the Della Cruscan vogue under the pseudonym Laura Maria; the poems registered her voice as a poet of sensibility. She opened up dialogue with the senior Romantic poets on many occasions, and even responded to the *Lyrical Ballads* with her own *Lyrical Tales*. Perhaps it was this contemporariness that contributed to her being a commercial success in her own time.

Robinson is often termed by her scholars as the British or English Sappho (after the Greek female poet of antiquity whose unrivalled poetic genius got her the title of "Tenth Muse"). Sappho was another of her disguises. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the surviving poetry of Sappho underwent a revival of interest, and many female poets looked up to her as their Muse, or appropriated her as a model. For the

woman poet or artist, the affinity to Sappho came naturally because Sappho's poetry allowed for the release of the most intimate emotions. Poets like Robinson who underwent severe emotional upheavals found this form of poetic expression most suitable. As Sappho, she was tragic, lyrical, and a master practitioner of the sonnet form. But, you must remember that even 'Sappho' was one of the phases, and not the only identity associated with Robinson. Masquerading behind these disguises, Robinson built for herself a multiplicity of poetic personae.

6.3 Important Poems that You Should Read

The following poems have been chosen for brief discussion because they are most anthologized (other than the ones prescribed) and also well received.

1. ***“The Haunted Beach”***: This poem should be read for its prosodic features and because it best reveals Robinson's craft. As has already been mentioned in the primary unit, Coleridge was most struck by the formal structures of Robinson's poetry, by her metrical inventions and her highly original style. It was for the poem “The Haunted Beach” that Coleridge made that exclamation “the Metre – ay! That Woman has an Ear” (*Letters* 1:576). This was made in a letter to Southey dated March 1, 1800, where Coleridge had praised 'The Haunted Beach' for its highly original meter, and for its images that he described in that same letter as “new & very distinct”. Before “The Haunted Beach” Robinson wrote another poem notable for its stanza, which came to be called the ‘Jasper stanza’ after the poem “Jasper”. Let us take a look at what the ‘Jasper stanza’ looks like before going to “The Haunted Beach”:

The night was long, 'twas winter time,

The moon shone pale and clearly:

The woods were bare, the nipping air

Across the heath, as cold as death,

Blew shrilly and severely. (lines 1-5)

The stanza is a variation on the ballad or hymnal stanza, and the five lines have the rhyme scheme *abcdb*. Lines 2 and 5 rhyme, while lines 3 and 4 consist of internal rhymes(that is ‘bare’ rhymes with ‘air’ within line 3, and ‘heath’ rhymes with ‘death’ within line 4). It is this formal regularity that lends music to the poem, and becomes a cause for Coleridge’s admiration.

“The Haunted Beach” employs iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter lines, a choice that Robinson made in “Jasper” too and even in “To the Poet Coleridge”. The Jasper stanza is, however, lengthened here to consist of nine lines. The metrical scheme of the Haunted Beach is even more elaborate with nine 9-line stanzas. Each of these stanzas follow the rhyme scheme *abcbedde*. If looked closely, an internal break can be deduced within each stanza, where the first four lines follow the traditional ballad or hymnal stanza with the *abcd* rhyme scheme. The remaining five lines exhibit a metrical innovation consisting of two rhymes *d* and *e*, and even a rhyming tetrameter couplet *dd*. The last line of each stanza, except the final one, repeats more or less the same line “Where the green billows play’d”, with slight variations on the word ‘play’d’. thus, it becomes a refrain in the poem and adds to its rhythmic regularity.

Coleridge has appreciated this poem not just in a letter to Southey but also in a note to Wordsworth’s poem “The Solitude of Binnorie”(1800) which appeared in the Morning Post. This poem borrowed the stanza pattern from Robinson’s poem, and Coleridge, in his prefatory note, acknowledges the inventor of the meter. He makes it explicit in the note that the meter is borrowed from her, and one cannot miss the resemblance. Although Wordsworth’s poem has 11 lines, the first lines are written in iambic trimeter and tetrameter in the same rhyme scheme, that is, *abcbedde*.

The poem also stands out in the Robinson oeuvre for being a ghost (‘ghastly’) narrative, replete with elements of the Gothic and the sublime. What is fascinating about the poem is its treatment of Nature which, here, is not calm or benevolent but sinister, mysterious and formidable, having a powerful hallucinatory effect on the human psyche. Robinson does not idealise Nature or its beauty. It is a ‘terrible beauty’ rather, that cannot be tamed or even grasped. The narrative is about a fisherman whose past is not revealed, but only that he has murdered a shipwrecked sailor on the beach for the Spanish gold that he carried. Since the murder, he has tried each day of his existence to escape from

the 'haunted beach' but is trapped by Nature's forces. For thirty years he has remained in the haunted beach, surrounded by supernatural beings or 'spectres':

Bound by a strong and mystic chain,

He has not power to stray;

But destined misery to sustain,

He wastes, in solitude and pain,

A loathsome life away. (lines 32-36)

Robinson deftly weaves the fisherman's consciousness into the physical environment, so that the sublime and dreadful aspects of Nature become nothing but projections of his own state of mind. The monstrosity of the beach, the malevolence of the 'yawning ocean' that swallowed up everything it came into contact with, may all have been figments of his imagination. It is the guilt he carries in his mind that has turned him to stone. The fisherman's burden of guilt is reminiscent of Coleridge's mariner whose guilt hung about his neck in the form of an albatross: Alone, alone, all, all alone,

Alone on a wide wide sea!

And never a saint took pity on

My soul in agony. ("Rime of the Ancient Mariner" IV. 9-12)

One cannot miss here the point that Coleridge's narrative poems like "Christabel" and "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" show his inclination towards the Gothic, and even there Nature unleashes terror as a reaction against human vices.

2. *The Poor Singing Dame*: One of the ways of reading "The Poor Singing Dame" is to read it as a self-portrait. The setting of the poem is such that there is a play of binaries or contrasting images, something that she employs in "January, 1795" as well (this oft-anthologised poem is a scathing criticism of aristocratic excess and a poignant depiction of class division.) Robinson invokes a two-class system here too. There is the Lord who lives in a great old castle, and then there is the poor dame residing in a 'poor simple dwelling'. This has some autobiographical connection because in the final years of her life Robinson lived in a cottage within the territorial ownership of the Prince of Wales's Windsor

Castle, where he occasionally resided. Biographical information on Robinson also reveals that for the most part of her life she was on the verge of bankruptcy, or lived with limited means, another fact that brings her close to the character of the poem's title. Generically, this too is a Gothic ballad featuring a woman who sings, her singing is both an end in itself and a means to unlimited ecstasy. Singing is also therapeutic, relieving her of her troubles that material poverty might have imposed on her. She sings all day to the great annoyance of the self-important Lord of the Castle who finds it hard to believe that someone can be so merry despite such abject poverty. He is so offended by her harmless 'roundelays' that he orders her imprisonment. She dies in prison. But that is not the end. Like the previous poem discussed here, and in keeping with the spirit of the ballad tradition, Nature intervenes to avenge a crime committed by a human. The maid's song is replaced by the deafening cry of screech-owls who 'shriek like a ghost', and 'his windows would rattle' with 'the winter blast blowing'. It is not difficult to see the resemblance between the singing dame and the writing poet. She writes, despite the ups and downs of life, despite the disability, or because of it. The identification between the dame and Robinson becomes complete when the Dame's name is revealed:

The Lord of the Castle, from that fatal moment

When poor Singing Mary was laid in her grave...

The Gothic elements in the poem work as a moral force that makes the Lord 'perish with shame'. Like "January, 1795", this poem too is a sharp criticism of the upper class, and highlights Mary Robinson's political stance. It is also an allegory on the return of the repressed, (or oppressed) to avenge the proud and the corrupt oppressor. The fact that the poor Dame's song does not die with her death speaks of Robinson's own preoccupations with poetic immortality, or an afterlife.

As regards form, it consists of eight eight-line stanzas of the rhyme scheme *abcdede*, again revealing a carefully wrought structure and pointing towards the pre-eminence of form in Robinson's poetry.

6.4 Probable Questions and Suggested Answers

1. Does Robinson conform to the popularly accepted image of the Romantic poet as 'natural, authentic, or spiritual'?

Ans: Robinson does not conform to the popularly accepted image of the Romantic poet as ‘natural, authentic, or spiritual’. Her poetry does not show certain tendencies (at least not exclusively so) that have come to be associated with the Romantic poet – immersing or losing oneself in nature, or celebrating the free human spirit as an extension of wild, unrestrained Nature. Robinson was an urban woman who drew urban landscapes or cityscapes as poignantly as scenes from nature. Also, she wrote under multiple pseudonyms which was not very conducive to the growth of a singular ‘authentic’ version of her unlike, say, Wordsworth, the pantheist.

2. Why is it important to place Mary Robinson against the backdrop of British Romanticism while reading her work?

Ans: If we go by the accepted chronological divisions of English literary history, then Mary Robinson is not a Romantic poet per se, but a pre-romantic, if you will. The British Romantic movement was formally launched with the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. And Mary Robinson died in 1800. She first published her *Poems* in 1775, almost a quarter of a century before Romanticism took off. With such scholarship as Judith Pascoe’s *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems* (2000), Robinson’s work has begun to assume a central place in discussions on Romanticism. Robinson was positioned somewhere in a transitional phase where her poetry anticipated the romantic turn. Because of her positioning she is a crucial figure for understanding the mutating form of English verse from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. Contemporary scholars of Robinson opine that there was much in Robinson’s poetry that the Romantics, especially Wordsworth and Coleridge, have inherited. A lot of borrowing and lending of meter, subject matter, and poetic images went on between Robinson and her two male contemporaries Wordsworth and Coleridge. It is interesting to note that the most productive years in her poetic output was the 1790s. In the concluding phase of her career she also made a conscious attempt to align and associate her poetry with that of the Lake poets.

3. In which phase of her literary career was Mary Robinson most actively writing poetry to secure her position as a poet?

Ans: The huge poetic output in the last ten years of her life (the 1790s) point to the fact that she was laboring hard to secure her position as a

poet. She made a conscious effort to inscribe her poetry into the same terrain that the Lake poets occupied.

4. How did Robinson experiment with poetic forms?

Ans: Mary Robinson and Charlotte Smith can be credited with the reinvention of the lyric in the eighteenth century. Wordsworth was not the one who ushered in the new personal poetry that celebrated the 'I' and blurred the conventional distinction between the poet and the speaker. Mary Robinson and Charlotte Smith reached their before him. Robinson was highly original in matters of technique. Besides exploiting some of the staple poetic forms like Spenserian stanzas, sonnets, and odes, she also invented hybrid forms. An example of a poem that employs hybrid stanza forms is "To the Poet Coleridge". Her collection titled *Sappho and Phaon* (1796) brought about a sonnet renaissance in eighteenth century England with its series of Petrarchan sonnets. She was also an accomplished practitioner of the blank verse. The prescribed poem "London's Summer Morning" is a good example.

Daniel Robinson has studied Mary Robinson's engagement with forms in great detail in his book *The Poetry of Mary Robinson: Form and Fame*. He unravels that Robinson's multiple pseudonyms, which he calls 'avatars', has a direct relationship with her experimentation with forms. He argues that these authorial personas function in a complicated network of relationships through literary, cultural, and contemporary allusions. Each of these avatars pays great attention to poetic form, and is a formal choice that the poet makes.

Robinson spiritedly engaged in the pursuit of fame by working within a masculinist tradition. She associated herself with the Della Cruscan in the early part of her career, and with the Lake poets in the latter part. And from both these associations she borrowed formal inspiration. She exhibited great technical virtuosity both within inherited formal traditions as well as in her own inventions and innovations in creating nonce forms. (A "nonce" form is one created by the poet for one-time use and may play with more traditional poetic forms.)

She even wrote a tribute poem for Joshua Reynolds, the leading artist of the time who had made a portrait of Robinson. Such tributes as this or the ones for Coleridge may hint that she strategically tried to impress

powerful men for two reasons, first because she knew they were dominating the market, and second, as a way to demonstrate that the one who is praising deserves the same praise.

In her 44-sonnet sequence *Sappho and Phaon. In a Series of Legitimate Sonnets (1796)* Robinson fully masculinises her authorial voice. When she calls these series of Petrarchan sonnets 'legitimate', she does so with a view to legitimising her claim as a sonneteer of the ranks of Petrarch. In adopting the form of the Italian sonnet, she identifies herself with Petrarch, not Sappho, and thus makes an attempt to masculinise her voice. "She employs the Petrarchan form in the name of the archetypal female poet as a means of subverting the tradition in which the male poet sublimates his sexual desire for an unattainable female object of desire as poetic immortality." (D Robinson 125)

When she comes into contact with the *Morning Post* contributors like Southey and Coleridge, she develops two new personas, namely Portia and Tabitha Bramble. She is seen to employ forms that shift from 'the baroque, irregular forms associated with Laura Maria, to the fixed and polemical forms of the Portia poems' to the 'new interest in using original forms of her own construction to combine narrative with subjectivity and formal variety usually associated with lyric poetry.' These can be seen as resulting from the influence of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's experiment with forms in *Lyrical Ballads*. This, however, was a two-way process, and the Lake Poets too have many a time been influenced by Robinson. A lot of borrowing and lending of meter, subject matter, and poetic images went on between Robinson and her two male contemporaries Wordsworth and Coleridge.

5. How did Mary Robinson's public image affect the critical reception of her work?

Ans: Mary Robinson (1757? – 1800) was introduced to the late eighteenth century English public as an actress before she turned to writing poetry. It is this tension between her identities as an actress (and whatever came in its wake) and an author that informs how her early readers perceived Robinson and her work.

Hers was a sensational life. Married at 15 to Thomas Robinson she ended up in a debtors' prison because her husband was a gambler and had incurred huge debts. It is in prison that she began writing poetry to

kill time. Those first pieces composed in prison went into her debut two-volume collection of poetry *Poems* published in 1775.

In December 1776, she made her debut on the English stage as Juliet with David Garrick's company Drury Lane. Her actor's career took off in no time (an actor can catch the eye of the public much quicker than a poet can). She was seen in leading roles, and nine times she played a Shakespeare heroine. It was in December 1779, playing the role of Perdita from *The Winter's Tale* that Robinson bewitched the Prince of Wales, the future king George IV. She agreed to become the Prince's mistress for a promised sum of £20,000. She never received the sum though, and faced acute financial crisis all her life. There followed a string of liaisons with famous men, but the name 'Perdita' stuck to her years after she was abandoned by the Prince. And surrounding this name her public image was being created through gossip columns and satiric cartoons that represented her as a sexually licentious woman, beautiful but scandalous.

In her own time she was widely read and was commercially successful, although it is doubtful how many took her craft seriously. Of her contemporary readers, the poet Coleridge has, on more than one occasion, expressed his admiration for Robinson's poetry, especially its technical virtuosity. He has endorsed her poems to be included in an anthology by Southey, calling her 'a woman of undoubted genius' (*Letters* 1: 562).

Judith Pascoe observes in her "Introduction" to the only modern edition of Robinson's selected poems: "Robinson the poet was also Robinson the fallen woman. (20)" Her poetic identity and literary achievement were always overshadowed by her sensationalized life. Always part of gossip, the notoriety associated with her public figure came in the way of poetic fame. Though she was a leading poet of her time, lack of critical attention over time had made her lapse into obscurity.

6. In what ways is "To the Poet Coleridge" a commentary on "Kubla Khan"? (50 words)

Ans: The poem is both a tribute to and a running commentary on Coleridge's "Kubla Khan". It was written in October 1800, sixteen years before "Kubla Khan" got into print. Robinson, being a part of

Coleridge's exclusive coterie of friends with whom he had literary exchanges, had read the poem in manuscript form. Coleridge had drafted the poem around 1797. When Robinson's poem appeared in the *Morning Post*, the allusions to Coleridge's poem would not be comprehended by its readers, and the direct quotations might have appeared to them like cryptic messages they found hard to decrypt. "Kubla Khan" would not be made available to the public until 1816.

The poem is a part of the poetic dialogue of six poems that ensued from the end of 1797 to 1800 between the older poet Robinson and her junior Coleridge cutting across genders and generations. By this time Robinson was in the final lap of her career, while Coleridge's career was ahead of him. They were both contributors to the *Morning Post*, and read each other's work and on several occasions put their admiration for each other's craft in writing.

In her poem she appropriates some images and motifs from this paradise, while adding some fantastic details of her own imagining. Robinson's colourful detailing renders the poetic landscape of "Kubla Khan" even more beautiful. She adds blue glassy streams and blue lawns to this paradise. She adds a network of 'gossamer' threads to the 'mighty fountain' of "Kubla Khan".

Robinson hopes to drink from the same fountain arising from 'that deep romantic chasm' that Coleridge drank from. Generously calling him 'Genius of Heav'n-taught Poesy'(line 52), she grants Coleridge the much sought status of the visionary poet, reiterating the Romantic idea of creative spontaneity as a divine gift, not a skill to be acquired but innate and instinctual. She is inspired in turn, and takes on the role of the damsel with the dulcimer.

Robinson's poem can be considered the earliest commentary on the metrical standards of "Kubla Khan". The metrical construction of Robinson's poem, similar to "Kubla Khan" in experimentation, yet different in its combination of metrical devices, sheds more light on the formal structure of Kubla Khan. She opens the poem using the folk meter, also called hymnal stanza. The first 12 lines are written in the hymnal measure (with the quatrains rhyming abab, cdcd, efef). The next ten lines (13-22) are composed of rhyming couplets with iambic tetrameter lines, except line 16 which is an iambic pentameter line. Lines 23-26 are again written in the hymnal measure. If you look carefully, lines 13-26 form a sonnet within poem itself (somewhat distorted)

because it fulfills the seven-rhyme requirement of a sonnet. The rest of the poem alternates between hymnal measure and rhyming couplets. Her choice of metrical devices shows that she was giving Coleridge a tough contest. Going a step further, she ends her poem with an Alexandrine. Robinson highlights the structure of *Kubla Khan* by making her response an equally compelling and competent exercise in prosody. By this she suggests what critics would fail to see for more than a century—that *Kubla Khan* is not a fragment but complete in itself.

Robinson's poem is not just the first published response to “*Kubla Khan*” but also the most insightful among the contemporary reviews. She seemed to grasp something of its theme and meter that most of Coleridge's contemporary readers missed.

7. What are the contrasting images of a London morning you find in “*London’s Summer Morning*” Wordsworth’s “*Upon Westminster Bridge*”?

Ans: But it will be interesting to draw a comparison between this poem and Wordsworth's "Upon Westminster Bridge". While the London of each poet might have been unrecognizable to the other, readers can draw a different perspective if the two poems are placed together like a diptych. Although Wordsworth's poem was composed on a later date (1802) than Robinson's (1800) read alongside Robinson's poem describes a scene that would necessarily follow Wordsworth's, when his sleeping city would be roused from sleep. Arranged chronologically, the events in Robinson's poem would follow the scene described by Wordsworth. The 'silent, bare' early morning London of Wordsworth gives way to busy streets reverberating with shrill metallic sounds and tradesmen's cries in Robinson's London. The soft 'first splendour' of the sun rising over Wordsworth's London hardens by the time it reaches Robinson's city: 'now the sun/darts burning splendour on the glittering pane.' The 'smokeless air' of Wordsworth's city is heavy with 'sultry smoke' in Robinson's. Wordsworth's 'sleepy houses' are replaced by a 'sleepy housemaid'. London glides from the realm of nature to that of the human. Wordsworth's London wears 'like a garment the beauty of the morning'. In Robinson's urban cityscape 'beauty smiles with industry' in shops. Wordsworth shows 'the mighty heart of London... lying still'.

Robinson shows that mighty heart all animated, sprung to its feet, up and about.

8. Which section of the London society peoples the streets in Robinson's poem? How much or how little have women been represented in the poem?

Ans: In "London's Summer Morning", the streets are populated by men and women from different occupations, though primarily from the working class— chimney boy, housemaid, dustman, tinmen, trunk makers, cork-cutters, vegetable vendors, lamplighter, pot-boy, old-clothes-man, porter. This shows how they are an integral part of the country's economy. Something that catches the reader's eye is that, although the people are mostly engaged in menial jobs there is nothing grim in the description. The workers seem to be at home in what they do, and even cheerfully engaged in work, something that is a stark opposite of a poem like Blake's "Chimney Sweeper". The poem paints a picture of friendly commerce where even the old-clothes trader appears entertaining. This is not to deny the class divisions existing in London or the suffering of the downtrodden. But, for a change, Robinson shows a sunny side. She excludes the grim realities from her vision, particularly in this poem.

Judith Pascoe comments: "While Robinson perhaps romanticises the London marketplace, she grants to women a centrality in the urban street that had historically been denied them (Spectacular Flaneuse 168)." In Wordsworth's London women are mostly absent or muted, and when present they are mostly from the margins — prostitutes or actresses (as in book seven of the Prelude). Mary Robinson shows women in action in her poem – a housemaid 'twirls the busy mop', the 'neat girl' with her 'band-box' going to work, the 'spruce and trim' salesgirl who is so smart and attractive that she attracts customers just by sitting in a shop. What's more, Robinson inserts her own self into the poetic landscape as the 'poor poet' waking from 'busy dreams'. She self-reflexively draws attention to the act of writing itself. Although the gender of the poet is not revealed (there is no 'his' or 'her' to qualify the busy dreamer), we assume it is the poet herself painting the summer morning. At a time when women were invisible from politics, commerce, and excluded from public life in general, Robinson depicting women in action in the middle of the London marketplace appears deeply liberating.

9. How does the poem foreground the matter of the gaze? How is the poet-speaker involved in the ways of looking and being looked at?

Ans: Judith Pascoe argues that Wordsworth's London is a city seen through the eyes of a tourist from the countryside. Robinson on the other hand was brought up in London from age ten and was very much a part of the urban spectacle. While Wordsworth was a distanced observer, Robinson was both observer and observed, spectator and spectacle. In these poems, Robinson the public spectacle becomes Robinson the poet-spectator, occupying the position of both object and purveyor of an urban gaze (165). Her affair with the Prince of Wales and subsequent liaisons with famous men had made her the talk of the town so much so that she could not remain unnoticed. Renowned artists of her time painted her; her portraits and caricatures were easily recognizable items of London's cultural life. Being a stock figure of London public life and susceptible to public exposure, Robinson cheerfully embraced her role as "the most attractive object in a large urban display" (Spectacular Flaneuse 166).

A miscarriage in the early 1780s left her crippled and heavily dependent on carriages. Though in huge debt all her life she always kept luxurious carriages because it was an indicator of social status. Although she was the Prince's abandoned mistress she didn't want to forsake the status it gave her. She was also highly addicted to the attention the carriage brought her. Framed within the carriage's window she could draw the attention of passersby. The carriage window also provided her with a vantage point to look at the city, however delimiting that might be.

Since the carriage window does not offer a panoramic view, Robinson gives us snippets of a noisy and bustling city arranged as if in a montage. The poem is so much about the very act of looking that there are pairs of eyes other than that of the poet-speaker:

In shops (where beauty smiles with industry)

Sits the smart damsel; while the passenger

Peeps through the window, watching every charm.

Now pastry dainties catch the eye minute
Of humming insects, while the limy snare
Waits to enthrall them.

Peeping passersby fix their gaze on the smart damsel inside the shop, while insects fix their 'eye minute' on pastries. This is a setting where everyone is watching everyone else. "This is a Foucauldian realm where everyone is subject to the focus of another's gaze...If no single individual can evade the gaze, it is equally true that none of them are excluded from training their own gaze on others (Spectacular Flaneuse 168)."

6.5 References and Suggested Reading

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BLOCK 2

Unit 1

William Wordsworth

Unit Structure :

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introducing the Poet
- 1.3 His Works
- 1.4 Critical Reception
- 1.5 Contexts of the Poems
- 1.6 Reading the Poem
 - 1.6.1 Reading ‘Ode On Intimations Of Immortality’
 - 1.6.2 Reading Michael
 - 1.6.3 Reading The Leech Gatherer
- 1.7 Summing up
- 1.8 References/Suggested Readings

1.1 OBJECTIVES

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) is one of the most admired poets of the Romantic era. For his brilliant ideas on various aspects of poetic creation and social life he is widely admired throughout the century. The unit will help in

- *reading* the poems in their proper contexts
- *understanding* the poet's ideas of Nature
- *celebrating* the simplicity found in his poetry as has been shown in the poems
- *focusing* on the basic philosophical and ideological issues of his time

1.2 INTRODUCING THE POET

Effective grasp of rural communal relationships, objections to over-stylised poetic diction, nostalgic yearning to represent the essence of Nature, radical desire to break with the artificial traditions and false

sophistication, and acute sensitivity towards the mutual interdependence of man and nature, are some of the characteristic features which distinguish William Wordsworth (1770-1850), the man who changed the concept of Romantic poetry. Poetry for him is the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' and the poet is a 'man speaking to man'. The rare emotional vitality of a poet unites the physicality of nature with the perception of mankind and the end-product is a unique blending of the two. Wordsworth is unique in the realm of English poetry for the sheer brilliance of his verse and his views on the nature of poetic creation, poetic diction, role of the poet, add to his reputation as literary critic.

William Wordsworth was born at Cockerthorpe, Cumberland, one of the five children of John and Ann Wordsworth. He was educated at primary schools in Cockerthorpe and Hawkshead and St. John's College Cambridge from where he got a B.A. degree. The death of his parents caused William to be separated from his beloved sister Dorothy.

The time spent by Wordsworth in France from 1790 till about 1793 had a profound impact on his poetic career. His friendship with Michel de Beaupuy, an aristocratic supporter of the Revolution inspired a passionate faith in revolutionary zeal. Meanwhile, his relationship with Annette Vallon and the birth of a daughter, Anne Caroline in December 1792 are events considered to have deeply affected him. Wordsworth's convictions with reference to the French Revolution underwent disillusionment as the regime changed to one of terror. His relationship was simultaneously disrupted by the hostilities which began in early 1793 and lasted until 1815.

The period 1793-95 was full of great personal unhappiness, uncertainty about professional future and moral and intellectual confusion. Despite his dismay at the drift of the Revolution into the realm of political terror, Wordsworth moved to higher realization especially with his association with William Godwin and his circle. He finally became disenchanted with France with her occupation of Switzerland in 1798.

Wordsworth's friendship with Coleridge began with the move to Dorset and then to Somerset in 1795. In the year 1798 came the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, to which were contributions both by Coleridge and Wordsworth.

Wordsworth, along with Dorothy, traveled to Germany in the autumn of 1799. Back in England after the bitterness and depression of the winter of 1799 which they passed in Germany and during which he began work on *The Prelude*, they settled in Dove Cottage in Grasmere close to his birthplace in the heart of his beloved Lake District with Robert Southey nearby. "Lake Poets" is the name given to the association between Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey. Dorothy's influence on her brother is considered to have diminished after 1802 when he married Mary Hutchinson.

Between 1798 and 1805 Wordsworth completed the first draft of his long autobiographical poem, *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind*. This version of the poem underwent many revisions yet it is considered to be different from the version published in 1850 after his death. The fact remains that the poem was not published during his life.

In 1813, Wordsworth was appointed to the sinecure of Distributor of Stamps for Westmorland and moved to Rydal Mount, Ambleside where he remained for the rest of his life. He was honoured by the Universities of Durham and Oxford and succeeded Southey as a Poet Laureate in 1843. Wordsworth's old age was marked by loneliness and the decline of his poetic powers. He died on April 23, 1850.

The social and political consequences of the French Revolution, the eighteenth -century development of psychological views implicit in Locke's idea of knowledge and perception, humanitarian impulse of the Enlightenment, his walking tour in France and Switzerland, among other factors have influenced his poetry.

SAQ

What was the effect of the French Revolution on English society? (30 words)

.....
.....

When did the Revolution begin and what happened subsequently ? (20 words)

.....
.....

Which facts of Wordsworth's life should be considered to have profoundly influenced his poetry? Can you identify the references? (30 words)

.....
.....

What kind of connections can we find between the French Revolution and his artistic beliefs? (40 words)

.....
.....

1.3 HIS WORKS

The best known works of William Wordsworth include *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), *The Prelude* (1850), *The Excursion* (1814), and *The Ecclesiastical Sonnets* (1822-45). Poems like 'Michael', 'The old Cumberland Beggar', 'The Solitary Reaper', 'Tintern Abbey', and 'Resolution and Independence' are still read and admired widely. Elegance, purity and simple poetic expressions are the qualities of Wordsworth's poetry and some of his works contain autobiographical accounts of his own development.

Wordsworth's *Descriptive Sketches* contains the experience of a walking tour in France, Germany and Switzerland and should be seen in the tradition of the late eighteenth-century meditative poems about nature. *Lyrical Ballads* is one of the most important documents of English Romanticism which asserts two roles of language, of conversation in the middle and lower stratas of society in creating poetic pleasure along with the changing motions of poetic decorum, and the nature of poetry and the role of the poet. The Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was occasioned by the republication of the revised and altered volume of 1798, remaining Wordsworth's most significant statement of the purposes of his poetic art.

Wordsworth's poetic themes are often to be seen in connection with the predominantly Romantic idea of the growth and change of the self. 'The Excursion' is a poem in nine books containing views of man, nature and society. Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is an autobiographical poem in blank verse which focuses on the growth of the poet's mind and a poetic

reflection on poetry itself. *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807) contain poems like the *Ode to Duty*, *Miscellaneous Sonnets* and *Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty*. *Peter Bell: A Tale in Verse* and *The Waggoner* was published in 1819. 'The Borders' is a blank-verse tragedy written by him and most of his later works commemorate his travels. For example, *The River Duddon: A Series of Sonnets* (1820), *Memorials of a Tour On the Continent* (1822), *Yarrow Revisited and Other Poems* (1835). Wordsworth's prose works include *The Convention of Cintra* (1809), an essay criticizing the agreement of Britain and Portugal to allow the French army to return home during the Peninsular War. *A Description of the Scenery of Lakes in the North of England* (1810) and *Essay on Epitaphs* was published in Coleridge's Journal 'The Friend'.

1.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION

Wordsworth's works have been received differently by critics throughout the ages. The twentieth-century critic Northrop Frye draws a connection between Wordsworth's innovative descriptions and social and political critique. Harold Bloom says that Wordsworth has made the 'poet's own subjectivity' the prevalent subject of poetry while dramatising the argument of the individual consciousness. In his defence of his literary practice Wordsworth is akin to authors like Dryden, Henry James, or T. S. Eliot, but W. J. B. Owen notes that Wordsworth is less original as his ideas about figurative language, poetic diction, relationship between prose and poetry draw heavily on ideas of the 18th century. Wordsworth, in his active concern about the pressures impinging on the lives of the inhabitants of industrial cities, looks forward to the opposition between high and mass cultures in the writings of modern critics like Raymond Williams. His opinions about the poet and his states, for instance, are also part of the the issues which are dealt with differently by different critics like Matthew Arnold, and I. A. Richards throughout the century.

Check Your Progress

1. Compare the dates of Blake and Wordsworth. How long were they contemporaries?

(Hint: A straightforward answer is required!)

2. What is the 'Romanticism' shared alike by the two poets?

(Hint: Look at their similarities.)

3. Note the differences in the critical reception given to the two poets.

(Hint: Read the relevant sections.)

Nature in Romantic poetry

In Romantic poetry Man and Nature are emblematic of each other. Contrastingly, the neo-classical view of nature was formed through the restrictive frame of 'perfection'. Thus for the eighteenth-century writer's aesthetic standards, art fulfills its role not by imitating nature irregular and ordinary, but as the embodiment of perfection. But this was also a confirmation of an Enlightenment conception of a mechanistic universe that nature must be idealised and taken in its perfection.

The Romantic ideal contested the eighteenth-century norm; as René Wellek remarks, "All Romantic poets conceived of nature as an organic whole, on the analogue of man rather than a concourse of atoms - a nature that is not divorced from aesthetic values, which are just as real (or rather more real) than the abstractions of science." If, for the neoclassical writer, the norm was to "Follow Nature!" , for the Romantic poet, the defining principle was the "return to nature". This return, however, was formulated differently by the different poets.

For Blake, nature appears differently from Wordsworth's sense of it as an animated divine force. In Blake's conception, nature and man seem destined for a sense of renewal challenging eighteenth century deism, cosmology and ideas of natural religion. Shelley's apprehension of nature consists of the sense of its vitality aligning it with man's progression towards self-consciousness.

Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime* proposes the idea of delightful horror in terms of the depiction of the natural world and its vastness and immensity. The 'Simplon Pass' passage in Book VI of his *Prelude* (1805) where the poet's memory of a daunting physical landscape is surpassed by his realization of imaginative potential also echoes the sense of sublime horror and grandeur of natural scenery. The dialectic of nature with memory and consciousness aiming towards a cosmic vision dominates the poetry of the period and helps to dramatize the idea of the self. Wordsworth's celebration of nature in 'Tintern Abbey':

"Therefore am I still/ A lover of the meadows and the woods,/ And mountains, and of all that we behold/ From this green earth; of all the mighty world/ Of eye, and ear, - both what they half create, / And what perceive; well pleased to recognize/ In nature and the language

of the sense,/ The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being"

shows that nature is as mutable an idea as the self and its holy redemptive power is found in the physical world.

Nature occupies Romantic horizons as a criterion, the cardinal standard of poetic value. In recent years, the new approach known as ecological literary criticism ponders over Romantic poetry addressing perennial questions concerning the relationship between humankind and the natural world.

1.5 CONTEXTS OF THE POEMS

1.5.1 Ode on Intimations of Immortality: This poem was composed during March 1802-1804 and first published in *Poems in Two Volumes* (1815). Dorothy's *Journal states:* 'William added a little to the ode he is writing" (17 June 1802). At least the first four stanzas were composed in March 1802, with further compositions during the year and it was finally completed by 6 March, 1804. The most important external evidence about the Ode's composition can be found in William Wordsworth's comments to Isabella Fenwick in 1843 : "This was composed during my residence in Town-End, Grasmere : Two years at least passed between the writing of the first four stanzas and the remaining part."

1.5.2 RESOLUTION AND INDEPENDENCE OR THE LEECH GATHERER

Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journal* clearly mentions that the poem was written at Town end between May and June 1802 and published in the 1807 volume namely *Two Volumes*. According to her, William **continuously worked** on it on certain days and almost 'tired himself to death'. The poem is based on an incident which Dorothy put on record on October 3, 1800. Wordsworth probably met the Leech-Gatherer on September 28, on the road to Grasmere. Not far from Dove Cottage, the brother and sister met 'an old man almost double', carrying a bundle; he wore an apron and a night cap, 'his face was interesting', and 'he had dark eyes and a long nose'. The old man was of Scotch parents and had been in the army. His wife and nine children out of ten died. He chose to

gather leeches. Since leeches became scarce, and he lost his erstwhile patience and strength for it, he was now forced to live by begging and was making his way to Carlisle where he should buy a few goodly books to sell.

Wordsworth writes, “I was in the state of feeling, described in the beginning of the poem, while crossing over Barton Fell from Mr. Clarkson’s at the foot of Ullawater towards Askham. The image of the hare I then observed on the ridge of the Fell”. F W H Myres quotes from a letter of Wordsworth to some friends a passage to explain Wordsworth’s feelings in writing this poem. The passage is worth reproducing “I will explain to you” says Wordsworth, “in prose my feelings in writing the poem. I describe myself as having been exalted to the highest pitch of delight by the joyousness and beauty of Nature; and then as depressed even in the midst of those beautiful objects, to the lowest dejection and despair. A young poet in the midst of the happiness of Nature is described as overwhelmed by the thoughts of the miserable reverses which have befallen the happiest of all men, viz, poets. I think of this till I am so deeply impressed with it, than I consider the manner in which I am rescued from my dejection and despair almost as an interposition of providence. A person reading the poem with feelings like mine will have been awes and controlled, expecting something spiritual or supernatural. What is brought forward? A lonely place, a pond by which an old man was the figure presented in the naked simplicity possible. The feeling of spirituality or supernatural is again referred to as being strong in my mind in this passage. How came he here? Thought I, or what can he be doing? I then describe him, whether ill or well is not for me to judge, with perfect confidence, but this I can confidently affirm, that though I believe God has given the **imagination**, I cannot conceive a figure more impressive than that of an old man like this, the survivor of a wife and ten children, travelling alone among the mountains and all lonely places, carrying with him his own fortitude, and the necessities which an unjust state of society has laid upon him.

You speak of his speech as tedious when one does not read with the feelings of the author. *The Thorn* is tedious to hundreds; and so is *The Idiot Boy* to hundreds. It is in the character of the old man to tell his story, which an impatient reader must feel tedious. But good heavens! Such a figure, in such a place, a pious self-respecting, miserably infirm and pleased old man, telling such a tale!”

The poem is written in a stanza form rarely attempted by Wordsworth. It is a seven line stanza, each line an iambic pentameter, with the rhyme scheme - a b a b c c. The seventh line, however, consists of six feet, while some of the other lines are hypermetric.

1.6 READING THE POEMS

1.6.1 Reading ‘Ode On Intimations Of Immortality’

The first four stanzas of the 'Immortality Ode' were composed in 1802 and the rest in 1804. The poem deals with the universal experience of growing up from childhood to maturity and records the gains as well as losses in this process of attaining the experienced view of world. Themes like the power of memory, the philosophical compensation of maturity, immortality, time, eternity etc commingle to form the totality of the Ode. The earlier part of the poem mourns the sense of loss felt by the poet when as an adult he can no longer experience the deep harmony and perfect union of sense and feeling. The later stanzas try to explain the loss in terms of spiritual gains and resolve the crisis by asserting the consolations of maturity. The poem also combines the double vision of childhood while projecting a transition from the world of innocence to the realm of experience and Wordsworth's visions of the childhood we live through as children and the childhood which we carry within us in terms of memory enhance the meaning of the poem. The fading of youthful glory with the advance of age, the visionary power of childhood, are explored in this ode along with the idea of pre-existence, hope of immortality and the doctrine of innate knowledge.

Stop to Consider

We have just read Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Do you find any similarity between these two poets in terms of their different attitudes towards different stages of human life?

The 'Child' of the epigraph dominates the poem. What does the 'child' symbolize?

A critic has remarked that "Like the other Romantic Poets, Wordsworth was concerned here primarily with the question of the reality of the self and its responses to experience rather than with the question of value and meaning in the universe outside the self". How far do you think this can be brought in to explain the lines of Stanza 9 in the poem (lines 130 -168) ? What is the significance of Nature in the poem ?

The opening stanzas reflect on the world which is replete with the "celestial light". Recording the primal joy of childhood, Wordsworth is intuitively aware of the life beyond Nature. Meadow, grove, stream, rainbow, rose etc are clothed in the celestial glory and 'every common sight' acquires the 'glory and freshness of a dream'. The youthful vision is lost and the apparent desolation is clear in the monosyllabic directness of the line 'The Things which I have seen. I now can see no more.' The aesthetic appreciation of nature coupled with the affirmation of harmony with the natural world emphasizes the joyous mood but the sense of loss is evident throughout the poem. The joy of springtime, the unforced happiness of the shepherd's boy is the blessed elements and the poet is alienated from this world of natural piety and enduring happiness. Melancholy intrudes and the 'pansy', the 'field' and the 'tree' now lack the transcendent reality they possessed before.

SAQ

Find out the images taken from Nature related to the theme of loss and gain. Do you think the poem alternates between these two factors? (40 + 40 words)

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The next few stanzas discuss the reasons for the loss of the 'celestial light'. The myth of pre-existence helps the poet to organise his views of the erosion of the visionary power. According to Wordsworth the soul is exiled from its true home and the world is a prison-house. We came into the world with innate knowledge derived from God. The inland is closer to the eternal life 'heaven lies about us in our infancy' but with the coming of age this divine power decreases. The visionary power dies with adulthood and the 'light of the common day' takes its place. Earth offers the child various sensory pleasures and the child participates in the trivialities of everyday existence. It learns the language of business, love, and strife and this slowly diminishes its divine power, Wordsworth compares the child to an actor. He is the 'best philosopher' for his intuitive understanding of the mystery of existence. The child is paradoxically the bearer of the of the heavenly message of joy and at the same time the willing agent of it's own imprisonment.

The poem raises the question of the value of life itself and yearns for the lost paradise. The final stanzas record the poet's attempt to come to terms with the loss of the primal joy. He tries to resolve the conflict by assuring that memories of childhood still exercise an active influence on his perception. The youthful vitality has given way to spiritual delight and all is not lost. The firm conviction remains that the world can still be transformed by the matured understanding of experience. Innocence is not the only basis for joy, life emerges from the embers of lost happiness. Wordsworth compares human development to a journey away from the source of life.

Stanza 10 returns to the exuberant natural scene and Wordsworth's absolute joy is clear as the conflict is resolved. He knows that the spontaneous involvement in the life of nature is no longer possible but now he perceives the intellectual delight which the 'philosophic mind' brings. This stanza is replete with the assurances and the primal sympathy which continues to exist in our memory. Unlike the child the adult is conscious of the fact of death but still the poet hopes for the eternal life. The final stanza confirms the resolution of the problem and he rejoices for his new sensitivity to the suffering of the fellow human beings. This vein of tender sympathy underlies the closing lines:

"Thanks to the human heart by which we live,

Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears'.

SAQ

Can we make a valid comparison of the poem with Shelley's "Ode To The West Wind" ? (30 words)

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.....
.....

Check Your Progress

1. Comment on Wordsworth's formulation of a 'new' paradigm of nature in terms of its relationship with humanity with special reference to the 'Immortality Ode'.
2. To what extent does Wordsworth share in Enlightenment concerns as evident in the poems prescribed for your study?
3. Comment on childhood and memory as two overriding metaphors in Wordsworth's poetry.

1.6.2 READING THE POEM RESOLUTION AND INDEPENDENCE

Wordsworth begins his poem with the alternation of stormy night and sunny morning showing Nature's mood is one of ecstasy, happiness and bliss. He contrasts the night of roaring wind and rain with the calm and bright sunrise filled with the sweet songs of the birds namely Stock-dove, Jay, and Magpie. Besides, the pleasant noise of waters abounds the Nature and the poet too feels excited. The morning being a time of

promise and source of joy, with its birth all things come out of their shelters. There is a sense of a renewal of activity, of new born beauty, of harmony in heaven and earth, and ecstatic joy among the creatures of earth. He beautifully captures how the hare in the moor repeatedly raises a mist as it runs and rejoices. The 'pleasant season', nature's happy mood, dominates and 'employs' his heart and soul, and like nature, he is also able to escape the tyranny of the unpleasant past. The morning's birth effecting rejuvenation and fresh activity in Nature, runs parallel to his movement back to youthful happiness when he was 'as happy as a boy' from the 'all the ways of men', which are 'so vain and melancholy'.

But between the fourth and seventh stanzas, the harmony between Wordsworth's mind and the Nature's 'pleasant season' seems to disappear after reaching the point of intense joy. He identifies himself as one among the creatures of the blissful Nature such as 'the sky-lark warbling in the sky', 'the playful hare' and as a poet, a 'happy Child of earth', he feels blessed with innocence, far from the worldly cares. Suddenly all his happiness seems to be exhausted and the gloomy, stormy and troublesome melancholy with unknown 'fears and fancies', and 'dim sadness and blind thoughts' fills his mind. It is as if the stormy night returns to him in spite of the morning and it makes him a prescient of future ills and evils. Even in the height of his joy, he apprehends the possible changes it might bring in the form of 'solitude, the pain of heart, distress, and poverty.'" In the sixth stanza the hard winter of these worldly cares follows the summer mood like perfect happiness of life. This diurnal wheel unravels the flip side of the holiday like gratuitous nature. At one time he would get everything without making any attempt. But now the poet is concerned about what would happen to him when this happiness gets exhausted and he is forced to helplessly depend upon others.

In the next stanza Wordsworth also remembers the sad end of Thomas Chatterton and Robert Burns who enjoyed 'glory and joy' in

their youth. He includes himself among the tragic company of the poets. Though the 'summer mood' of the 'Child of Earth' makes him joyous and privileged like other poets, it brings in its trail the harsh winter, which throws him into darkness and destruction in the form of 'despondency and madness' eventually arising from transitory 'gladness'.

These opening seven stanzas form an important introduction to the poem and implicate the 'problem' of the poet which anticipates a living resolution.

From the stanza VIII and onwards, there is a discernible break. While in his melancholic thoughts Wordsworth suddenly encounters an interesting character under the God's providence who happens to be the oldest among the grey-haired old men presented through an intricate set of images 'a huge stone on top of the mountain', or 'a motionless rock full of life' or 'a sea-beast that has come out of the water to take rest on a reef or sandbank in the warmth of the sun'. For Wordsworth the Nature's paradise of the happy Children of earth suddenly changes into a 'lonely place' showing a contrast between the landscape in the beginning of the poem and the landscape in which he sees the mysterious Old Man (Leech Gatherer) who emerges from nowhere as 'something given'. The old man is directly related to this mood of Nature and to Wordsworth's 'dim sadness' and 'blind thoughts' as in the earlier stanza. Thus, the figure, landscape and thoughts are presented almost in consonance and they form one inseparable whole.

'Life's pilgrimage' beyond the extremity of human suffering has not only crippled his body but deformed him and he is poised between life, sleep and death. He seems neither completely alive nor dead with a body doubly bent and his head very close to his head, maybe, due to some intense suffering or physical strain or some terrible disease in the past. But certainly he was carrying a weight too heavy for his age. In spite of his weak limbs and his body with a pale face resting on the staff made of wood, the Old Man seems not all alive nor dead, / Nor all asleep—in his old age:

In the next stanza, Wordsworth is still trying to understand the mystery of the Old Man. His motionless standing, his unawareness and

his feebleness make him appear completely non-human. Similarly his attitude, his form and his manner remain independent of the external forces just as a piece of cloud remains unmoved by the loud winds. In spite of his unabated suffering and feebleness there is a curious strength and decisiveness (the cloud 'moveth all together, if it move at all'). It is, as if, his bodily weakness and helplessness has given rise to his inner strength and decisiveness, for he is an incarnation of suffering, carrying a 'more than human weight'.

This sense of surprise continues all through the poem. The paradox of strength in weakness is revealed first through the old man's action and then through his reply to the poet. While looking for leeches in the muddy water of the pond after stirring the calm water of the pond with his staff, he is deeply involved into it as if he were 'reading a book'. When the poet starts a conversation with him, the old man gives a gentle reply in a respectful voice with a pause. When the poet says that it is unsafe for an old man like him to be alone at such a deserted place, the first reaction he sees is a sense of surprise from "*the sable orbs of his yet-vivid eyes*". The old man's "lofty utterance," "stately speech", 'choice word and measured phrase, above the reach of ordinary men' . . . , in spite of a feeble voice, has a dignity like that of a Scottish Presbyterian's who perform their duty towards God and man. While the old man goes on saying about the risks and hazards of his life and livelihood, and his determination for an honest and decent living, the poet seems to be concerned about how the old man says, and not what he says.

The old man is still talking to him; but his voice seems to grow gradually indistinct as the sound of a distant stream. Now Wordsworth is unable to distinctly divide word from word of his speech. The poet imagines (in his mind's eye) the whole body of the old man resembles the one he had met with in his dream or he may have been sent from another strange world. The mysterious, extraordinary, more than human qualities of this feeble, yet heroic old man clearly connect him to

‘something given’. In other words, Wordsworth more and more believes that the old man’s appearance is not a coincidence, but a divine plan of Nature, and he is God’s messenger to give him ‘*human strength by apt admonishment*’..

In spite of the apt admonishment, Wordsworth, as perplexed and disturbed as ever is grappled again with the problem of all the melancholic thoughts like ‘the fear that kills’, the ‘hope that is unwilling to be fed’, ‘cold, pain, and labour, and all fleshly ills’ and ‘mighty Poets in their misery dead’. He is now in dire need of some consolation, and hence asks the old man how he manages to bear the burden of living.

The question of the poet is quite similar to the one he has already asked and the old man’s answer is the same but with a smile. This time his question was broader, more philosophical. While the Old Man speaks the same answer, the poet remains greatly troubled by the loneliness of the place and the seemingly other-worldliness of the form of the Old Man and of his speech. But when the Old Man has finished speaking, the poet attains a state of realisation with a sense of fulfilment. He suddenly finds a release from all his ‘dim sadness - and blind thoughts’ through a laughter. It is the laughter, the potential figure, the symbol of release and relief, through which the poet scorns his former self suffering from dim sadness and blind thoughts, humbly accepts the ‘apt admonishment’ of the Leech Gatherer and derives the much awaited ‘comfort’.

"God," said I, "Be my help and stay secure;
I'll think of the Leech Gatherer on the lonely moor!" (139-40)

In this last couple of lines the poet makes his resolution and he is no more troubled by the mystery. He has no need to inquire, to question, or to be troubled about the Old Man any more. Instead he declares that he will adopt him, and take him in as part of his consciousness which will certainly free him from infirmity and helpless dependence on others.

1.7 SUMMING UP

Wordsworth in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (2002), which is considered to be the official manifesto of Romantic Movement set out with the precept that his poetry would use the language of the common people dealing with the everyday incidents of the ordinary folk. All his writings celebrate the actions of the ordinary people and transfigure them into extraordinary ones through his imaginative power. By doing so, he believed that the domain of human consciousness can be largely expanded. The present poem *Resolution and Independence* can be read in this light. One of his poems namely *The Tables Turned* published in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) succinctly captures his vision of Man and Nature:

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

Resolution and Independence is a poem about the resolution of a problem. It is all about the inner strength of courage and determination, the means to resolution. Wordsworth eventually discovers in the Old Man, the Leech Gatherer who is none else but the other self of the poet, who is unaware, unconscious but has the prowess to face the stormy night or the hard winter unlike the 'Mighty Poets in their misery dead'. The poet slowly and gradually strives all through the poem to unravel the mystery of the old man, the primary symbol, the paradox of strength in weakness and the divine impulse until he is able to laugh out his inner struggle and the problem.

1.8 REFERENCES and SUGGESTED READING

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Unit 2

William Wordsworth

SUPPLEMENTARY UNIT

Unit Structure :

2.1 Objectives

2.2 How to Approach the Poet

2.3 Other Important Poems to Read

2.4 Probable Questions and Suggested Answers

2.5 Important Books/essays/materials

2.6 Additional Notes

2.7 References and Suggested Reading

2.1 Objectives:

After reading this unit, you will be able to

- Learn how to read William Wordsworth
- Know about other poems by the poet
- Answer important questions relating to the texts

2.2. How to Approach the poet:

The participants of this programme should try to have a fair background knowledge of history of English literature especially about the changes that took place from 18th c Neoclassicism to late 18th and early 19th c Romanticism. Besides, they should read *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (revised ed. 2002) which will give them some information about Wordsworth's ideas of poetry, poets and poetic diction.

Many of his poems are chance encounters relating to quite commonplace incidents and common people. But Wordsworth had the

ability and imaginative power to transfigure those ordinary incidents and people into some extraordinary ones.

2.3 Other Important poems to read

Learners should familiarize themselves with *Simon Lee, Michael, Preludes, Tintern Abbey etc.* so that they get some ideas and information about how Wordsworth chooses his themes, characters and poetic diction.

Similarly Coleridge's *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* can be compared with the present poem to have some idea how the preoccupations of both the romantic poets differ. While Wordsworth prefers to transfigure ordinary into extraordinary, Coleridge prefers the opposite.

2.4 Probable questions and suggested answers:

Learners may be asked essay type questions on justification of the title, character of the leech gatherer, structure of the poem, imagery etc. The critical analysis part of this unit has been deliberately made longer to help the learners find out the relevant answers to the questions mentioned. However, while writing the analysis of such a long poem many important lines of the poem could not be accommodated. Hence the learners are advised to keep the text handy while reading this material.

2.5 Important essays/books/materials:

- WORDSWORTH'S WANDERING IN "RESOLUTION AND INDEPENDENCE" Author(s): Dennis Grunes Source: CLA Journal , MARCH 1992, Vol. 35, No. 3 (MARCH 1992), pp. 339-352 Published by: College Language Association Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44322498>

- The Dialectic of Experience: A Study of Wordsworth's Resolution and Independence Author(s): Anthony E. M. Conran Source: PMLA , Mar., 1960, Vol. 75, No. 1 (Mar., 1960), pp. 66-74 Published by: Modern Language Association Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/460428>
- The Sublime, Self-Reference, and Wordsworth's Resolution and Independence Author(s): Steven Knapp Source: MLN , Dec., 1984, Vol. 99, No. 5, Comparative Literature (Dec., 1984), pp. 1007- 1022 Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2905397> JSTOR is a not-for-profit service
- Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence' Author(s): VICTOR SAGE Source: Critical Survey , SUMMER 1967, Vol. 3, No. 2 (SUMMER 1967), pp. 108-113 Published by: Berghahn Books Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41553737>

2.6 Additional Notes:

1. **There was a roaring in the wind all night:** Dorothy thus describes the rough weather in her journal: ‘A very rainy or rather showery and gusty morning; but after the sun shines.’

9. **The sky rejoices in the morning’s birth:** The sky becomes bright and seems to be delighted at the break of dawn.

18. **Or heard them not, as happy as a boy:** “Whether I listened to them or not, I was happy.” —W.T. Webb

21. **All the ways of men:** The meaningless talk and deeds of men which smack of vanity.

28. **Dim sadness—and blind thoughts:** Here the adjectives point to the vague and unintelligible nature of his sad feelings.

36-37. **My whole life I have lived in pleasant thought, As if life’s business were a summer mood:** Cf. Thomson *Castle of Indolence*:

For never sun on living creature shone

Who more devout enjoyment with us took;
Here on his hours he hung as on a book,
On his own time here would he float away,
As doth a fly upon a summer brook.

38-39. *As if all needful things would come unsought/ To genial faith, still rich in genial good:* I take the sense to be ‘a man who cheerfully trusts his providence, and is rich in kindness to all.’ —Cotteril

43. *The marvellous Boy:* ‘There is particular poignancy in calling Chatterton ‘the marvellous Boy’, for *The Prelude* makes clear how much Wordsworth dreaded leaving his own marvellous boyhood for ever behind him, and so abandoning the hiding places of his power.’ — Bloom

44. *The sleepless Soul that perished in his pride:* Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770) took his own life in the despondency caused by the failure of his poetic ambition.

45. *Of Him who walked in glory and in joy:* Robert Burns ‘During the years when Burns followed his plough along the mountain side, Mossifel Farm, he was full of hope and vigour, but his later years were sad, for, as he himself says, ‘Thoughtless follies laid him low, and stained his name.’ His life was shortened by intemperance. — Cotteril

47. *By our own spirits are we deified:* ‘We poets imagine ourselves to be as gods, exalted above the ordinary human destiny of suffering and misfortune.’ —Webb

48-49. *We poets in our youth begin in gladness;/But ‘thereof come in the end despondency and madness:* Cf. Dryden, *Absalom and Achitophel*, Part 1, 163-64;

Great wits are sure to madness near allied,
And thin partitions do their bounds divide.

57. *As a huge stone:* Wordsworth observes: “The stone is endowed with something of the power of life to approximate it to the sea-beast ; and the sea-beast stripped of some of its vital qualities to assimilate it to the stone ; which intermediate image is thus treated for the purpose of bringing the original image, that of the stone, to a nearer resemblance to the figure and condition of the aged man, who is divested of so much of

the indications of life and motion as to bring him to the point where the two objects unite and coalesce in just comparison.”

75. *Motionless as a cloud the old Man stood*: “This simile is also cited by Wordsworth as an example of poetic imagination and it does certainly stand one test of a truly imaginative creation, for it lives in one’s memory. But it is the picture of the great thunder-cloud, moving all together if it moves at all, which seems ‘to me the living thing of beauty, not the simile; which is quaint rather than strikingly appropriate.’ — Cotteril

96-97. *A stately speech; / Such as grave Livers do in Scotland use*: The old man spoke in a language which was beyond the reach of common men. It had the dignity which marks the speech of the Presbyterians of Scotland.

111-12. *Or like a man from some far region sent, To give me human strength, by apt admonishment*: It seems to the poet as if the old man, an emblem of ‘resolution’ and ‘independence’, has been sent from the other world to rebuke him for his wilful sullenness in Nature’s sweet air.

122-23. *Stirring thus about his feet: The waters of the pools where they abide*: Mr. Webb imagines the old man standing in the water with bare feet in order to allow the leeches to fasten onto them. Whether Wordsworth meant this or not, it is a fact that leeches are not easily caught except by some such device. - Cotteril

129-30. *In my mind's eye I seemed to see him pace/ About the weary moors continually*: In this mind's eye, as opposed to his corporeal eye, the leech-gatherer paces continually and silently in his wandering solitude.

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Unit 3

S.T. Coleridge: *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Unit Structure :

3.1 Objectives

3.2 Introducing the poet: Biographical Sketch

3.3 Coleridge as Poet

3.4

3.4.1 Context of the poem

3.4.2 Reading the Poem

3.5 Summing Up

3.6 References and Suggested Reading

3.1 Objective:

By the end of this unit, you will be able to

- Develop some understanding of the life and works of Coleridge
- Make connections between his works and his situations in life
- Evaluate the poem in aesthetic terms
- Evaluate Coleridge's ideas and themes in the context of the poem

3.2 Introducing the Poet: Biographical Sketch:

Coleridge was born on 21 October, 1772 in Ottery St. Mary in Devonshire. Compared to his nine siblings, he was vulnerable but gifted with the power of expression and a capacity for reading. He was sensitive and alive to the complications of the world from a young age. His father's death in 1781 gave him great shock, and so did the death of his brother Frank. He attended school at Christ's hospital in London where he felt alone and abandoned, and his routines at the school were dull and comfortless. Here he achieved friendship with Charles Lamb and

others. James Boyer, the schoolmaster instilled in him a discipline in his creative and intellectual projects. Amid dull, insipid atmosphere of Christ's College his extensive reading of poetry, philosophy and religion kindled his imagination. Subsequently he joined Cambridge, still he kept up companionship with older friends and made new ones, and attended literary discussions. In 1792 he won a prize for an ode on slave trade which inaugurated political discussions among his intellectual circles. He was then caught up in the upheavals of the French Revolution and followed the political events with a keenness. He stood with the radical camp, basking in the ray of the new age of freedom and equality, something which impelled him to resort to an utopian project called 'Pantisocracy'(but of that, later.). after France declared war on Britain, Coleridge's passion for France waned. Even from before, Political developments in France was intense with the 'reign of terror'.back in his college, fiery pamphlet by one William Fren raised controversy , inviting a trial in the Senate , resulting in Fren's banishment from the university, while Coleridge kept in touch with him. gradually Coleridge suffered financial crisis and debt. He joined a literary group convened by Christopher Wordsworth, and even contemplated volunteerign for the 15th light dragoons in desperation. Soon he was back in Cambridge and admonished by the master. Again , he planned a walking tour to North Wales with a companion, and on the way befriended Robert Southey. While the Wales tour was delayed.By degrees, he fell into chaos of irrational discourses and unpredictable change of direction. His relationship with Mary Evans (whom he loved) did not make any progress, and he started confused, directionless loose living. He was alive to tension between agrarian and industrial revolution, but also to the fraught relation between conscious self and unconscious drive. Finally he drifted to the right conservatism an dorthodoxy in religion, which was a common fate of his whole generation. Therefore, Coleridge's turn from radicalism to conservatism reflects the intellectual trajetory of his generation. But coleridge was also battling problems of his own psychology, and tried to document this inner struggle.

For quite long , Coleridge suffered through addiction to opium, and his famous supernatural themed works including the *Rime* were conjectured to be partly an effect of the use of drug.

Coleridge's friendship with Robert Southey was significant in so far as the former's creative and intellectual life is concerned. He got attached to Southey's family through his marriage with his sister. Coleridge's

career as a radical lecturer in matters of politics religion , slave trade etc was building up, culminating conceptualization of an egalitarian scheme called Pantisocracy. The plan was: twelve gentlemen with twelve ladies of liberal mindset would live in a colony, labour for two hours and devote the leisure to study, discussion and bringing up children. It was to be a safe haven for all kinds of political opinions. The project, it goes without saying, failed. Similarly, Coleridge's initial affinity with Godwinism also waned. Finally, it is his friendship with Wordsworth that proved to be most rewarding in terms of his creative output as well as critical thinking. His connection with Wordsworth started in 1796 after he broke with Southey over the plan of Pantisocracy. With Wordsworth he discussed poetry and they exchanged letters. Coleridge even searched for Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy a year's lease on Alfoxden House which was to be his second home. There, all three made an intimate group spending time with animated discussions of literature and literary theory where Charles Lamb and John Thelwell also took part. Coleridge's heyday as a poet was during this time spent at Alfoxden House. From the summer of 1797 to the spring of 1798 Coleridge had an outburst of creative energy when major poems such as "This Lime-Tree Bower", "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", "Frost at Midnight", "The Nightingale", part of "Christabel" and "Kubla Khan" were written. He also delivered sermons during this time at the behest of William Hazlitt's father. In October , 1798 he went with the Wordsworths to Germany and enrolled at the University of Gottingen and there he was also exposed to the Germanic languages and literatures as well as Germanic thought including the philosophy Immanuel Kant. Upon return from Germany he led an unhappy quotidian domestic life. Attractions for Wordsworth made the Coleridges to live in 1800 at Greta Hall , Keswick in the North. Life at Keswick was not happy though. His wife was not happy there and she complained that Coleridge spent too much time at Grasmere with the Wordsworths. Coleridge's health deteriorated and he began taking increasing doses of laudanum. He even went to Malta and Italy to restore his health and lived there for twelve years, while return to England did not give him happiness , either. In fact, rest of his life he was restless, ill, staying with friends and sometimes family, struggling with financial difficulties. In 1817 he moved to the house of Dr. Gillman, a physician in Highgate trying to cure his opium problem. And here he passed the remainder of his life, writing occasional verses, preparing philosophical lectures. After years of personal discomfort and disappointment he died in 1834.

Check your Progress: How far does Coleridge's connection with the Wordsworths had a bearing on his poetic works?

3.3 Coleridge as Poet:

His first anthology *Poems on Various Subjects* was published by Joseph Cottle in 1796. It also contained four sonnets by Charles Lamb, one sonnet jointly penned with Samuel Favell, another with Robert Southey. It contained "monody on the Death of Chatterton", eight poems, a section of thirty-six "Effusions", five "poetical epistles" and "Religious Musings". "Ode on a Departing Year" was published in the same year in a thin quarto dated December 26, 1796. *Poems* (1797) is the second edition of *Poems on Various Subjects*, where Coleridge omitted nineteen of his poems including the political sonnets and re-organized the rest. *Lyrical Ballads*, a collaborative work with William Wordsworth published first in 1798, contained four poems by the poet, namely, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", "The Foster-Mother's Tale", "Lewti", and "The Dungeon". After a few copies were printed, "Lewti" was omitted and replaced with "The Nightingale" to avoid being identified as a West Country radical. "The Rime" was reprinted under his own name in *Sibylline Leaves* in 1817. *Fears in Solitude* brought out as a volume in August or September of 1798, and it contained three poems, viz "Fears in Solitude", "France; An Ode", "Frost at Midnight".

Coleridge wrote many political poems including "The Visions of the Maid of Orleans" and "Dejection: An Ode" in the *Morning Post*, and contributed a few minor poems to *Courier*. Coleridge had fifteen poems and twelve epigrams in the second volume of Robert Southey's *The Annual Anthology*, published in 1800. *Sibylline leaves* (1817), *Poetical Works* (1828, 1829, 1834) were other publications in poetry.

Coleridge's literary career extended from 1787 to 1833. He had about 7000 compositions (poetry and prose) to his credit. As a poet, however, he is known for a few of his poems such as "Kubla Khan", "Christabel", "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", and a few others.

Much of Coleridge's earlier poems were steeped in the tradition of Gray and Collins and the sentimental sonnets of William Lisle Bowles. They

were allegorical, metaphysical, even political. It is perhaps parting owing to Charles Lamb's exhortation to get rid of elaborateness in favour of simplicity and spontaneity that he started writing blank verse, whose model was Cowper's *The Task*, a source for "Frost at Midnight". Cowper's blank verse has the rhythm of ordinary speech and avoids formal balance and antithesis of the eighteenth century heroic couplet. Coleridge added a structure to Cowper's rambling lines and gave it psychological insight as well as a meditative quality. In other words, the romantic lyric was introduced by Coleridge through a set of poems known as 'conversation poems' for which classical ode was taken as a model. The conversation poem is a form of romantic lyric in which the poet finds himself in an outdoor location and speaks to an invisible auditor, involving thought, memory, anticipation, ending with a resolution of an emotional problem which is dealt with. In these poems Coleridge finds in nature images of himself and God. The poet received sensation from nature, but also through speculation relates to nature and society where imagination is also activated through the recurring image of the Eolian Harp. This eighteenth century image of nature's music is transformed by Coleridge to an image of inspiration. Other figures of inspiration— the sun, the moon, the breeze, for instance—surface in other poems by Coleridge. The harp presents a problem for Coleridge, for it implies some passivity of mind as it awaits inspiration from nature's force. On the other hand, conceptualization of nature as language turns out to be equally problematic because in joyless state of mind, the language of nature speaks nothing, as in "Dejection: An Ode". Thus, he is compelled to shift to the conceptualization of the poet's mind as active entity endowed with imagination, a shift to the Kantian position on the mind as a maker of the world. The conversation poems are also called the 'crisis lyrics' as they involve a sense of loss, overcoming of that loss through excursion into imagination, and to sympathy with other minds. Most of these poems are about the interior world of the poet, and we have little explicit reference to contemporary politics. Even so, these poems can be read in the wider context of the political debates of 1790s, and they resonate with politics.

Around 1797 Coleridge was looking for a fresh poetic language that could reach out to the readers. His socio-political thought also required some change. Events in Britain and Europe at large disheartened him, and France's invasion of Switzerland in 1798 left him dispirited. But he was pained to see people favoring their imperialistic government. He wrote

France: An Ode. Here he railed against imperialist aggression of Britain and France.

Opposition to slavery and to the conquest of native peoples was his occupied him for long, which explains his enthusiasm for the French Revolution. He understood that his radicalism was unpopular because slavery and superstition reinforced each other. When there were accounts of various superstition in colonies in West Indies and Africa, he belied that the Britons were no less superstitious, as seen in their blind allegiance to the Church and the state. Practice of superstition presupposes sharing of guilt and a condition of powerlessness. In the Rime, the Mariner journeys beyond the limits of geographical knowledge, which makes him helpless before powers and events over which he has no control. His journey further into the terra incognita renders this helplessness more acute. From this angle, he resembles the Britons who believes in the power of political and religious authorities while Coleridge, his creator was disenchanted with contemporary politics.

Coleridge is known to us as a major Romantic poet only through a couple of poems among which three stand out remarkably: The Rime, Christabel, and Kubla Khan. Besides some of his 'conversation poems' also survives to us, such as Dejection: An Ode, Frost at Mid-night', To William Wordsworth' etc.

It is true that Coleridge was an opium addict, but let us not forget that he suffered illness throughout his life, and that he took the drug as a palliative to pain of illness (Evans 78)evaluation of Coleridge's achievement saw a breakthrough with the publication of his note-book in 1957 by Kathleen Coburn. The notebook speaks of the poet's prodigious learning, and we know him today as a poet, philosopher, literary critic, a man of learning.

Coleridge's distinctiveness as a poet can be seen in comparison with Wordsworth. The Lyrical Ballads is a joint venture of both and both shared the same romantic sensibility such as the centrality of the creative self and the power of imagination. Yet, they differed in their treatment of poetic material and focus. Wordsworth builds up a world known and familiar which are then imbued with the hue of imagination. Coleridge stands apart; he has a propensity for the strange territory which only mind can conjure up: the world of memory and dream with tumultuous seas, ships, strange creatures and uncanny atmosphere. In all, Coleridge

has a totalising vision imbued with a magical quality. Coleridge does not confine himself within the limits of familiar experiences which is why he often makes forays into diverse experiences of an imagined reality. Operation of imagination is such that disparate aspects of experience in that exotic world formed a coherent picture.

Check Your Progress: Write a brief note on the major works of Coleridge.

3.4

3.4.1 Context of the Poem: of the three best known poems of Coleridge, the *Rime* is the most remarkable one because, among other things, it is a completed poem unlike the rest two. The poem is written in ballad meter. In *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge writes that in some of his poems he sought to achieve a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’, and we can assume that the poet definitely had at least *The Rime* in mind.

In chapter 14 of *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge mentions the origin of the poem. It was based on a dream of Coleridge’s friend Cruikshank, and was planned as a joint effort with Wordsworth. The story goes something like this: in the autumn of 1797 Coleridge spent much time with Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy in North Somerset. Both men were in their 20s and published poet, yet had to face monetary crisis. They planned to go on a tour across the Quantock Hill, money was needed for the same. Hence they decided to compose a ballad called “The Wanderings of Cain” in three books on the model of Solomon Gessner’s *The Death of Abel* (1758), and sell it to a magazine. (bl.uk) Wordsworth was supposed to write the first part, Coleridge the second, and whoever finished first was to write the third. Wordsworth, however, felt that they have different styles which would never come together, and the project was aborted. What Coleridge produced, instead was *The Rime*. Coleridge entertated the material inwardly and published the completed poem several months later. Coleridge revised the poem for publication in 1817.

“The Wanderings of Cain” had a mere eighteen lines and four pages of prose, published in 1828 the prose had Cain who after killing his brother wanders across a barren landscape with his child where “There was no spring, no summer, no autumn, and the winter’s snow, that would have been lovely, fell not on these hot rocks and scorching sands.” () You

can notice its affinity with the Ancient Mariner especially after the killing of Albatross. In *The Rime*, the shooting of Albatross was suggested by Wordsworth who derived the idea from reading George Shelvocke's *A Voyage Round the World, by the Way of the Great South Sea*" (1726).

Coleridge's writings in 1798 had a radical character. He wrote article attacking the newly proposed tax to raise revenue, and he wrote a poem called "Fire, Famine and Slaughter: A War Eclogue" where he practices Gothic mode. Indeed, even as he expressed scorn for the excess in Gothic mode which was popular at the time, he was nevertheless somewhat occupied with the gothic which did creep up into his poems in a variety of ways. The supernatural ambience of *The Rime* principally owes, at least partly, to the contemporary popular gothic tradition.

Stop to Consider: In the supplementary unit, you will get to know more about the context of the poem. The text as we read it today is not the way it appeared in 1798 anthology of *Lyrical Ballads*. It had since then undergone a process of revision for close to two decades. It would be interesting to know how Coleridge had to negotiate with a resenting readership's taste while drawing on some of his experiences in the intervening period.

3.4.2 Reading the Poem:

Part I:

The poem starts off with precision, intensity and dramatic force. A Mariner enters a wedding celebration and holds the hand of a wedding guest to tell a story. The wedding guest's exasperation at the Mariner's untoward intervention is reflected in his terse and angry verbal response. This exasperation quickly subsides because of the hypnotic 'glittering eyes' with which the weird, strange man with 'skinny hands' fixed his gaze on the guest. The Mariner's extraordinary narrative power is established with a decisive stroke, and the 'glittering eye' of the narrator provides an indication of the enormity of the events that will be recounted. The event of narrating takes place against a familiar backdrop of a wedding ceremony and provides some sort of a frame narrative. The time of narration and the time narrated, the present celebration of

wedding and the past tale of quasi-mystical disaster are juxtaposed. This juxtaposition creates a dramatic effect, and facilitates the poet with a means to switch between moods and tones.

Look at repetition and syntactic parallelism all through the poem, right from the beginning:

The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared,
Merrily did we drop
Below the kirk, below the hill,
Below the light house top. (Lines)

Through such devices the poet creates rhythm that evokes an air of optimism surrounding the ship's onward journey. In fact, the wedding guest is torn between opposed poles of attraction, as the ship's progressive journey to the equator is juxtaposed with the climactic moment of the bride's entering the hall. However, we can assume that he is the next moment overpowered by the Mariner's account of storm and onset of the first disaster when the ship had to move south. The jubilant air of the bride's showing up in the hall suddenly transformed into apprehension of disaster at sea, and thus the story acquires a new momentum.

As the ship moves south to the equator, pervasive image of snow transform the familiar seascape into a strange territory of green ice. The shiny surfaces of the ubiquitous green ice constitute an uncanny, desolate terrain. If the bride in red ('red as rose') carries suggestions of love and sensuousness, 'green' in the 'green ice' suggests decomposition and corruption, and resonates, much later, with imagery of corruption and sickness. The ice is first described as emerald, and subsequently clubbed with a rather negative epithet-dismal: 'dismal sheen'.

The Albatross, then, follows the ship, and adds to the story's eventuality. The episode of the albatross takes place in an atmosphere which is swiftly changing. The big arctic bird flies through the mist and fog that surround people on board. The Mariner's intuitive response to the bird is religious: it could be a 'christian soul'. The final stanza of the part I of the poem offers a shocking revelation that the Mariner killed the bird. But the motive behind shooting the bird is a mystery; it is not perceptibly linked any cause. There are contrary indications as to the significance of the bird. The ice is split vigorously, while the ship is propelled by 'a good south wind', suggesting the bird is a good omen.

On the contrary, the wedding guest's view of the bird is patently negative:

God save thee, ancient Mariner!
From the fiends that plague thee thus! (Lines)

Part II:

Part I ends with a cryptic, yet a crucial statement: 'I shot the albatross.' Brevity of the concluding line suggests brief, fatal moment which is the end of all confusions and shifting perceptions of the bird. But it paves the way for another set of circumstances which can be reasonably perceived as the necessary result of the act of killing. Similarly, this brief statement of killing comes off as a shock to the reader and engages him/her in the subsequent events. Part II, then, can be seen as a consequence of the most crucial action of Part I, which is a harrowing crisis facing the Mariner and the shipmates, and concludes, liked the preceding section, with yet another horrific surprise.

The Mariner marks a difference now: the good company of the sea-bird is missed-'But no sweet bird did follow.' It seems to move him to a prompt realization of his guilt: "I have done a hellish thing."It is, however, not the Mariner's repentance but the shipmates' indictment of him. While they denounce him for killing the bird of good omen, they appreciate him for the same act when the fog and mist is cleared off. Two things can be said in this respect. First, a prompt repentance on the part of the Mariner would foreclose description of crisis and spiritual suffering that the poem offers. Secondly, the shipmates' vacillating moral attitude towards the bird cannot be accepted as natural because it will marginalize a fundamental question of the moral /ethical responsibility for the act of violence.

Stop to Consider: Look at the swiftly changing ambience of the sea. This fluctuation is a feature of the natural phenomena. Coleridge has depicted this shifting character of outward reality of nature: change is the direction of wind, the storm and the ship's becalmed state etc. but the main action here is the killing of the bird. If a change in the response to an act of violence is perceived as equally natural, it will nullify all ethical and moral perspectives. Can you relate it to Coleridge's moral/political position?

In part II we have a depiction of a crisis which is outward projection of an inner crisis. With no mist and fog obstructing in its route, the ship movement is swift till it enters a 'silent sea'. This prelude to what is in store at the silent sea is just a contrast to the imminent stasis. . Look at the stanza with lines from 103-106: there is alliteration of 'f'. (fair, foam, flew, furrow, followed, free, first). This resonates with the fluid, unhindered and somewhat swift movement of the ship. As breeze drops down and silence ensues, the voyage transfigures into a terrifying and oppressive vision of silence. And we have sharp, poignant, images that suggest violence and crime, oppressive hotness, claustrophobia, and a torturous fixity:

All in a hot and copper sky

The bloody Sun, at noon

Right up above the mast did stand

No bigger than the moon (Lines)

The ship being becalmed is part of voyaging experience, as many a travel narrative will testify. What is remarkable about Coleridge's treatment of it is he explores the metaphoric possibilities of this experience so as to connote a horrible situation of stasis. The Mariner is pushed to a crisis whose essence is not just a 'lack' but a paradoxical situation: ubiquity of water, yet a thirst that cannot be quenched. Secondly, the Mariner perceives a state of rotteness in such unlikely places as the sea. But next to the perception of the rotting sea is the sight of the slimy creatures in the 'slimy sea'. This kinectatic image of the slime speaks of the Mariner's aversion to, even hatred of the sea creatures.

On the other hand, spectacle of distant fire, a natural phenomenon not uncommon in voyages, portends of disaster. The water is compared here to witches's oils, ("The water, like a witches' oils")- something that takes for granted the reader's familiarity with a strange, supernatural phenomenon. The shipmates and the Mariner are superstitious, but the images offered compel the reader to 'suspend disbelief', to invoke Coleridge again. The impasse and its varied psychological ramifications are depicted through various images such as the 'copper sky', 'bloody sun', 'painted ship', 'slimy sea', 'witches' oils', shipmates being 'choked with soot' etc which carry varied resonances.

The horrific surprise I mentioned earlier is this: the dead Albatross is hung about the Mariner's neck. It compels us to reformulate what happens after the bird is killed in terms of certain issues: issues of crime and its moral responsibility, changing perspectives on the act of killing

and the irony of conviction. The Mariner's guilt is a known fact. What is depicted is the shipmates' complicity and opportunistic shift in stance on the act of crime. The carcass of the bird is hung about the Mariner's neck, implying that he is made to carry the burden and torment of guilt while the people on the ship justified the shooting of the bird in the beginning.

Part III:

Two overtly allegorical figures viz Death and Life-in-Death are conjured up by the poet, and they are seen to be playing dice. But what renders the situation somewhat plausible is the poet's sensitivity to the very act of perceiving. As if affected by the pall of mist and fog, the Mariner fails to make sense of the appearance of things. Caught in a disaster, what they crave for is a ship that can sail them back home. If Death and Life-in-Death are supernatural entities, they are not presented as immediately perceivable figures. In the first stanza of this part the Mariner beholds 'a something in the sky'. As the object nears, perception changes: "A speck, a mist, a shape, I wist". The imagined reverberation of 'a sail! A sail!' articulates boundless joy of a prospect of liberation from this impasse, but the subsequent revelations frustrates such expectations, connoting, instead, a sense of horror. The spectre-woman and her Death-mate acquire a reality through the Mariner's muddled perception. As the spectre-woman wins the game and declares it over, subsequent transition to night is swift:

"The Sun's rim dips; the stars rush out:

At one stride comes the dark;

With far-heard whisper, o'er the sea,

Off shot the spectre-bark."

Stellar imagery that we see in the next stanza –the dimmed stars, the horned moon 'with one bright star'—is now to the superstitious Mariner, and no less to the reader, a potent signifier of some untoward development. Eventually, then, all the shipmates drop down dead without a 'groan or sigh'. Let me remind you here that Wordsworth was critical of the poem's coherence, arguing that the events are not well-connected. It is true that *The Rime* has a dream-like quality, as suggested by the sudden shift in atmosphere and moods as well as the prevalence of a nightmarish ambience. As argued by C. M. Bowra, the poem assimilates both- the dream-like quality and logical connection of events. True that the connecting thread is not explicitly given by the poet, but suggestions to this effect are difficult to ignore. Why, for instance, do the shipmates die? Can't their death be ascribed to their

psychological complicity in the act of violence? Like in the previous parts, the narrative here too builds up to a climax at the death of all the shipmates which provides horrible experience to the Mariner and reminds of his impious act: Look at how Coleridge describes the scene-

Four times fifty living men
(And I heard nor sigh nor groan)
With heavy thump, a lifeless lump
They Dropped down one by one.
The osuls did from their bodies fly-
They fled to bliss or woe!
And every soul, it passed me by
Like the whizz of my cross-bow! (Lines)

Check your progress: Do you think that the motive behind shooting the albatross is given in the poem?

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Part IV:

After sudden and shocking death of the shipmates, Life-in-Death works upon the Mariner, and in the subsequent stanzas, we have this peculiar condition of being alive where the dividing line between life and death is obliterated. The wedding guest’s response expresses this horrible condition of being alive:

“I fear thee, ancient Mariner!
I fear thy skinny hand
And thou art long, and lank, and brown
As in the ribbed sea-sand” (Lines)

The poet explores the emotional and psychological condition of the Mariner: the despair of his loneliness, an irretrievable sense of loss, hatred of the swarming slimy creatures now surrounding him, inability to pray to God, and a terrifying sense of an overwhelming ocular torment. The entire visible world—the sea and the sky—is not only

stripped of any meaning or hope but stands as rather oppressive. What surpasses all torment is the sight of the corpses staring at him. Their glance is menacing not because it is unreal but because of their curse. What is terrifying is the intensity of this overwhelming sense of guilt where there is no redemption in sight. It is not just a momentary condition: “Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse.”

It is at this height of crisis that the Mariner casts a look on the slimy sea creatures. He beholds the beauty of these unknown modes of being and discovers a serene joy in their existence. He “blessed them unawares”, and this instinctive compassion for other beings carries its rewards: the Albatross falls off his neck. In other words, it is by blessing the water-snakes that the Mariner is re-connected to the world of affections, and this love and compassion retrieves him from the ongoing crisis and impasse. Even as he has to go further for complete redemption of his soul, he is at least opened up to a future.

Part V:

This part describes restoration of life and soul’s revival. In sharp contrast to thirst, scorching heat and terrible impasse that oppressed the Mariner, we now have storm, thunder and rain –an atmosphere which is strange but not as menacing. For one thing, in contrast to the oppressive heaviness of the visible world depicted in the previous part, the Mariner feels now feels an uncanny lightness. It suggests that his instinctive expression of love for the sea-snakes offloads the soul’s heavy burden of guilt. Even the tumult of nature is transposed into some serene spectacle. Look at the comparison made between the lightning and a water-fall (“a river steep and wide”.)

What immediately follows is the groan of “the dead men”, and it culminates in a ghastly spectacle of the dead shipmates pulling the ship’s ropes:

“They raised the limbs like lifeless tools

We were a ghastly crew.”(Lines)

We are sensitized to the horrible image of lifeless bodies operating in a ship, a strange combination of the familiar and the grotesque, but its philosophical import should not be missed. After a sudden re-discovery of the sustaining power of life (as reflected in the mariner’s blessing the water-snakes), the condition of life-in-death which symbolize a spiritual vacuity and crisis, is deemed ghastly.

What animates the bodies of the deceased mariners is a question similar to the question surrounding the Albatross. As suggested earlier, The

crisis facing the people at sea is a consequence of an act of killing which, in turn, is a necessary outcome of a basic attitude: is the bird a good or evil omen? But in Coleridge's scheme of things, the sense of evil is ultimately overpowered by a belief in the providence of God, of the essential goodness of all beings. A sign of the Mariner's transformation, then, is his realization that ghastly corpse of the shipmates is animated by the heavenly spirits. And hence the Mariner dispels the wedding guest's fear:

“It was not the souls that fled in pain,
Which to their corpses come again
But a troop of spirits blest.”(Lines)

This spiritual realization enables him to hear the heavenly music, which comforts him. It is as though the bodies are transformed into lofty music of the birds. The sky is rife with the sweet songs of the nightingale and other small birds. From the spectacle of gigantic Albatross flying around the ship to one of small singing birds hovering in the sky a great transformation has taken place , this is an effect of the ethical transformation of the self. But this blissfulness turns out to be a transitory phase, as the Mariner has still his penance to do. The spirits partake of the ship, causing it to pause as though it were in the throes of another disaster. The mariner hears two spirits conversing on his crime and issues of penance.

Part VI:

The mariner falls into a trance and hears the two spirits conversing. The conversation of the supernatural spirits is yet another manifestation of the intervention of supernatural forces in the affairs of men. The conversation affirms two things: enormity of the crime committed by the Mariner, and that the moon is the sole arbiter of the ship's motion, suggesting how the cosmic forces participate in the entire drama enacted over the sea. At another level, this is also an outward projection of the inner torment the Mariner undergoes in his unconscious state. The voices disappear, the Mariner wakes up and find himself being captivated by the cursing look of the dead men. The sea is serene and green in hue, yet he is dogged by some inexplicable fear. He feels as though he is being chased by some specter.

After this all-encompassing torment, we have a sense of relief with a wind blowing on him. The psychological trials and tribulations of the Mariner is enacted through the drama enacted by the forces of nature. But the poet attends also to this uneasy psychological state where sense

of guilt co-exists with a sense of relief: something that explains the ambivalence of the wind-

It raised my hair, it fanned my cheek

Like a meadow-gale of spring—

It mingled strangely with my fears,

Yet it felt like a welcoming (Lines)

Finally, the fresh breeze suggests an euphoric sense of a return which is articulated through a set of exclamatory questions in lines 464-467. The Mariner then sees the seraphs (angels) standing by each deceased men of the ship, a heavenly sight. The whole scene is steeped in silence. This silence is endowed with a blissfulness and serenity while the ‘silence of the sea’ in the previous part is redolent is disturbing. The arrival of the pilot and his son is another source of joy. The final stanza of this part mentions a Hermit to whom the Mariner would confess to his crime and seek redemption. This this part of the poet ends in another climactic moment of surrender, confession and redemption. It is the reference to the Albatross that binds such climaxes in each part of the poem and lends to the poem an unity.

Part VII:

This section starts with a description of the Hermit who lives in a wood and prays thrice a day. A boat appears and the people on it marvel at the loss of light that they saw a while ago, that is the seraphs. And now we see the self-presentation of the Mariner himself as a strange figure, because the perspective has changed as the boat-people and the Hermit are now observers. The post appalling response comes from the pilot, as he says:

“Dear Lord! It hath a fiendish look”

The accursed ship of the mariner drowns, while he is saved by the pilot’s boat while the boat is caught in a whirlwind. The pilot falls down in a fit, and his son goes mad. These are manifestation of the devilish quality that the Mariner has attained:

Ha! Ha! Quote he, “full plain I see

The Devil knows how to row”(Lines)

What is more important is the fact that the Hermit finds it really difficult to resist the ghastly power of the Mariner. This makes his plea for absolution more acute and humane. But absolution requires confession, a re-telling of what happens in his voyage. This need for telling becomes an ethical imperative on the part of the mariner which is why he adopts story-telling as a vocation, a perpetual condition for redemption.

3.5 Summing up:

The Rime did not elicit congenial response from Coleridge's readers who were shocked by its strange style, use of obsolete words, and awkward syntactic inversion. Wordsworth could sense popular resentment of the poem. He even declares in a short advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads* that the poem was written in imitation of the style of the elder poets and is largely intelligible. Few readers were convinced. From Robert Southey to Charles Burney readers resented its incoherence, extravagance and obscurity. Wordsworth even wrote a letter to the publisher Cottle expressing his willingness to exclude the poem in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, which, of course did not materialize. The poem, however, survived, and its enduring poetic excellence is now a commonplace. We have discussed Coleridge's life and work, his mind and his preoccupations. We have also discussed the poem in length and dwelt on the peculiar context of the poem. In the supplementary section we are going to discuss aspects of Coleridge and his poetry in some more detail.

3.6 References and Suggested Reading

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Unit 4

S.T Coleridge: The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

Supplementary Unit

Unit Structure :

4.1 Objective

4.2 The Making of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

4.3 How to Read the poem

4.4 Other Study Suggestions

4.5 Probable Questions with suggested Answers

4.6 Summing Up

4.7 References and Suggested Reading

4.1 Objective:

In the previous Unit, we have discussed the life and works of Coleridge and offered a reading of the poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

This unit is provided to

- deepen your understanding of the poem
- facilitate you to read the text for yourself
- help you prepare for the examination.
- Know the history of the text and how it attains the present shape and configuration

4.2 The Making of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

We have already briefly discussed the context of the poem. But the poem as we have it today is not the way it appeared in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. From 1798 to 1817 when it was published in the anthology *Sibyllian Leaves*, the text underwent a complex process of revision and re-writing which needs some elaboration.

In a walking tour Coleridge made with William and Dorothy Wordsworth on 13 November of 1797 both the poets talked animatedly about a plan to collaborate on a poem which was to be sold for £ 5 to one Richard Phillips. Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) was a popular anthology of English ballads, which testifies to the fact that literary ballad was very much in vogue. The choice of the ballad form for the new poem to be written was driven primarily by consideration of monetary gains. The conception of the Rime is said to originate in a strange dream of John Cruikshank—one of Coleridge's neighbours—where skeleton of a ship with a figure in it was an important image. It was about an old navigator who committed a crime and is consequently tortured by specters pushing him to a life of eternal exile. Meanwhile, Wordsworth also read Captain George Shelvocke's *Voyage Round the World by the Way of the Great South Sea* (1726) where officers in a ship voyaging on a sea shot an albatross, and the ship was navigated by the dead sailors. Wordsworth later realized that his collaboration in this poetic project with his fellow poet would not succeed. Coleridge, after returning from the tour, started writing the poem and completed it in four months. The poem was initially intended to be an imitation of traditional ballad but turns out to be a quite original and complex tale. This transformation of *The Rime* from its initial inception to the form it achieved in 1817 edition of *Sibyllian Leaves* is an interesting tale in itself, revealing the way Coleridge had to negotiate the question of readership and of popular poetic taste and was impelled to revise some of the elements of the poems through his critical consciousness as well as exposure to varied experiences of felt life experience in the intervening period. In the first place, theoretical discussions with Wordsworth was one important factor. The role of imagination in terms of poetic effect was something that both poets conceived differently. In the opening paragraphs of

chapter 14 of *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge describes how they would differ in terms of their poetic treatment. While Wordsworth's usual sphere of poetic speculation was ordinary life of people and nature to which he seeks to lend an air of novelty, Coleridge seeks to evolve a peculiar technique so as to bring the supernatural terrain into the familiar real of experience. He intends to infuse a human interest to supernatural agencies and characters and to give them a semblance of reality so as to achieve a 'willing suspension of disbelief'. *The Rime* was the only poem in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, and the poem was markedly different from the other poems.

Coleridge's readers were shocked by its strange style, use of obsolete words, and awkward syntactic inversion. Wordsworth could sense popular resentment of the poem and declares in a short advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads* that the poem was written in imitation of the style of the elder poets and is largely intelligible. Few readers were convinced. From Robert Southey to Charles Burney readers resented its incoherence, extravagance and obscurity. Wordsworth even wrote a letter to the publisher Cottle expressing his willingness to exclude the poem in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, which, of course did not materialize.

In the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800, *The Rime*, thus, re-appeared but in a revised form. Pressured by Wordsworth as well as the adverse reviews, Coleridge deleted certain lines, modernized the archaic words and added a few lines, and the point was to make it more palatable to contemporary taste. Part V and VI saw more substantial revisions where the poem had been criticized for being unnecessarily longish and unintelligible. Coleridge was not mentioned now as co-author but simply hinted at as merely 'a Friend' by Wordsworth in the preface. In fact, this arrangement was Coleridge's who did not want the reputation of his revered friend to be damaged, and the poem was placed at the end of the first of the two-volume *Lyrical Ballads*. What was important to see, however, is a note Wordsworth added here where the following flaws of the poem are mentioned:

1. The Protagonist (i.e. the mariner) does not have a distinct character
2. He does not act but is being acted upon
3. Events narrated in the poem have no necessary causal connections.
4. It has some labored imagery

On the other hand, Wordsworth appreciates in the same note the Passion that animates the poem, certain beautifully worked out images rendered through felicity of language, its metrical virtuosity which also created

variations to good effect. As for Coleridge's revisions, the Argument was re-worked so as to emphasize crime and its consequences. He added to the title a subtitle 'A Poet's Reverie' which suggests that Coleridge deeply acknowledged the poem's defects that the reviewers pointed out. The third edition (in 1802) and fourth (in 1805) of the *Lyrical Ballads* saw no substantial revision of the text that appeared in 1800 edition. Till 1805, the name of the poet was withdrawn. In an anthology called *Sibylline Leaves*, *The Rime* appeared along with the name of the poet, in 1817. 1817 edition also saw substantial revision. From 1800 till 1817 Coleridge's life took a peculiar turn. (You may have a glimpse of this phase in the section "Biographical Sketch" of the previous unit. Please have a look.) It was indeed a period of perpetual suffering, instability, estrangement from family and friends, addiction to opium, ill-health. His relationship with Wordsworth was troubled, and he went on a self-imposed exile to Malta. He even began to identify himself more with the *Mariner*, and his Malta voyage gave him an exposure to ocean travel. If you look at the poem, you will come across quite a few images of the sea which are sharp and poignantly poetic. Take this image:

The Sun's rim dips; the stars rush out;
At one stride comes the dark;
With far-heard whisper, o'er the sea,
Off shot the spectre-bark

There are besides stanzas where the descriptive details speak of Coleridge's realistic imagination, but also bear some trace of experience, something that can be traced back to his Malta Voyage. Coleridge omits Gothic figure of Death, and lends to *Life-in-Death* an air of supernatural terror. Supernatural agents that figure in the 1817 edition are not source of Gothic horror but symbolize darker, frightening aspects of man's inward nature.

Other two substantial additions in 1817 version are first, the use of a quotation from Thomas Burnett's *Archaeologiae Philosophicae* (1692) for contemporary readers, and provision of a marginal prose gloss. (While considering the treatment of the supernatural, you may think beyond just the representational aspect of the poem and think about the link it has with the natural order of things, or human nature.) Burnett's quotation basically enumerates this relation between the natural and the supernatural. More significant, however, is the prose gloss that provides a running commentary on the narrative action of the poem also in some instances, adds significant details absent in the verse proper. Modern critics such as William Empson resent the addition of the gloss stating that it strips the poem of its necessary ambiguities.

4.3 How to Read Coleridge:

From the discussions of Coleridge—his life, work, and the poem prescribed in your course—let us turn to a more practical issue: How to read his poems? It is an important practical question because no amount of study about the poet can rule out the imperative of reading his poems. Encountering the text, however, needs some sort of prior knowledge as well as an appropriate orientation. Reading Coleridge, or any other poet for that matter, involves a consideration of questions both general and specific to the poet/poem. The general question—how to read a poem—is huge and has engaged poets, critics and readers alike. (Incidentally, Terry Eagleton wrote a book titled *How to Read a Poem*, and you can have a look at the book.) Let us put the matter succinctly thus: Poetry communicates. But it is no ordinary communication; it embodies and articulates certain human experience. It gives us some degree of pleasure and delight and makes us aware of certain dimensions of human reality. Unlike practical language, poetic language is itself an embodied experience and not a mere abstraction of concrete experience, (though abstractions can find place within the texture of a poem.) a good poet is able to activate and orchestrate such varied elements as words, rhyme, rhythm, symbol, imagery, tone, figures of speech—all to this effect: to make his/her poem an appropriate vehicle for an inward experience. Sheer capacity for experience does not define a poet. What matters is his ability to give a body to this amorphous, shapeless thing called experience. Through the use of varied resources of language. Thus, your task as a reader of Coleridge would be to try its peculiar poetic experience with special attention to the formal, constitutive elements of his poems. It goes without saying that this experiential dimension should enable you to grasp Coleridge's ideas, and preoccupations. But understanding Coleridgean themes from the secondary sources without linking it to the living body of experience embodied in the poem would deprive a reader of the necessary pleasure of reading the poet.

Let us now shift our focus to the more specific question of reading Coleridge. I am not offering any tips that will enable to grasp the poems without the necessary pleasure of reading. Now, ask yourself: can you read *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* the way you read Alexander Pope's *An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*? Let me, then, respond to the issue with an elaboration of the following points: (1) understanding Coleridge as a quintessentially

Romantic poet (2) understanding Coleridge's distinctive style, thought and sensibility.

The first point is too obvious to explain. The centrality and the power of imagination is a Romantic disposition. As a contrast, you can read major eighteenth century poets where Nature and Reason reigned supreme which is why poetry was more inclined towards satire. (Dryden, Pope, Swift were great satirists of the time.) Nature here was conceived to be a standard, and rationality was taken to be man's essential nature. Deviation from this essential, rational nature of human being required a restorative effort whose major vehicle was satire. (To know more about satire, you can have a look at the Unit of Jonathan Swift's poems). Though the Romantics underscored the centrality of creative faculty of human mind, imagination served varying functions in their works. For Coleridge, imagination not just creates an imaginary world but gives it a semblance of reality so as to create a 'willing suspension of disbelief'. In the context of *The Rime*, imagination's task is evocation of a supernatural atmosphere in a way which engages the reader.

As for Coleridge's style, thought and sensibility, h

(1) How will you read *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*? I think, the following points will help you reading the poetic text.

1. The poem tells you a story in the first place. Though it presents an encounter between the mariner and a wedding guest in a festive occasion, its primary interest is a marvellous tale that relates to the Mariner's past. The dream-like quality of an extraordinary voyage undertaken by the narrator in the past, supernatural disaster, crisis and its aftermath—all this requires a verse pattern which is that of ballad. As you go through the poem, note how Coleridge negotiates the ballad form so as to treat a peculiar poetic material.

2. As a Romantic poet, Coleridge obviously differs from his neo-classical predecessors. If logic, reason, wit, intellect are the main thrust of eighteenth century poetry as in Pope, Swift and sharpen an instrument of criticism of people and society, it is imagination and feeling that defines romantic sensibility. An important point to consider, then, is the poet's distinctive mode in which emotions are articulated in poetry. In *The Rime* the events and situations are narrated through the voice of the narrator as he recounts them long after they occurred, before the

wedding guest, the narrative focus is on the extrenality of events and not on intimate self-expression. The poem is not like a speculative rambling of a sensitive 'I' figure, as in , say, Wordsworth:

I heard a thousand blended notes
While in a grove I sat reclined
In that sweet mood when pleasant thought
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

The Rime evokes a wide range of emotions from sorrow, guilt, blissfulness, serenity, scorn, hatred, compassion, joy, grief, anxiety, relief, terror. As you go through the poem, look at how varied circumstances and conditions at sea give rise to diverse emotions and how they are part of your poetic experience now. The poem progresses in tiny episodes which are indeed compelling images. See how emotional texture of the poem does not so much issue from confessional occasion but is related, instead, to the poem's pervasiev use of imagery.

3. Supernaturalism is a basic theme here. As a reader, you will perceive that the poem has many elements that are not part fo everyday reality but represent a different world: the death-in-Life, the Albatross, mysterious death of all shipmates, etc. More important is to look at the atmospheric dimension of the narrative of voyage. As we discussed in the previous unit, Coleridge sensed the popularity of the gothic tradition. The new fashion of dull and unconvincing horror in Lewis's *The Castle Spectre* did not fascinate him, yet the spell of the gothic was there. 1798 was a time when the influence of Gothic literature was felt, be it Robert Maturin's *Bertram*, Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* or Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*. For Coleridge the challence was to bring in the supernatural into the realm of familiar experience, in other words, to give the supernatural a semblance of reality. This accords with Coleridge's poetic aim as expressed in *Biographia Literaria*, when he talks about the plan of Lyrical Ballads: "(...)it was agreed that my endeavor should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic truth." (141) let us look at another exerpt from *Biographia Literaria*: "(...) Incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them rea. And

Real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency.” (141)

The poem explores a dream-like state, embodies varying emotions, employs a technique of detailing—all through the power of imagination. Look at how varying ambiances are created through separate, sharply conceived scenes, down to the very nature of similes that are employed. Similes normally establishes a connection between a tenor and a vehicle in which the latter belongs more to our familiar world. Coleridge reeverses this relationship: a compelling situation or event is likened to something which is no less unfamiliar. It elicits the reader’s supposed familiarity with something which is strange, even ghastly. Let us take an example:

The water, like a witch’s oils
Burns green, and blue and white.

Distant fires at sea creates some terror and cannot be dismissed as a known thing, but the simile of the witch’s oils is even more unfamiliar and , hence, terrifying. Yet, the reader’s familiarity with it is taken for granted. The resulting effect is that of the reader’s unwitting recognition of the situation which is uncanny and redolent of the supernatural.

4. when you look at *The Rime* merely as a narrative, what you expect is unravelling of the motives of action, and events and situations which are logically connected. Are the motives clear? Are logical connections of events explicitly given? Poetry is not governed by logic and rationality that operates in our everyday practical world. yet the poem’s intent is not to depict exact contours of a subjective state of a moment but deals with a material which demands an expansive, epic treatment; a moral problem that requires deeper speculations. As you will notice, the poem ends with a distinctve morale (though later Coleridge was not happy with this explicit moralism). In other words, the poem has a moral-philosophical (and, as critics add, political) substance, a deeper core, and does not merely indulge in shallow supernatural terror. It provokes a series of questions and thoughts: Why did the Mariner kill the Albatross? Why is the carcass of the bird hung around the neck of the mariner? Why does the voyage turn into a disaster? What are the moral and psychological ramifications of the ship’s benumbed state? Why is the changing perception of the slimy creatures significant in the context of the crisis that is depicted? Why does the mariner recount the story to the wedding guest? As you go through the poem, you will find yourself negotiating with these issues.

4.4 Other Study Suggestions

4.4.1. Maurice Bowra's popular book *The Romantic Imagination* contains an essay on the poem we have discussed, titled "The Ancient Mariner". When the supernatural almost spent its force and the Gothic degenerated into fanciful and unconvincing horror and the major Romantics looked for fresh experience and expressions, Coleridge's choice was indeed challenging. In the above chapter you will have an interesting and almost thorough discussion of the poem in terms of how the poet treats the supernatural. Though, as mentioned by the author, Coleridge deals with this subject in his three most remarkable poems namely "Kubla Khan", "Christabel" and "The Ancient Mariner", the last one is a complete work where Coleridge invests all his power and resources as a poet. He writes that the supernatural is not the poet's sole focus. Basically Coleridge creates an imaginary world beyond the familiar existence and posits it as an alternative. At the same time, this strange imaginary world also comments on our known world of experience. He states that Coleridge was exposed to varied, contrary experiences in his life, and that it is in this poem that he is able to articulate his inner being in a brilliant way. One important observation Mr. Bowra makes here is that Coleridge was himself fascinated by the supernatural theme because he had a sense that some mysterious, unknown forces are at work in our familiar life. This propels him to treat the theme of guilt and punishment by resorting to material "which is itself mysterious" (73) a reading of the essay will enable you to read "The Ancient Mariner" more fruitfully.

4.4.2. Francis Fergusson writes an essay titled "Coleridge and the Deluded Reader: "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"" , contained in *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose* edited by Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (Norton Critical Edition). He offers a critical view of the moral dimension of the poem and argues that the explicit moral lesson attached to the close of the poem is too simplistic. He opines that the morality is best to be seen as a problem in the context of the poem. The Mariner (who is transformed towards the end and "loveth well", has a malignant effect on the sailor and his son even as the latter two saved his body. Further, he contends that the Gloss that Coleridge added in later edition may have lent some sort of moral unity to the poem, but the Gloss offers an intrusive value judgement when the

poem per se at times betrays some ambiguity. For instance, while the Albatross is laden with contradictory moral value (as a 'good omen' or 'bad omen'), the Gloss offers a rather unambiguous statement that dismisses the sailor's vacillation on the bird's moral worth. (Other critics also talk about the problematic function of the glosses, because through these Coleridge confers higher authority to someone other than the Mariner, and they endorse the Christian moral scheme but destroy the textual ambiguities. He also talks about the problematic distribution of differing punishment to the shipmates and the Mariner for their commitment of or complicity in , murder. While the shipmates only aired their opinion about the bird, they become Death's property, a punishment heavier for the crime. The poem offers little in the way of explaining this eventuality.

4.4.3. Basil Willey writes a book titled *Nineteenth Century Studies: Coleridge to Matthew Arnold* where the first chapter "Samuel Taylor Coleridge" discusses the trajectory of Coleridge's thought and its historical significance. Coleridge, Willey argues, registered a profound reaction against what the eighteenth century stood for: the cult of Nature and Reason. When rationality was supposed to govern the society and the individual, little room was left for the exploration of what lies in the world of mind and in the unseen world. To Coleridge the aspiration for the unseen reality is not geared to any material gains but a spiritual need. The life of mind as well as the domain of human experience, he feels, required to be richer and more satisfying. If we look at the philosophical underpinnings of his thought, we might detect diverse influences, yet a profound faith in God persists all along. Coleridge expounded the notion of 'organic unity', because the sense of the whole as a living entity was a necessity for him. Seen from this angle, his deep religious thought and literary theory have a continuity. The living universe owes its existence to a divine power, while in artistic creation, an analogous power is ascribed to human mind- the power of imagination. One of the diverse influences I mentioned is the cult of necessitarianism which he preached during his days at Cambridge. It is during this time that he opposed monarchy, and nobility and carried a revolutionary optimism kindled by France. This revolutionary idealism made him resort to a project called 'Pantisocracy' along with his friend, Robert Southey. An avid reader from childhood, Coleridge has already passed through Hartley, Berkeley and Spinoza. You can have a look at the chapter. It will enable to gain

some idea of Coleridge's mind and sensibility, which you can relate to your reading of his poems.

4.4.4. John Spenser Hill's *A Coleridge Companion* offers a discussion of the major poems. The fourth chapter "The Ancient Mariner" is a comprehensive study of the poem that includes information about the sources and influences, publication history as well as the themes and form. First, it will give you the idea of how a complex process of revision, addition, and deletion over almost two decades went into the making of the poem. The poem was based on popular ballad so as to enable Coleridge to sell it for some profit, and eventually the poet saw himself struggling with adverse criticism that it triggered and impelled him to revising it a number of times till it attained a significantly different shape in 1817. Coleridge's own experience of felt life got articulation in such revisions in a way that enriched the poetic text. Coleridge's treatment of the supernatural in the poem, he argues, is linked to a preoccupation shared with his poet-friend Wordsworth with the theme of crime, guilt and redemption. The poets parted their ways, however, as their attitude to the supernatural were discovered to be quite different. This difference in outlook translated itself into a difference in their poetic method. With Wordsworth aiming to 'defamiliarize' everyday world and people to arrive at a moral wisdom implicit in the objects of nature, and Coleridge endeavoring to familiarize the supernatural world by infusing a human interest in it and thus achieving what he calls 'willing suspension of disbelief.' Wordsworth has poems that deal with crime, guilt and redemption, like 'Peter Bell' where supernatural intervention is avoided and redemption takes place through a process of natural visitation. Hill also studies how the poem emerged out of a popular ballad tradition which revived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but also brought the ballad conventions to brilliant poetic effect. Unlike Sir Walter Scott, for instance, who imitated the form in many of his poems, Coleridge's adaptation of popular ballad also introduced novelty. For one thing, he extended the four-line ballad stanza to five, six, even nine lines to heighten a certain emotional impact or to fix a scene in memory and also did relieve the readers of the monotony of repetition of the same stanza.

4.5 Probable Questions and Suggested Answers:

1. Do you think that Coleridge and Wordsworth had their distinctive traits as Romantic poets? How does this understanding of their difference enable your reading of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*?

Answer: a. You must situate their similarities in terms of their basic disposition and preoccupation. Imagination, for instance, is a cherished ideal that binds them together.

b. Coleridge expresses his difference with Wordsworth in terms of the method and poetic effect. While Wordsworth seeks to lend a sense of wonder in an otherwise familiar setting, Coleridge intends to render the unfamiliar, familiar.

c. This technique manifests itself in his treatment of the supernatural.

2. What is the significance of the episode of the wedding ceremony in the poem?

Answer:

- a. The wedding ceremony provides a kind of frame narrative to the tale of voyage, disaster and supernatural phenomenon
 - b. The wedding ceremony provides the context of a familiar festive atmosphere against which the narrative of sea voyage and disaster can be set for dramatic effect
 - c. The wedding ceremony provides an auditor to the story of the Mariner and thus fulfills a necessity of ballad.
 - d. Through the imagined presence of the wedding guest, the continuing moral/ethical relevance of a strange and apparently adventurous narrative is sought to be established.
 - e. The Mariner's tale's effect on the wedding guest is discerned in perceptible change in the latter's disposition from exasperation to being a 'sadder and wiser man'.
2. What the discernible aspects of Coleridge's poetic style are as reflected in this poem?
 - a. Coleridge's fascination for the supernatural and his choice of the ballad form
 - b. Use of the ballad to tell a story that moves through concrete scenes and images

- c. His use of the narrative mode to describe changing scenario and emotions
 - d. His exploration of symbolic dimensions of the outward journey across sea
 - e. His obliteration of explicit links among separate scenes to enhance the strangeness of the events
 - f. Sharply conceived images and their power to evoke varied mental/psychological atmosphere
3. Write a note on Coleridge's treatment of the supernatural.

Answer: As for the supernatural, it is not seen as beyond the reach of common sense and everyday rationality but as something rooted in human psychology. It is not represented as something uncanny or strange enough to deter a reader but so compelling as to make him/her suspend disbelief. And a story of voyage provides a necessary framework in which superstition and supernatural can be located. Coleridge's reading of the accounts of voyage with descriptions of tropical heat, storm, shooting albatrosses, strange effects of light and so on was no less important in the conceptualization of the poem itself. The shipmates alternately praises and blame the Mariner for shooting the bird, and thus they try to give a supernatural significance to the killing of the bird. Then they curse him and thus try to control the weather which threatens the ship. The Mariner accepts the curse, as he realizes his violation of a taboo. The Mariner's working with the dead shipmates presents a ghastly scenario, but here we have a language where enslavement is written on the body. If superstition prevails in the minds of the shipmates and the mariner himself, how can the self be liberated from superstition and slavery? Love is the saving grace, but it is never a deliberate act or doctrinaire belief but a spontaneous, instinctive act.

4.6 Summing Up:

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is a multi-layered text and can attract responses from varying perspectives. In this unit, you have gained some understanding of how to read the poem in the first place. Besides, the making of the poem is elaborated just to give you a sense of how the text evolves out of a long process of creation and hence requires equally engaging reading. We have also discussed how questions for the

examinations may be answered. All of this should enable to get back to the poem again with some fresh perspective.

4.7 References and suggested Reading

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Unit 5

Hymn to Intellectual Beauty

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Unit Structure :

5.1 Objectives

5.2 Introducing the poet

5.3 Works of P. B. Shelley

5.4 Critical Reception

5.5 Context of the Poem

5.6 Reading the Poem

5.7 Summing Up

5.8 References and Suggested Reading

5.1 Objective:

In this unit, we will discuss one of the most famous romantic poets—Percy Bysshe Shelley with special reference to the poem *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*. In the course of the unit, you will be provided with concise information on the life and works of Shelley and how he was received during his lifetime. Attempts have also been made to situate Shelley within the political framework of the romantic period and how Shelley represents the society through his poems. In this unit you will specially learn about the poem *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* and how the poem represents Shelley's romantic ideals and also his love for freedom.

With this objective in mind the unit is designed to help you

- Connect the life of the poet with his works.
- Place the poet in the 19th century literary context.
- Understand the controversies surrounding the poetic works of the poet and the stand of the poet.
- Conceptualize the range of meanings possible that the text brings to us.
- Appreciate thus the work presented to you in its totality.

5.2 Introducing the Poet:

Percy Bysshe Shelley, born in the year 1792, was one of the prominent figures in the romantic poetry tradition whose fame, however, was recognized only after his death. Surrounded by controversies for his radical views against religion and contemporary social order, Shelley's poetry could not gain much audience even for those works that are now famous. Born to a wealthy family, P.B. Shelley showed exceptional talent in the field of science and occult practices from his childhood and often went against the established norms. He is also known for the violent clashes with his classmates for not conforming to their ways of life. Such violent outrages earned him the title 'Mad Shelley'. He was also expelled from the University College, Oxford, for refusing to deny his joint authorship with Thomas Jefferson Hog for the publication of *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811). However, Shelley had already published *Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire* (1810) and *The Wandering Jew* (1817) and a gothic novel *St. Irvine* (1810) by this time. These collections along with *The Necessity of Atheism* brought Shelley negative popularity and faced sharp criticism. *The Necessity of Atheism*, *Queen Mab* (1813), and *The Revolt of Islam* (1818), which attacked monarchy and institutional religion as the main sources behind all the corruptions in the society, were considered to be incendiary and gained him titles such as impious and demonic among the orthodox circles. Due to such perception about his poems, despite self-financing, the poems published hardly ever sold well. There were 1489 copies of *Original Poetry* but only 100 copies were in circulation. Similarly, only 70 copies of *Queen Mab* were in circulation while most of the copies of *The Necessity of Atheism* were burned.

Though he was very poorly received during his lifetime and often attracted animosity, he was a revolutionary poet on his own right who aimed to break free from the shackles of traditional values that infringed individual liberty. He was rebellious against the authoritarian system and orthodox belief system and chose to believe in nature and its liberating aspects. He as a poet believed that nature along with the good human soul is capable of bringing great change into society. But such a fine poet always had to face scathing criticism till his death by drowning in 1822. It is only after his death, thanks to his wife's effort, Shelley's works started getting popular. Mary Shelley, the second wife of P.B. Shelley with whom he had eloped after his three years of marriage to Harriet, published *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1824), a collection of eighty-three complete shorter poems and other fragmented works written by Shelley. The collection, unlike Shelley's previous publications, was rather received well in the literary society but had a

short span because Shelley's father, Sir Timothy Shelley, did not want his son's work to be in circulation because of their scandalous nature. But the collection had already been sold well and 300 of the 500 printed copies were in circulation and there were further demands for his poems which led to unauthorised publications. Thus, Percy Bysshe Shelley started getting the popularity and appreciation that he deserved, nevertheless posthumous.

Stop to Consider:

“Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world”

Shelley's friend Thomas Love Peacock in his magazine piece “The Four Ages of Poetry” wrote that in an age of science and enlightenment, poets should abandon their pursuit of poetry and engage in more creative and practically useful works. As a rebuttal to this essay, Shelley wrote “A Defence of Poetry” in the year 1821, just one year before his death. In this essay he articulates that an epoch of great intellectual and artistic achievement is one in which revolutionary events, ideas and imagination energize each other. Rebutting the mocking of Peacock, Shelley wrote that the way Renaissance shaped the poets of that era, the spirit of the contemporary society shapes the Romantic writers. He concluded the essay by writing that the poets must address and engage with realities of their contemporary society to remain relevant so that they do not become “dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse”. This article is not a literary theory but what poetry does and who the poets are. In so doing, Shelley said, “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”

Throughout our discussion, you will find several instances that will explain this idea. Note down the instances.

Despite his distaste towards any religion and rejection of any divine order, Shelley believed that the divine can only be perceived through nature, a disposition that he might have developed when he was a child living in Field Place, an idyllic place. However, his childhood liberty was restrained soon when he went to Syon House Academy in 1802 where he faced serious bullying which also continued when he joined Eton College. Though he was bullied, his unwillingness to give up had earned him the titles as mentioned above ‘Mad Shelley’ and ‘Shelley the atheist’, yet such revolutionary attitude might also have helped him develop some of his key ideas such as individual liberty, hatred for authoritarianism, and free love.

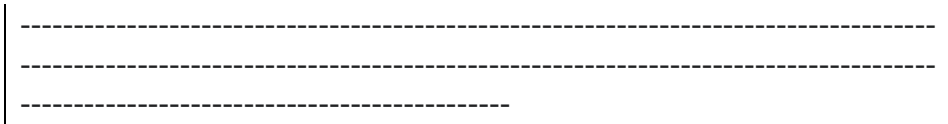
However, just calling Shelley a revolutionary and anti-authoritarian would be an incomplete statement if we do not take French Revolution into consideration. In fact, Romanticism fairly emerged out as a reaction against the failure of the French Revolution that shattered the age-old monarchical system. In the words of Albert Hancock, "The French Revolution came, bringing with it the promise of a brighter day, the promise of regenerated man and regenerated earth. It was hailed with joy and acclamation by the oppressed, by the ardent lovers of humanity, by the poets, whose task it is to voice the human spirit." This free spirit is one of the most commonly explored themes among the romantic poets who believed that human beings are unique and are not subject to scientific rules. P.B. Shelley's poems advocate this unique belief of the human free spirit. Interestingly, Shelley was born in the year 1792, the peak time of the French Revolution that had started in 1789 and the effect of which continued years after that. Shelley grew up within this time of great social change of which he later said, "the tempests which have shaken the age in which we live." His poems such as *Queen Mab* and *Prometheus Unbound* strongly advocate such revolutionary ideals and the potential social change. However, while advocating for social change, such as French Revolution or Irish Revolution, Shelley never supported violent means. In fact, in a pamphlet he wrote, "I do not wish to see things changed now, because it cannot be done without violence, and we may assure ourselves that none of us are fit for any change, however good if we condescend to employ force in a cause we think right."

P.B. Shelley was thus a fine romantic and a vocal advocate of social change who put humans and nature in a balanced mode and believed that through nature can human attain absolute freedom. Though he was not fondly appraised during his lifetime, he became a source of inspiration for many later poets such as Alfred Lord Tennyson, Lord Byron, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Robert Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, W. B Yeats, Edna Saint Vincent Millay and Henry David Thoreau.

SAQ:

How did the socio-political scenario of the early 19th century influence the writings of Shelley?

Discuss the lyric poems of Shelley.



5.3 Works of P.B. Shelley:

Though Shelley had a short lifespan, he has left us with a huge amount of literary works that include a significant number of poems, essays, and closet dramas. It is, however, not possible to discuss all the works here in detail so his major collections have been discussed in this section. As mentioned in the previous section, Shelley had started writing poems and essays quite early but his breakthrough came with his first long philosophical poem *Queen Mab*. The revolutionary ideas that Shelley held were delineated in this poem. Written as a reaction to The French Revolution, Shelley in this poem holds that the past and the present are dominated by evils resulting from authoritarian systems, both political and religious. However, the poem takes a turn from such conditions and *Queen Mab* presents a utopian vision of a future in which mankind evolves with nature. Envisioning a better future of humankind in reconciliation with nature is essentially one of the dominant traits of romanticism that in fact prevails in all the poems of P.B. Shelley.

Such optimism from the evils of contemporary society is also shown in the poem *The Revolt of Islam* (1818). Originally written as *Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City: A Vision of the Nineteenth Century*, was written as Shelley said, ‘in the view of kindling within the bosoms of my readers a virtuous enthusiasm for those doctrines of liberty and justice, that faith and hope in something good, which neither violence nor misrepresentation nor prejudice can ever totally extinguish among mankind.’ This poem describes the struggle of a brother and a sister against the oppression caused by the Ottoman empire. Such oppression is also shown in the verse drama *The Cenci* (1819) which is based on the actual murder of a count by his daughter-Beatrice Cenci. In this verse drama, count Francesco Cenci is the man in power who causes multiple oppression including the rape of his daughter. But the daughter refuses to give in and plots revenge resulting in the tragic end of the plotters suggesting the invincibility of those who were in power.

Such revolutionary ideas are continued in his poems such as *The Mask of Anarchy*, a poem written on the occasion of the massacre at Manchester also known as the Peterloo Massacre that took place in the year 1819. It’s a political poem that again raises voice against injustice. But in so doing, the poem does not advocate violence. It says:

Then it is to feel revenge
Fiercely thirsting to exchange
Blood for blood—and wrong for wrong—
Do not thus when ye are strong.

(The Mask of Anarchy)

The poem perhaps can be called as one of the earliest calls for non-violence. Shelley's non-violence is not a meek surrender. It further says,

Rise like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number—
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you—
Ye are many—they are few.'

(ibid.)

Interestingly, such a beautiful poem that was sent to Leigh Hunt in 1819, was not published for reasons as Hunt mentioned that the public was not yet ready for such ideals and it was finally published in the year 1832.

Shelley's revolutionary ideals were always accompanied by high moral ideas. Napoleon taking over post-Revolution was ultimately seen by many as a failure of the revolution itself because of the death and destruction caused by the revolution and after. Shelley was against such violence and believed that love ultimately wins over vengeance and hatred. In the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley wrote that the purpose of his poetry was to "familiarize the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence...". Such a high moralistic attitude prevails in almost all of his poems in which human liberty is advocated through non-violent means. In his poems, the revolutionary spirit is mixed with a positivistic attitude. He writes, "... to hope till hope creates/From its own wrecks the thing it contemplates" (*Prometheus Unbound*). *Prometheus Unbound* is a lyric drama that depicts a cosmic setting but the central idea of the poem is elemental that deals with mankind in general. This lyric drama is a re-creation of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* and in recreating, he recreates the myth celebrating the victory of mankind.

French Revolution and Romantic Poetry

'Worshippers of nature' is perhaps the most cliched definition of Romanticism that segregates romanticism from politics. But, the origin of Romanticism was every bit political. It originated out of the socio-political turbulence of the late eighteenth century, especially the French Revolution. The early part of the revolution had filled the first-generation romantics—Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron with the hope of a peaceful and a balanced society with heightened liberty for the individuals. Prior to the revolution, English poems were mostly based on aristocratic themes but the revolution and the subsequent dismantling of monarchical system raised hope in the society for the laymen. In fact, the rusticity and common man that romantic poems invoke is a part of that feeling. In 1791, Wordsworth was in France and was greatly fired by the ideals of the revolution. Upon his return he also wrote the poem A Letter to Bishop in support of French Republic. But the subsequent violence and terror had him disillusioned and he wrote the drama The Borderers that reflects his depression. The same goes with Coleridge who was a strong supporter of French revolution in the beginning but later when France invaded Switzerland, he was frustrated and wrote the poem France: An Ode which originally titled as The Recantation: An Ode. Though Shelley did not experience the French Revolution, he had seen the Napoleonic War and the violence it caused that had him disturbed. Nevertheless, his advocacy for a balanced society, a society free from religion, ideals of revolution, equality, and fraternity are all on based on the revolution.

It is, however, important to note that though the Romantic era was mostly determined by an escapist attitude, Shelley can more be addressed as confrontational than escapist. Shelley also often disapproved of Wordsworth's world of recuperation. In his search for nature as in poems like *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* and *Mont Blanc*, Shelley presents nature as a formidable force that can and does interfere human world for better causes. In the poem *Mont Blac*, the mountain is shown as taking actions against 'large codes of fraud and woe' in *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, the poet considers Beauty as the singular force that can free humanity from slavery and bring love and harmony into society.

Shelley, though better known as a revolutionary poet, was also a fine lyric poet. His lyrics are often shorter and personal in nature. Though elegiac in nature, Shelley's lyrics often represent his idealistic optimism as in the poem *Ode to the West Wind* he writes: If winter comes, can Spring be far behind! Though the poem begins with self-pitying as he

says: “I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed”, eventually it ends with a tone of exultation. The same tone can also be observed in his poem “To A Skylark” in which he has made use of pathetic fallacy. Some other lyric poems written by Shelley are “Lines Written in the Euganean Hills” “Ode to Naples” “The Cloud” etc. The most famous lyric of Shelley is perhaps *Adonais*, a pastoral elegy written to commemorate the death of John Keats.

Shelley’s excellence, thus, was not limited to fine poetry only but he wrote in various forms and styles including revolutionary satire, philosophical vision and urbane verse letters, lyrics, verse drama, closet dramas etc., Shelley once in the register of Hotel de Villes de Londres in Chamonix addressed himself as ‘Atheist. Lover of Humanity. Democrat.’ All these qualities are truly reflected in all his works.

Check Your Progress:

1. Comment on the themes PB Shelley’s poems.

(Hint: Nature, Revolution, Individual Liberty, Freedom)

2. Through nature Shelley explores humanity. Discuss.

(Hint: Shelley’s take on the social evils and how nature comes to the aid of humanity)

3. Do you think that myth plays an important role in the poems of Shelley? Discuss.

(Hint: Refer to *Prometheus Unbound*)

4. Shelley’s optimism stems from his understanding of nature. Comment.

(Hint: *Queen Mab*)

5.4 Critical Reception:

By now, you all are familiar with the critical reception of Shelley in his lifetime. The critiques on Shelley during his lifetime was not on the merits of his works but on the rebellious nature of his works. William Wordsworth was of the opinion that ‘A poet who has not produced a good poem before he is twenty-five, we may conclude cannot, and never will do so.’ When asked about *The Cenci*, he replied, ‘Won’t do...’ However, Shelley’s appreciation came much later. Even Wordsworth later opined on Shelley that ‘Shelley is one of the best artists of us all: I mean in workmanship of style.’ During the early Victorian period, Cambridge Apostles, a group of undergraduates with members such as Tennyson and Arthur Hallam, bore the cost of a copy of *Adonais*. And even Francis Turner Palgrave’s *The Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language* included twenty-two poems of Shelley, the third highest in rank. In 1885, the Shelley Society was formed and one of the prominent members of this group was George Bernard Shaw. This group worked on the revival of the works of Shelley and also staged several of his plays including *The Cenci* in 1886.

However, in the modern times, the works of Shelley has received mixed reactions. While 20th century critics such as T.S. Eliot, Allen Tate, and F.R. Leavis, held Shelley as an immature poet in whose writings are filled with immaturity of intellect and sensibility, Harold Bloom, on the other hand, was of the opinion that Shelley is one of the finest poets of all time. However, since his first publication, Shelley has received both negative and positive comments. But he shall always be better known, in the words of Mary Shelley, for “The struggle for human weal; the resolution firm to martyrdom; the impetuous pursuit, the glad triumph in good; the determination not to despair; --such were the features that marked those of his works which he regarded with most complacency, as sustained by a lofty subject and useful aim.”

Stop to Consider:

Mont Blanc, *To A Sky-lark*, and *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* are thematically related. All of these poems contrast human beings against nature and show the limitations of human beings in comparison to nature. In the poem *To a Sky-lark*, the lark is described to have possessed fountains of joy that human society can never possess; in *Mont Blanc*, Shelley compares the power of a mountain with men and their limitations of imagination; in *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, Shelley presents the concept of Spiritual Beauty that can drive away human society from slavery and bring peace and harmony. Like any romantics, Shelley too looks into nature. These poems depict man’s attempt to

understand their position in the universe as well as seeking for means to free themselves from worldly pain.

SAQ:

1. Do you think Shelley was immature as a poet?

2. Criticism of Shelley during his life-time was based on the theme and not the content. Do you agree?

5.5 Context of the Poem:

In May 1816, Shelley along with Mary Shelly and Claire travelled to France then to Switzerland where they met Lord Byron. This is perhaps one of the most significant journeys in English literature for it produced a number of significant literary texts that include Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Lord Byron’s *Manfred* (1816-17) and PB Shelley’s *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* and *Mont Blanc* (1816). Shelley wrote the poem when he went out with Byron around Lake Geneva. Once completed, the poem *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* was sent to Leigh Hunt for publication who eventually lost the poem and Shelley had to write another which was first published in *The Examiner* in the year 1817 and was later on included in the collection *Rosalind and Helen, A Modern Eclogue, With Other Poems* (1818).

This is a quasi-religious poem that recounts an important event in the life of the poet. Written in the form of prayer to some unseen Power, the poem addresses some spiritual being the presence of which cannot be located but is elemental in the development of the human mind. The poet notes his encounter with this power when he was a child and was busy searching for ghosts and other spiritual beings. This statement in the poem, however, coincides with Shelley own childhood when he used to go after these things especially during his stay at Eton College. However, the unseen Power, despite being inconstant, had rendered vision to the poet that guided him throughout his life. The poem is an ode or a prayer to this unseen Power that is also called ‘Spiritual Beauty’.

The basic idea of this ‘Spiritual Beauty’ is platonic and it has often been argued by critics that Shelley was deeply influenced by Plato before writing the poem. While rigorous attempts have been made by many scholars on Shelley to trace the sources of the poem, but no concrete link between Plato and Shelley could have been established. It is rather said that that the title of the poem ‘Intellectual Beauty’ has been taken from Godwin’s *Memoirs*(1798).

Stop and Consider

P.B. Shelley had sent the poem ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ to Leigh Hunt, the founder of *The Examiner*, anonymously signing it as P.B.S. In a conversation between Leigh Hunt and P.B. Shelley, Hunt had asked Shelley if he wanted to write his full name instead of his initials. To this, Shelley had replied: “Will I own the Hymn to Intellectual Beauty? I do not care. As you like. And yet the poem was composed under the influence of feelings which agitated me even to tears, so that I think it deserves a better fate than the being linked with so stigmatized & unpopular a name (so far as it is known) as mine.” Hunt later published the poem with the initials P.B.S.

5.6 Reading the Poem:

Also termed as a manifesto of Shelley’s ‘natural Platonism’, the poem *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* rejects the traditional notions of a deity and formulates alternative source of spiritual value, namely “Intellectual Beauty”. Through a set of imageries, the term Intellectual Beauty has been defined as something which is enigmatic and spiritual but not in a religious manner and can free human society from all evils if it were permanent.

The poem starts with the poet addressing some mysterious ‘unseen Power’ that roam around us unseen and visits various worlds with its inconstant wing. The ‘unseen Power’ or the Spirit, despite its inconsistency, visits each human heart like summer winds creeping from one flower to the other or moonbeams shining on the pine like trees in the mountains. The poet here uses a number of similes to describe the Spirit such as ‘hues and harmonies of evening’ clouds in starlight’ ‘memory of music’ etc. Significantly, the similes used here ‘like hues and harmonies of evening’ are transitory in nature but during their stay every human heart loves them. This is what the ‘unseen Power’ is. These images also evoke a sense of peace and harmony which is brought by the

‘unseen Power’ as described in the later stanzas of the poem. The opening stanza affirms the existence of some unseen Power which is mysterious and graceful. Through its praises, the first stanza sets the tone of a hymn.

Hymn VS Ode

Hymn is a kind of song that is sung to celebrate or express religious feelings. These songs are usually sung as a part of religious service. Originated from the Greek term hymnos, hymns are also used to praise human heroes or abstract concepts. Though meant to be sung, hymns gradually evolved to be read. Edmund Spenser’s Fowre Hymns is one of such hymns that celebrate earthly love and beauty and also heavenly love and beauty. However, hymns were gradually secularized by poets such as James Thompson A Hymn on the Seasons, Keats Hymn on Apollo. Shelley have also written a number of hymns that mostly celebrate abstract objects.

Odes, on the other hand, are lyric poems which are serious in subject and treatment that glorify or praise an event or individual. The Greek Poet Pindar is considered to be the prototype of Odes from which it came into English. The basic purpose of odes is to glorify a person or thing or an event. Hymn, on the other hand, venerates some sacred entity. Hymns are religious in nature. Shelley’s Hymn to Intellectual Beauty, though often said to be based on the Odes of Wordsworth that glorifies nature, is a hymn in its theme and structure for the deification of the ‘Spiritual Beauty’.

The first stanza focuses on the transience of the Spirit while the second stanza notes the time in its absence. In this stanza the poet further characterizes the Spirit and says that the Spirit of Beauty with its own hues shines upon human thought or form, and its absence on the other hand causes gloom. The poet in a plaintive manner asks why the Spirit leaves human society into a vast valley of tears in a vacant and desolate state. However, soon the poem turns towards its rhetorical questions and uses the image of sunlight causing rainbow over the mountains. Through the evocation of such beautiful imageries, Shelley states that the Spirit of Beauty shows itself through such objects and through moral goods-“Love, Hope, and Self-Esteem”. These qualities have been contrasted with ‘fail’ ‘fear’ and ‘death’ ‘hate’ and ‘despondency’ that cause pain among human. The poet questions the reason why such gloomy things exist on earth and categorically states that if Beauty is kept firmly in human heart, humanity can get rid of these pains.

Stop to Consider

The term “Intellectual Beauty” appears only in the title while the rest of the poem addresses it in several enigmatic terms such as ‘unseen Power’ ‘shadow’ ‘Spiritual Beauty’ and through a chain of imageries, the term is described. For Shelley, this term ‘intellectual beauty’, however, may have had several sources. Shelley had read the novel *Adeline Mowbray, or the Mother and Daughter* (1804) written by Amelia Opie. In this novel the term appears as “a passion founded in esteem, and the admiration of *intellectual beauty*, could not . . . subsist.” In 1812, Shelley had ordered the book *On the Origin and Progress of Language* in which the term ‘intellectual beauty’ appears three times. Other than these the term also appears in several other books in the reading list of Shelley that include Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication to the Rights of Woman*; William Godwin’s *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The definition of the term is obscure but Shelley uses it as a form of questing than a mere concept. E.R. Wasserman defined the term as ‘divinity of mind only’.

In the first two stanzas, this Spirit of Beauty has been presented as some sort of spiritual deity in line with Christian God— ‘unseen Power’ that ‘consecrate’ and is all-powerful. However, this is not to confuse with Shelley’s stance on atheism. In the third stanza of the poem, Shelley’s atheistic belief is reasserted. In this stanza, Shelley asserts that the unanswered questions were beyond human perception but to assign meaning into them the concepts of ‘Demon, Ghost, and Heaven’ were created by the poets or sages. ‘Demon, Ghosts, and Heaven’ are the terms often associated with religious order which are undermined in clear terms when the poet said,

Therefore the names of Demon, Ghost, and Heaven,
Remain the records of their vain endeavour:
Frail spells whose utter'd charm might not avail to sever,
From all we hear and all we see,
Doubt, chance and mutability.

However, Shelley answers those questions of which the sages did not have answers. He again uses simile to explain the Spirit and to answer the questions. As mist over mountains are driven by light or the way night wind can cause music to some still instrument, the Spirit can be the

answer of those questions and drive away the ‘doubt’ chance’ and ‘mutability’ that permeate on earth.

The deification reaches its peak in the fourth stanza in which the power of the Spirit is delineated in clear terms-

Man were immortal and omnipotent,
Didst thou, unknown and awful as thou art,
Keep with thy glorious train firm state within his heart.

In the previous stanzas, ‘fear’ and ‘doubt’ have been given some sort of permanency in contrast to which ‘Love, and Self-esteem’ are shown as ‘uncertain’ like clouds that come and go. However, these qualities would have been permanent and human beings would have been ‘immortal and omnipotent’ if the Spirit had firmly sheltered in human heart. The Spirit, for Shelley, is fountain of life and inspiration. It has been called as ‘nourishment’ to human thought by which Shelley most probably meant that the poetic mind is rendered by this Spirit. Its power and influence is like darkness that smothers a dying light. The poem then turns into a prayers mode and requests the Spirit not to leave because if it leaves, the poet fear, the graves may become ‘a dark reality’. The last two lines of this stanza is built upon the poet’s previous statement in stanza two that when the Spirit leaves, it becomes a gloomy state. Its continuous existence is significant for the calm and peaceful existence of human beings.

Stop to consider

Throughout the poem, Shelley has made use of multiple theological imageries to advance his reverence for the Spirit starting with ‘vale of tears’ that refers to the Vulgate version of Psalm 84:5-6 and means that these are temporary pains of the world against the eternal bliss of heaven. While ‘name of God and Ghosts, and Heaven’ on the other hand is suggestive of the concept of Trinity, ‘Love, Hope, and Self-esteem,’ refer back to the Theological virtues: Faith, Hope, and Charity. Shelley has replaced ‘faith’ with ‘Self-esteem to subjectivize the notion of Spiritual Beauty as well as demarcate between traditional religious concepts and his understanding of abstract Beauty.

The poem has some more biblical references. You may trace them and explain their use in the poem.

In our discussion on the life and works of Shelley we have found that Shelley was very much concerned about human condition especially the

contemporary socio-political scenario that were driven by blood and violence. In most of his poems, he described the present as desolate and filled with evils and a restatement of the same can also be found in this poem though not in overt manner. And the only solution, as found in many of his other poems, is nature. Only through nature, human beings can evolve to a better society. Here in this poem, the Spirit is a manifestation of that nature that can bring peace and harmony on earth.

Shelley, however, gradually subjectivizes his experience of the Spirit. While in the previous stanzas, Shelley generalizes the existence of the Spirit and its necessity in the society, in this stanza, Shelley personalizes his experience with the Spirit. He says that as a child he sought for ghosts and had been to various 'listening chamber, cave and ruin', to listen to the 'departed dead'. He used to call them using 'poisonous names' but he never saw or heard any of them. that he did not find one is a restatement of the previous claim that these are 'vain endeavors' of the poets and sages. In such a time when the child was musing on the 'lot of life', like 'winds wooing all vital things that wake to bring news birds and blossoming', the shadow of the Spirit fell on him that made the poet 'shriek and clasp hand in ecstasy'. The shadow had changed the course of his life. The 'news of birds and blossoming' is suggestive of nature revitalizing in spring season when everything starts afresh. Similarly, the shadow of the Spirit revitalized the spirit of the poet and perhaps rendered the poet his muse.

Once the shadow of the 'unseen Power' fell on him and he realized the significance of it, he promised that he would dedicate all his powers to this shadow. He asserts that he has kept his promise to the last word and ghosts and spirits of 'a thousand hours' can testify the same. The poet turns devotional towards the Spirit and states that he was always elated with the thought that someday this world would be freed from its 'dark slavery' by the Spirit and it would give, in its 'aweful LOVELINESS' and things that the poet cannot even imagine. This stanza of the poem is devotional and religious in nature for it deifies the Spirit in a religious way in which the Spirit is considered as God-like that can drive away all the evil and make the world beautiful for which the poet prayed in the previous stanza.

In the last stanza, the poet brings in a natural cycle to compare life's journey. As the day past noon becomes calm and serene, and the autumn becomes harmonious and there is a glow in the sky which cannot be observed in the summer, the poet too finds himself in that stage of his life in which for the onward journey of his life he requests the shadow in all its forms to bless his life again-

Thus let thy power, which like the truth
Of nature on my passive youth

Descended, to my onward life supply.

He prays the Intellectual Beauty to continue exerting its power upon him and make the coming days of his life peaceful like the autumn season. The Spirit, as he says, has freed him from self-conceit (fear) and love all humankind. Shelley's choice of word 'to fear himself' is interesting here. By 'fear himself' Shelley must have meant something desirable in line with 'Love' 'Hope' and 'Self-esteem' and not something like doubt or mistrust. The word 'fear' in traditional sense may mean humbleness or in Biblical use "The *fear* of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom". This sense of humility and humbleness and his love for all human kind has been taught by the Spirit of Beauty.

SAQ

1. Explain the use of simile in the poem.

2. What does Shelley mean by the term 'intellectual beauty'?

3. Write a note on the use of figures of speech in the poem.

4. Discuss Shelley as a revolutionary poet.

The last two stanzas reveal Shelley's ideal of universal love and brotherhood. As mentioned throughout the discussion on Shelley, he was a strong advocate of freedom and this expressed through the lines "thou wouldst free/This world from its dark slavery," and "Whom, SPIRIT fair, thy spells did bind/To fear himself, and love all human kind." French Revolution though was liberating in many aspects, promoted violence, while institutional authoritarianism prevailed all over. However, Shelley was strongly against such authoritarianism which he condemned in many of his works and believed that human kind in collaboration with nature are capable of great change. In this poem, the Spiritual Beauty/Shadow/Intellectual Beauty, have been delineated as a manifestation of nature that is capable of this great change.

Stop To Consider

Shelley's poems are often considered to have platonic influence (the philosophical doctrine that believes in the existence of an abstract reality/objects) especially in the poem *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*. However, critics such as Wasserman and Harold Bloom have denied the relevance of Plato in the reading of Shelley. And they were perhaps right given Shelley was defending poetry while Plato was against poetry. However, Shelley used to read Plato a lot and also translated *Symposium* which might have influenced his notion of abstract objects. Shelley's concept of 'divinity in man' resembles Plato's Demiurge, while internalizing the ideal beauty is also platonic. The poem *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* is heavily platonic in nature starting from the title word 'intellectual beauty' to the creation of an enigmatic 'Spiritual Beauty' that resembles Plato's 'abstract objects.'

Though the poem does not address to any God or deity, the poem is inherently religious in nature. Starting from the title word 'hymn', the poem has a plenty of elements that are prayers in nature. The poem offers unconditional praises to the 'unseen Power', vows to follow its path and asks for its support, and these are necessarily religious in nature. However, it would be misinterpretation of the poem if it is considered as a religious poem. The mysterious power represents hope for a better future that would be free from slavery and other ills that is seen in most of his poems. In this context, the observation made by Mary Shelley in the Preface to the First Collected Edition, 1839, is apt. What she said about Shelley defines this poem and most other works of Shelley. She said:

To defecate life of its misery and its evil was the ruling passion of his soul; he dedicated to it every power of his mind, every pulsation of his heart. He looked on political freedom as the direct agent to effect the happiness of mankind; and thus any new-sprung hope of liberty inspired a joy and an exultation more intense and wild than he could have felt for any personal advantage.

Check Your Progress:

1. How does Shelley use contrasting imageries for the Spirit and human? Do you think Shelley has used such contrasting imageries to show human limitations?
2. Write a note on the title of the poem.

3. Do you think the poem is platonic in nature? Illustrate your answer.
4. Through the abstract object as described in the poem, do you think Shelley was searching for a religious substitution?
5. Comment on the structure of the poem.
6. Shelley's poems are often a reflection on the conditions of human society. Elucidate.

5.7 Summing up

In our discussion, it has been made clear that Shelley was an astute atheist but he believed in Plato's concept of the existence of abstract objects and this is explicated in this poem as 'Intellectual Beauty'. The term 'Intellectual Beauty' however has not been mentioned once in the seven-stanza poem, rather, the abstract idea has been addressed as 'unseen Power' and 'Spiritual Beauty'. This 'unseen Power' has been rendered qualities such as the one who has 'inconstant wing' mutability' having 'shadow' having different 'forms' that can emancipate humanity from the chains of slavery and bring peace and harmony as the day brings once the noon is over or autumn after summer. Thus, Shelley deifies the 'unseen Power' and recalls his childhood days when he spent his childhood in vain in search of supernatural entities. He found the real purpose of his life when he was visited by 'Intellectual Beauty' whose shadow exalted him so much so that he 'shriek'd and clasped in ecstasy' and vowed to dedicate all his powers to the shadow. The childhood of the poet is in recollection here and in the present, the poet believes that he is in the autumn of his life, he prays the Spirit to be upon him in his 'onward life supply' so that he can be calm that he desires.

The central idea of the poem is to create a non-theistic and rational 'Power' to designate the force that animates nature and ensures its continuance. Through the creation of such a power, Shelley deviates from the contemporary social belief system as well as the evils inherent in it and resorts to his own notion of divinity which is based on nature.

5.8 References and Suggested Reading:

Casaliggi, Carmen, and Fermanis, Porscha. *Romanticism: A Literary and Cultural History*. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2016.

O'Neill, Michael. *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. United

Kingdom, OUP Oxford, 2013.

Barcus, James E (Ed). *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Critical Heritage*. United

Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2003.

Wordsworth, Jonathan. *The Penguin Book of Romantic Poetry*. United

Kingdom, Penguin Books Limited, 2005.

Unit 6

PB Shelley's 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty'

Supplementary Unit

Unit Structure :

6.1 Objectives

6.2 How to Read P B Shelley

6.3 Major Poems of P B Shelley

6.4 Probable Questions and suggested Answers

6.5 References and Suggested Reading

6.1 Objectives

After reading this unit, you will be able to

- Orient yourself to the poetry of P B Shelley
- Develop a perspective on the poetry of PB Shelley
- Answer questions related to the poem

6.2 How to Read PB Shelley:

PB Shelley lived during a period when tremendous changes were undergoing in every aspect of society—social, political, religious. While the necessary developments in the field of science and technology caused people to start questioning the 'divine order', the French Revolution showed the powers of the masses— a section which Shelley

wanted to champion in his poetry. The failure of the revolution symbolized through the unchecked rise of Napoleon Bonaparte caused Shelley to detest revolution that caused violence. The Peterloo Massacre on the other hand made him an advocate of non-violence. All these factors are reflected in his writings to a great extent. Shelley, as a progressive thinker, in his poems welcomed the changes that are for the betterment of human civilization. He was also greatly influenced by the writings of Tom Paine (*The Rights of Man*) and William Godwin (*An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*)—two American revolutionary writers that inspired him to advocate for human values over institutional religion or monarchical ideals.

All these factors are often reflected in the poems of Shelley. The massacre, the revolution and other upheavals of that time had caused great turmoil in society and he writes on these oppressions and injustices in his poems. However, his poems do not show an escapist tendency from such oppressions but often advocate for revolution and social change mixed with high optimism. Shelley's optimism comes from nature which is shown as a powerful entity. The poems deal with nature in such a way that the forces of nature are healing and restorative. As in the poem "Ode to the West Wind" Shelley shows that after a period of winter (gloom and death), nature reverses the order of things and brings resurrection with spiring. This way, the social change that Shelley advocates, takes place with and in nature. In this deep and mystic appreciation for nature, Shelley explores the conditions of human society through his poems. As a poet, Shelley believed that poets are not authors but they are 'the institutors of law and founder of Civil Society.' They are the 'unacknowledged legislators' of the world who can transform society. And Shelley is not just a poet but a moralist in his own right, who, in his poems, advocates human values over institutional or religious supremacy.

Shelley's poems thus mostly comprise of two things: nature and revolution. Shelley was inherently a romantic poet but his romanticism is blended with revolutionary ideals. In his essay, *A Defence of Poetry*

Shelley offers that poetry nurtures imagination which enables the poet to understand the human situation. The situation that Shelley imagines through his poems is the condition in which humanity evolves from the ‘dark slavery’ of society with the help of nature. His poems are thus a passionate search for personal love and social justice. The thematic concerns of most of his poems can be summed up as:

- Individual values over institutional values.
- Love for humanity.
- Humankind has the potential of getting better with the help of nature.

Any attempt to read Shelley must take place by considering these factors. In the next section, a few of Shelley’s poems have been discussed which will help you understand Shelley’s thematic concerns in a detailed manner.

6.3 Major Poems of PB Shelley:

Queen Mab (1813):

Queen Mab sets the revolutionary tone in Shelley’s poems. The revolutionary announcement was already made in his essay “The Necessity of Atheism” but in this poem, the corruption of man by the institutions has been delineated in detail. The poem is told in a fairy tale manner in which Queen Mab appears on earth and takes the soul of Ianthe to the edge of the universe. In this journey, Ianthe is shown visionsof the past, present and future. The past and present are filled with evils but in the future things change for the better and a utopian world is formed. The utopia is won by love and imagination. The poem shows that humankind can be perfected by moral means.

Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude (1816):

It is a poem about the journey of an uncorrupted youth into the deepest part of nature. David Daiches describes the poem as ‘a mixture of abstraction and passion, of mythopoeia and narcissism, of moralizing and emotional indulgence.’ This poem is about the life of a poet who ventures into the most obscure parts of nature in search of strange truth. In this journey, the poet finally lands into the very source of nature, the quest of which is a repetitive theme in the poems of Shelley.

Ozymandias (1818):

In this sonnet Shelley expresses his detest for the powerful kings. In the poem, a traveller meets the shattered statue of a powerful and arrogant king of whom nothing remains. Written in a competition with his friend Horace Smith, the poem explores the ravages of time and the fate of history. The poem in a precise manner throws light on the poets moralistic/humanistic approach.

The Revolt of Islam (1818):

Originally published as *Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City: A Vision of the Nineteenth Century*, *The Revolt of Islam* like *Queen Mab* attacks on monarchy and institutional religion as the main source of corruption. Shelley in the preface of the poem said that that the poem was written ‘in the view of kindling within the bosoms of my readers a virtuous enthusiasm for those doctrines of liberty and justice, that faith and hope in something good, which neither violence nor misrepresentation nor prejudice can ever totally extinguish among mankind.’ This poem describes the struggle of a brother and a sister against the oppression caused by the Ottoman empire.

The Masque of Anarchy (1819):

Written as a reaction to the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, in this poem Shelley raises voices against injustice in society. The poem starts with the poet lying in Italy but voices from England leads him to envision Anarchy as the main oppressor in society. Used as a metaphor, the describes Anarchy as the God, king and the law who is on a killing

spree. However, he appeals to the people to stage nonviolent protests against such violent forces.

To a Sky-lark (1820):

To a Sky-lark is Shelley's one of finest lyrics in which he explores the limitations of humankind in contrast to the bird which is more than a bird. The poem begins with the poet addressing the lark as "Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!/Bird thou never wert" and throughout the poem, the bird has been depicted as a kind of extra-terrestrial being that possesses knowledge that can free humankind from its woe. This is common to most of Shelley's poems in which he looks towards nature to find the remedy for human ailments. The Sky-lark and the Spirit (Hymn to Intellectual Beauty) are some of such manifestations of nature in the poems of Shelley that have been rendered potential to liberate humanity.

Ode to the West Wind (1820):

This is perhaps one of Shelley's best revolutionary poems in which he invokes the West Wind—the destroyer and the preserver, that bears the seed of revolution to carry the poet with it like the wind carries a dead leaf or a swift cloud. The poet prays the west wind to make him its 'lyre' and carry his words across the universe. The words used here are essentially the words of social change and revolution and hope—If winter comes, can spring be far behind? The poem was written at the same time as "Mask of Anarchy", and *Prometheus Unbound* and bears the same message of revolution and reform in society.

6.4 Probable Questions and Suggested Answers:

Question: The poem "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" is a philosophical musing of the poet. Discuss.

Answer: The poem "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" is a philosophical musing of PB Shelley in which he explicates his platonic ideals of

existence. Like Plato, Shelley believed that there are two realms— the physical realm and the spiritual realm or the one that is not perceivable through the senses but its existence can be epitomized through our imagination. For Shelley, this exists in spirit form in nature. In this poem, Shelley has put forward that idea through the abstraction of ‘Intellectual Beauty’ which is some ‘unseen Power’ but is the essence of nature whose shadow and light can bring great change into society.

Important to note that Shelley had inherited a great deal from the enlightenment philosophy, a movement that had shattered the orthodox religious superiority and put renewed faith in man and nature. And in the poem ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ Shelley engages to articulate an unseen power or divinity without making, what he perceives to be, the philosophical and linguistic errors of organised religion. He, on the other hand, proposes a new idea in the form of and through nature— Intellectual Beauty, which is different from any theistic spirit. Through this idea of ‘Intellectual Beauty’, Shelley reaffirms his atheistic belief. In the poem, the foundation of religious belief—heaven and ghosts, have been rejected and replaced with Spiritual Beauty—an idea that can free human society from all evils if worked together.

Shelley was writing at a time of great social change when the human value was deteriorating in front of institutional ideals. Shelley often held the monarchical system or the institutionalized religion as the root cause of all evil from which only nature can offer freedom. In his poems such as *Queen Mab*, a utopian vision is created which is reached through nature. That same idea is propagated in this poem. Though the poem does not critique the social evils, it does not deny their existence. It says that in the absence of the spirit the human society becomes a ‘vale of tears’ and from such a desolate condition only the spirit can free human society.

The poem offers the philosophical insight of the poet in two different layers. On one hand, the spirit helps the poet with his individual musings and frees him from his meaningless pursuit of ghosts and departed souls;

on the other hand, the poem shows that the spirit which is a representation of nature can free society from humanity works together.

Question: Shelley's poems are often a reflection of the conditions of human society. Elucidate

Answer: During his visit to Chamonix and Mont Blanc in July 1816, Shelley declared himself as 'atheist' 'lover of humanity' and 'democrat'. These inscriptions which were made on several occasions are actually at the heart of Shelley's poems. His poems advocate the supreme liberty of human society from the evils permeating in society. Evil, for Shelley, emanates from systems, whether civil, religious, scientific, or economic in nature, that are imposed upon man by reasoners without the scrutiny of the effects. This system enchains human society from which liberty can be achieved only through imagination. Important to note that Shelley was a strong advocate of social change but the contrary outcome of the French Revolution, the social system in England, institutional religious systems had him disillusioned and he charged them of enslaving humanity. In poems such as *Queen Mab* and *Prometheus Unbound*, he challenges this idea and envisions that humanity, if worked with nature, can be free from these chains. The same issue is also addressed in the poem 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty'.

In the poem, Shelley has contrasted the human condition with the Spirit of Beauty and states that human society lives in a 'vast vale of tears' which is 'vacant and desolate' and wrought with 'fear and dream and death and birth'. Attempts have been made by the sages or the poets to answer these questions regarding such human condition but none could answer the same. Shelley, here, refers back to his childhood habit of searching for ghosts and spirits. But all these quests and answers were just a futile attempt to better the human condition—the dark slavery in which humanity is trapped.

Shelley's abstraction of the enigmatic spirit, however, has answers to these questions that can better human society. He says that the Spirit

would 'free this world from dark slavery' and give whatever 'words cannot express.' This spirit has also caused him 'fear himself' and 'love all humankind'. The last line of the poem 'to fear himself, and love all human kind' makes a significant statement in the poem. The evils that were permeating humankind can only be freed through universal love and brotherhood which was devoid in the revolutions in that period. However, Shelley always abhorred violence and advocated human peace which is obvious in this poem.

Question: Trace the sources of the poem "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty".

Answer: Regarding the source of the poem, there are a number of debates among the scholars of PB Shelley. While it is often agreed upon that the poem is platonic in nature, no evidence suggests that Shelley was reading Plato when he wrote the poem. The experience described in the poem is essentially personal and not derived from Plato. But, it is also undeniable at the same time that the inspiration for the title word 'intellectual beauty' has been derived from various sources. The most important source of the poem can be traced back to Mary Shelley's reading of Spencer's "An Hymne of Heavenly Beauty". PB Shelley may also have read the poem before Mary Shelley as her reading list often included the previous readings of Shelley. It is very likely that Shelley has adopted the title from this poem just by changing the adjective 'heavenly' into 'intellectual'.

The term "Intellectual Beauty" appears only in the title while the rest of the poem addresses it in several enigmatic terms such as 'unseen Power' 'shadow' 'Spiritual Beauty' and through a chain of imageries, the term is described. For Shelley, this term 'intellectual beauty', however, may have had several sources. Shelley had read the novel *Adeline Mowbray, or the Mother and Daughter* (1804) written by Amelia Opie. In this novel, the term appears as "a passion founded in esteem, and the admiration of intellectual beauty, could not . . . subsist." In 1812, Shelley had ordered the book *On the Origin and Progress of Language* in

which the term 'intellectual beauty' appears three times. Other than these the term also appears in several other books in the reading list of Shelley that include Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication to the Rights of Woman*; William Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The definition of the term is obscure but Shelley uses it as a form of questing than a mere concept. E.R. Wasserman defined the term as 'divinity of mind only'.

Question: Discuss how Shelley explores human limitations in the poem.

Answer: PB Shelley's poems often go beyond the human sphere in presenting nature or elements of nature in a supernatural manner. His poems such as 'To a Sky-lark' 'Mont-Blanc' and 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' portray objects that are more spiritual in nature than ordinary. In 'To a Sky-lark' the lark is a bird with special abilities than an ordinary bird. The poet addresses the bird as 'blithe spirit'. The same goes for 'Mont-Blanc' in which the mountain has been described as a powerful and sublime force. In 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' however, he does not portray an ordinary object as supernatural but he creates a new idea essentially of nature but not necessarily. In all these poems, Shelley contrasts the human sphere with the sphere of the spirits/lark/mountain and shows the limitations of human society. In these poems, the powers attributed to these objects are infinite. The more infinite the forces appear; the more finite seems its perceiver.

In the opening stanza of the 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', the spirit is described as 'unseen Power' that visits the human sphere in an unseen manner but it visits in an inconstant manner. This inconsistency helps the poet to contrast human limitations. In the second stanza, the poet shows that the earth is a 'vale of tears' which is vacant and desolate filled with gloom. Humanity is filled with questions but devoid of answers. To show the limitations the poet refers back to his search for ghosts and spirits but he found none. He also refers to the questions to

certain inevitabilities such as why there is scope for both love and hate, despondency and hope on earth. Not only he but ‘no voice from some sublime world’ or sages or poets could answer the questions. Devoid of answers, humans have vainly used the names of ‘Demon, Ghost, and Heaven’ as images that have the answers. In contrary to this, like the Sky-lark, the Spirit of Beauty is omniscient and all-powerful that is free from the woes of humanity and can liberate humans from its dark slavery.

However, if the abstract object or ‘Sprit of Beauty’ is looked closely, it may appear that it is the mental faculty of a human mind that if freed from fear and made to ‘love all human kind’ can free itself from the ‘dark slavery’.

Question: Write a note on Shelley’s use of apostrophe in the poem ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’.

Answer: The poem “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” is written in the form of an invocation in which the poet invokes the abstract idea called ‘Intellectual Beauty’ that has the potential of liberating humanity from its slavery. However, this Spirit which once appeared in the life of the poet is now absent which needs to be invoked. In this invocation, the use of apostrophe helps the poet in multiple ways. The poem is a deification of the intellectual beauty and in the process, the use of apostrophe and abstraction becomes very important through which the poet calls for yet resists the poet’s identity with intellectual beauty. The use of apostrophe helps the poet to suggest immediacy of the Spirit as well as its distance from the poet/human sphere. The enigmatic object that once guided the poet when he was a child is now being addressed again as it is present everywhere: ‘I vow’d that I would dedicate my powers/To thee and thine: have I not kept the vow?’ The use of words such as ‘thee’ and ‘thine’ suggests immediacy and omnipresence of the abstract idea, the absence of it is also felt by the poet. This absence is rendered through multiple analogies. The entire poem proceeds within the same rhythm: ‘Beauty’ is invoked, only to have apostrophe disintegrate in an

elaboration of its effects in the world and on the poet's life, which stirs the poet to a renewed invocation as if absence could be inverted into presence by the simple intensity of desire.

The use of apostrophe also helps the poet in differentiating the human sphere with the Spirit's which creates a poetic demand to describe the Spirit. As the poem begins to explain the intellectual beauty in the human sphere, the poet uses devotional and enigmatic imageries such as 'unseen Power', 'Spirit of Beauty' etc., to distance its existence from the human sphere. The invocation or the hymn continues the abstraction of the beauty through ironically distancing analogies to create an impression of infinite force of the beauty.

Another important aspect of the poem is to deify (in a non-religious manner) the Spirit and sing praises for it. Apostrophe which is a way of invoking someone/something which is absent but addressed as if it is present helps in the poet's invocation of the Spirit.

Question: Comment on the religious nature of the poem. Would it be appropriate to call the poem religious?

Answer: The 'Hymn' announces the religious character of the poem which incorporates a number of traditional elements of prayer. The poem is a prayer offered to a mysterious Power to whom the poet asks for help, confesses his childhood errors (his futile quest for ghosts and spirits) and renewal of his childhood vow of following the spirit and all these are but inherently religious in nature. The poem has also borrowed terms and concepts from religious and ethical traditions. The poem has also made use of a range of biblical words mixing them with humanism.

Throughout the poem, Shelley has made use of multiple theological imageries to advance his reverence for the Spirit starting with the 'vale of tears' that refers to the Vulgate version of Psalm 84:5-6 and means that these are temporary pains of the world against the eternal bliss of heaven. While 'name of God and Ghosts, and Heaven' on the other

hand is suggestive of the concept of Trinity, 'Love, Hope, and Self-esteem,' refer back to the Theological virtues: Faith, Hope, and Charity. Shelley has replaced 'faith' with 'Self-esteem' to subjectivize the notion of Spiritual Beauty as well as to demarcate between traditional religious concepts and his understanding of abstract Beauty.

The use of such biblical references with Shelley's own addition furthers Shelley's atheistic belief. However, in his additions, Shelley focuses more on the humanistic and individualistic values than to add theistic meaning to his description of the Spirit. That is why biblical term such as 'faith' is replaced with 'Self-esteem' for having self-esteem. Thus, though the poem is religious in nature with several inclusions of biblical references, the poem is not inherently religious but secular.

Question: Write a short note on the gothic elements in the poem.

Answer: The poem 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' is not a gothic poem in nature but it does have gothic elements. David Punter called the poem 'litany of Gothic themes and images.' The poem was written in the same journey in which Mary Shelley had produced *Frankenstein* and Lord Byron *Manfred*, two seminal gothic literature. During their journey, they have had competitions such as horror storytelling which might have influenced Shelley as well while writing the poem.

The poem also does not evoke typical gothic horror and suspense in the course of the poem but it most certainly has gothic elements. In the poem, Shelley goes back to his childhood and recalls the days when 'he sought for ghosts' and wandered 'through many a listening chamber, cave, and ruin' with fearful steps to pursue and talk to the 'departed dead'. These images: ghosts, caves, and ruins, departed dead, etc., are undoubtedly gothic in nature.

However, the elements of gothic do not take over the grandeur of Spirit and the poet hints at the power and beauty of Spirit that it can free the world from such a gothic atmosphere and free humans from its grasp.

Question: Write a note on the title of the poem.

Answer: The title of the poem is too complicated to define in short. Though throughout the poem Shelley has tried to describe what ‘intellectual beauty’ is, but in the course of the poem, it becomes more and more enigmatic. However, tracing the sources of the poem would help in understanding the title to a certain extent. And it is often believed by scholars of Shelley that Spenser’s ‘An Hymne of Heavenly Beauty’ is the preliminary source of the title. However, Spenser’s title suggests that ‘beauty’ is driven from heaven. But Shelley did not believe in heaven and thus rephrased the word ‘heavenly’ with ‘intellectual’. The “Intellectual Beauty” of the poem thus does not refer to the beauty of the mind or of the working intellect, but rather to the intellectual idea of beauty, abstracted in this poem to the “Spirit of Beauty,” whose shadow comes and goes over human hearts.

However, there are other sources as well for the title word ‘intellectual beauty’ taken from texts which were in Shelley’s reading list. Shelley had read the novel *Adeline Mowbray, or the Mother and Daughter* (1804) written by Amelia Opie. In this novel, the term appears as “a passion founded in esteem, and the admiration of intellectual beauty, could not . . . subsist.” In 1812, Shelley had ordered the book *On the Origin and Progress of Language* in which the term ‘intellectual beauty’ appears three times. Other than these the term also appears in several other books in the reading list of Shelley that include Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication to the Rights of Woman*; William Godwin’s *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. However, in all the texts, the term appears more like something to do with the mental faculty of the perceiver of beauty. E.R. Wasserman defined the term as ‘divinity of mind only’ that is beauty perceived with one own mental and their ability to perceive external beauty may be regarded as ‘intellectual beauty’.

Interestingly, throughout the poem, the term ‘intellectual beauty’ does not appear a single time other than in the title. Throughout the poem, as in a hymn, the term has been addressed using several other terms such as ‘unseen Power’ and ‘Spirit of Beauty’. However, through all such descriptions, Shelley tried to convey the idea that beauty is more an abstract idea than a concrete one.

Question: Comment on the use of simile and alliteration in the poem.

Answer: The abstraction of the intellectual beauty which has no concrete precedence is a problematic idea. To simplify the picturization of intellectual beauty which is also simply addressed as Spirit, Shelley has made use of a diverse range of similes and metaphors to throw light on the nature of the abstract idea. In the first stanza of the Hymn Shelley makes a clear distinction between the ‘unseen Power’ and its immanent presence (‘awful shadow’) in the ‘various world’, the adjective and subsequent similes such as ‘summer winds’ and ‘moonbeams’ suggest that while the ‘unseen Power’ itself is universal and unchanging, it has ‘various’ manifestations in natural phenomena. Here, in the stanza, Shelley has made use of a number of similes to describe the nature of the Spirit. The similes used are- ‘hues and harmonies of the evening’ ‘clouds’ ‘memories of music’ and these similes suggest the transience of the Spirit as well as the variety inherent in it.

The nature of simile in the poem, however, changes as the poem progresses and the description of the Spirit matures. To suggest the enigmatic quality of the Spirit, Shelley uses imageries such as ‘mist o’er mountains’ ‘moonlight on a midnight stream’ which are deeper in nature and bear sublime feelings. These are not just one-word imageries but descriptive in nature. Such descriptive imageries in the form of similes are used throughout the poem to describe the mysterious nature of the Spirit.

Apart from simile, the poem also uses alliteration to add musicality to the hymn and renders religiosity of the Spirit. Some of the alliterations used in the poem are: ‘human heart...hues and harmonies...memory of

music’, ‘Hopes of high...departed dead...with which...winds are wooing...birds and blossoming’. Rhythm is an important part of hymns and Shelley has perfectly made use of a diverse range of alliterations to render rhythm and musicality to the hymn.

6.5 Suggested Readings:

Bloom, Harold. *Shelley's Mythmaking*. United States, Yale University Press, 1959.

Curran, Stuart. *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*. The United Kingdom, Oxford University Press, 1990.

Duffy, Cian. *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime*. Kiribati, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Mulhallen, Jacqueline. *Percy Bysshe Shelley: Poet and Revolutionary*. The United Kingdom, Pluto Press, 2015.

Owen, Anthony., et al. *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. The United Kingdom, OUP Oxford, 2013.

Schulze, Earl J.. *Shelley's Theory of Poetry; A Reappraisal*. Germany, De Gruyter, 1966.

Scrivener, Michael Henry. *Radical Shelley: The Philosophical Anarchism and Utopian Thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. United States, Princeton University Press, 2014.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Selected Poems and Prose*. Edited by Cian Duffy, Jack Donovan, United Kingdom, Penguin Books Limited, 2017.

The following is a list of articles/journals/weblinks that the students may find helpful:

1. Shelley's theories theory of evil:

<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=7525&context=etd>

2. Percy Bysshe Shelley as a revolutionary poet:

<https://www.journalcra.com/article/percy-bysshe-shelley-revolutionary-poet>

3. Knapp, John. "The Spirit of Classical Hymn in Shelley's 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty.'" *Style*, vol. 33, no. 1, 1999, pp. 43–66. *JSTOR*.

www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.33.1.43. Accessed 29 Aug. 2021.

4. Isomaki, Richard. "Interpretation and Value in 'Mont Blanc' and 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty.'" *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1991, pp. 57–69. *JSTOR*.

www.jstor.org/stable/25600880. Accessed 29 Aug. 2021.

5. Nitchie, Elizabeth. "Shelley's 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty.'" *PMLA*, vol. 63, no. 2, 1948, pp. 752–753. *JSTOR*.

www.jstor.org/stable/459445 . Accessed 29 Aug. 2021.

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www.jstor.org/stable/459068 Accessed 29 Aug. 2021.

7. Hall, Spencer. "Power and the Poet: Religious Mythmaking in Shelley's 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty.'" *Keats-Shelley Journal*, vol. 32, 1983, pp. 123–149. *JSTOR*,

www.jstor.org/stable/30210198 Accessed 29 Aug. 2021.

Unit 7

John Keats: “Ode on Melancholy”, “Ode to Autumn”

Unit Structure :

- 7.1 Objectives
- 7.2 Introduction
- 7.3 John Keats: His life
- 7.4 Keats’s Poetic Career
- 7.5 John Keats as Poet
- 7.6 “Ode on Melancholy”
 - 7.6.1 Context of the Poem
 - 7.6.2 Reading the Poem
- 7.7 “Ode to Autumn”
 - 7.7.1 Context of the Poem
 - 7.7.2 Reading the Poem
- 7.8 Summing up
- 7.9 Reference and Suggested Reading

7.1 Objectives:

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- Learn about the life of the poet
- obtain a general idea of the works of John Keats
- situate Keats in the context of the British Romantic Movement and assess his contributions
- Read “Ode on Melancholy” and “Ode to Autumn” in terms of the themes and ideas.
- Critically appreciate the poems under discussion with particular attention to language and style.

7.2 Introduction:

The notion of literature as self-expression is a basic tenet of Romanticism. From the later eighteenth century the importance of poet as creator endowed with the power of imagination gradually came to be established, later codified in Coleridge's critical discourse and shared by the Romantics. Literature, especially poetic literature, effected a shift from dependence on the act of imitation of preexisting forms to one of expression of self. It does not mean that the Romantics did not use existing forms or genres of poetry, but the thrust is more expressive than mere technical craftsmanship. Keats was the last major Romantic poet and one widely anthologized and taught language departments in various academies of higher education across the globe till date. In this unit, we will discuss Keats as a poet focusing on his two poems, 'Ode to Melancholy' and ; Ode to Autumn'. These two poems, along with few others that constitute his "great odes" are a proud harvest of his mature years, though he lived not much longer after that. As you will learn, it will not suffice to read Keats not as a Romantic poet like other major preceding Romantics such as Wordsworth and Coleridge. It is important to see that Keats has a distinctive voice, a style that he evolved through painstaking, self-critical efforts throughout his poetic trajectory.

The 'great odes': Also known as '1819 odes', the group includes 'Ode on Melncholy', 'Ode to Autumn', 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'Ode to a Nightingale', 'Ode to Psyche', and 'Ode on Indolence'. An Ode , according to Glossary, is a "long lyric poem that is serious in subject and treatment, elevated in style, and elaborate in its stanzaic structure.

John Keats: His life

Keats had a brief life-span: born in 1795, he breathed his last on 23 February, 1821 due to tuberculosis. A twenty six year old poet struggling to survive amid exigencies of financial trouble and tragic family incidents with such untimely death also buried immense potential as a poet. Still harvest of this short life is no less amazing, and they sustained the poet's afterlife amid lovers of literature down the ages.

Son of Thomas Keats and Frances Jennings, Keats had a humble origin and suffered financial hardship throughout his life. Unlike other romantic predecessors of his time from Wordsworth to Byron or his contemporary Shelley, Keats could not enjoy material privilege or secure literary patronage. Thomas Keats, a stableman at livery stable in London, died a by falling from a horse a couple of years after marriage with Frances. Keats's mother remarried immediately after, leaving her children to the care of their maternal grandmother. Keats was sent to Clerk's school where he learnt science and other practical subjects besides Latin and French. While at school, he was known to be 'noisy' and 'high-spirited' (878, Norton Anthology). At Clerke's school, he had as his mentor Charles Cowden Clerke, son of the school's headmaster. Cowden opened him up to reading, music, and theatre. From Clarke's later account, as mentioned in Douglas Bush's book *John Keats*, we know about his reading as a boy which included William Robertson's *History of America*, Andrew Tooke's old *Pantheon*, John Lempriere's *Classical Dictionary*, Joseph Spenser's *Polymetis*, John Bonnycastle's *Introduction to Astronomy* etc. (20). Keats's mother, after years of separation and now ill, returned to her family before she died of Tuberculosis. Keats's grandmother chose one J. N. Sandell as the guardian of the orphaned children. At the behest of Mr. Randell, Keats left school in 1811 and was apprenticed to the apothecary Thomas Hammond with whom he stayed three years amid resentment and boredom. Weekly visits with Clarke to Enfield were a breath of fresh air in this claustrophobic time. In 1815, Keats joined Guy's Hospital of London as a student. Though he was increasingly distracted by the poetic impulse, he completed his study of medicine. Meanwhile, Keats and Clarke subscribed to Leigh Hunt's paper *The Examiner*. Leigh Hunt, as you know, was a prolific writer of the time, and a radical thinker. Keats eventually met Hunt and their friendship remained immensely fruitful (though Keats later struggled to rid himself of the influence of Hunt). But it is primarily his friendship with Hunt that propelled Keats to abandon medicine in order to pursue poetry. Hunt introduced the poet to William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, P. B. Shelley while Keats also gained from his contact with John Hamilton Reynold, Charles Wentworth Dilke, Charles Brown and so on.

Keats saw trials and tribulations in his personal life. Orphaned, and subjected to the care of an indifferent guardian, he had to shoulder familial responsibilities at a time when money was scarce. His brother George and his bride immigrated to America and fell into financial

distress. Keats had to make money by resorting to journalism and writing plays. He also faced deaths: his mother and also his brother died of Tuberculosis. The poet himself began to suffer from continuous cold. It is conjectured that he had a premonition of his death which probably intensified his poetic engagements. After his death, he was buried in a protestant cemetery in Rome, and there is evidence in his writing of his contracting the ominous disease of tuberculosis. As already mentioned, Keats died at the age of 26, on 23 February, 1821 in a Protestant Cemetary in Rome. In accordance with his last wishes he was buried under an unnamed tombstone containing only these words: ‘Here lies one whose name was writ in water.’

Stop to Consider:

- Keats was an extraordinary person in that to write poetry was his vocation and suffered financial constraints. His study of medicine did not prompt him to take up profession in that line and he earned his living by writing. To have a better view of his student life and his intense poetic affairs, you may read John Keats by Douglas Bush, especially the second chapter. Bush maintains that Keats Medical work at Guy’s Hospital in London was presumably good and efficient, but “unlike his fellow students, he was increasingly distracted by the seductive and imperative claims of poetry.” (27)
- Biography of writers is discredited by new criticism as a decisive instrument to study literature. However, to figure out the range of meanings evoked by poetry, and biography of the poet can be usefully studied in order to understand his/her peculiar thought and sensibility. The same applies to Keats. To better understand Keats’s intimate feelings and thoughts as a person, you may read his letters.

7.4 Keats’s Poetic Career:

Keats’s life was brief, and his poetic career even briefer. He started writing when he was eighteen years of age, when he resorted to conventional versification. Probably the first poem, composed in 1814 is ‘Imitation of Spenser’, set in four Spenserian stanza, speaks of Spenser’s influence but lacks in any fresh and moving idiom. Other poems written in that year include the sonnet ‘On Peace’, ‘To Lord Byron’, and ‘As from the Darkening Gloom’ that mourns the death of his mother. ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’ , the first poem written in 1816

that registers Keats's distinctive poetic voice, was a fervid response to a shared reading with Clarke of a few passages from Chapman's translation of Homer. The poem displays Keats maturity in form, style and imagery. Keats's first Volume of verse *Poems*, published in 1817, speaks of the pervasive influence of Spenser as in poems like 'Sleep and Beauty' and 'I Stood Tip-toe Upon a Little Hill'.

In 1817 he started composing *Endymion*, a poem of more than 4000 lines. As for P. B. Shelley, he had a poetic career of 10 years, while Keats wrote all his poems in less than five years, and hence his engagement with poetry can be said to be more intense. Unlike Shelley, however, Keats does not articulate any philosophical or political conviction or reformist zeal; all he wanted to be is a poet. As one historian of literature says, he "lived for poetry and for nothing else." (416-17, History, Franco) However, *Endymion*, as assessed by David Daiches, was where the abundant imagery and setting overpowers the storyline () where the poet could hardly display the maturity of his later years. But Keats is a remarkable poet also in the sense that his development was rapid, and he could manage to attain his mature style at an extraordinary pace. Daiches opines that events of death and an inkling of his own imminent misfortune gave him a sense of urgency. () To explore such elements of his speculations, you can have a look at his famous Letters. It is important to note here that Keats revised *Endymion* in 1820. A man of acute critical judgment, the poet was not happy with *Endymion* and saw it basically as an experiment, not an achievement.

Late in 1818, Keats planned to write an epic poem *Hyperion* on the model of Milton's *Paradise lost*. He abandoned the undertaking half-way through in April, 1819. In the same year he reworked the same material for the renewed title *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, modeled now on *The Divine Comedy*. But Keats abandoned the attempt all the same. One reason why he did so was his urge to acquire an independent idiom and style and his occupation with fresh poetic sensation.

Keats wrote long narrative poems with often mythical, classical or medieval background, such as *Lamia*, *Isabella*, *The Eve of St Agnes*, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. They explore relationship of emotions to reality, notions of beauty, love and its impermanence, and so on. As for the 'odes', they are now regarded as Keats's best poems. For more on the odes, you may refer to the relevant section in the supplementary unit after this unit.

7.5 John Keats as a Poet:

Keats was the last born of British Romantic poets. has received continuing popularity down the ages, even surpassing poets like Shelley. Many a times in varied references to romanticism in literary discourses, the name of Keats is often used synonymously with the movement itself. However antiquated that literary movement has appeared to a modern reader, Keats has not yet passed into the realm of such antiquarian interest but remained as a living testimony of the power of poetry. The poetic power represented by that name of the poet has sometimes surpassed his Romantic predecessors. As a poet, Keats is known for his originality, for the sensuous quality of his poetry, and for the deeper and varied thought and feeling that he was capable to articulate through the sensuous veneer of his poetic experience. Keats was a man of critical consciousness, and he was even critically self-conscious. His distinctive poetic voice is a known fact today, but his striving for individuality can be gauged from facts of his life, as any good biography would tell you. As you will get to know, Keats befriended the influential Leigh Hunt, but later he moved away from Hunt to keep himself from the latter's influence. He wrote *Hyperion* in imitation of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but dropped the undertaking halfway through, sensing that he was capable to imitate the great 17th century poet while his own individuality would be at stake.

Nevertheless, a few words about influence of predecessors and contemporaries on the poet under discussion would be in order Spenser was a great inspiration for Keats responsible for kindling his fascination for the Elizabethan poetry.. Keats appreciates in Spenser's sense of beauty, his splendid imagination, his melody and felicitous phrasing. Spenser was not merely an inspiration but a model that he followed and imitated till as late as 1819. (John Keats as Critic 452) Keats was similarly filled with praises for Shakespeare whom he alludes frequently in his letters. One reason behind his appreciation of Shakespeare is the bard's 'negative capability', a phrase coined by Keats himself to define a poet and his/ her vocation. Milton's influence is comparatively less profound, and towards the end of his career Keats veered away from the epic poet. Nevertheless, Milton's sublimity and his use of sensuous language elicited Keats' appreciative response. Among his contemporaries, Wordsworth won his praises.

Keats did not write any treatise on poetry but expressed his views on the poet, imagination, sensation and notion of beauty in scattered comments across his letters and poems. It is proven, after the publication of the letters, that Keats has a deeply speculative mind and developed something of a theory for his own poetic practice. An important critical concept evolved by the poet and discussed extensively among critics/scholars is ‘negative capability’ which argues primarily that the path of a poet is not that of a practical person guided by Reason. If reason was a cherished ideal in neo-classical period, it is now sharply questioned as a custodian of poetry. Keats upheld the principle of sensation, instead. But sensation in Keats does not necessarily lead to any moral vision or set agenda for social reform but ushers us, instead, into a perception of beauty through the stimulation of imagination. Imagination, as you know is a basic tenet among the Romantics. Keats believed that imagination is not veering away from truth but is synonymous with it. Imagination and beauty is not just an instrument to in the realization of some ulterior motive. Keats worked out an equation of imagination, beauty, and truth in this way: “What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth...”(Irving H. White 456) Does , then, Keats overlook issues of complexities, difficulties and problems of human experience in favour of some lofty aesthetic vision? It may be a point to ponder, I would say. However, let us not forget that Keats was quite aware of the dark aspects of life, and feverishly so. If you look at his poems, examples would abound to testify to such concerns. But his poetic vision too negotiates such dark aspects of human experience. In a letter he wrote to Reynolds, Keats compares human life to a mansion of many chambers. (incomplete)

7.6 Ode on Melancholy

7.6.1 Context of “Ode on Melancholy”:

Given the existing scholarly and critical work on the poet, “Ode on Melancholy” does not have any specific context or occasions that impelled the poet to compose it. However, we can trace its peculiar thought and temperament to some of the lived experiences of Keats’s life. We shall hint at them at relevant place in the supplementary unit.

7.6.2 Reading “Ode on Melancholy”

The first two stanzas can be seen as part of a single utterance that sets forth a set of prohibitions as well as propulsions with the force of an assertion. In the third stanza the direct address to the auditor is missing and an objective, speculative utterance takes its place. There is also a shift in the third stanza because it's purely speculative disposition is stripped of a degree of vehemence that animates the previous stanzas, geared to the auditor to do or not to do something.

(i)Section I:

The poem starts with an urgent prohibition: “No,no! go not to Lethe”. In fact, the speaker starts with vehemence and dissuades the purported auditor from resorting to a set of actions, and hence, the force of the utterance here is essentially negative. Through vehement negation of the acts, we are made aware of the basic conflict that the poem seeks to depict and resolve. It is the commitment of suicide that issues forth from a death-wish and gropes for a number of means. As the title itself suggests, the speaker deals with melancholy which goes to the verge of despair and death. Although death as such does not find mention, various faces of death are in place- forgetfulness, drowsiness, a state of being drowned, darkness or sleep. The list of poisonous vines and berries might seem redundant when they all signify death. But through them, the speaker suggests certain actions- twisting (Wolf-bane which requires some force because it is tight-rooted), touching (i.e. being kissed by nightshade), praying (implied in the phrase ‘rosary of yew-berries), the sting of ‘beetle or ‘Death-moth’. What constructs the state of melancholy are the ‘pale forehead’, ‘mournful psyche’, ‘sorrow’s mystery’, ‘wakeful anguish’. Images of grapes and vines such as wolf’s bane are connected to wine, and the total effect of all this is a kind of drowsiness that engulfs the speaker too rapidly, something which is consonant with bathing in the river Lethe:

For shade to shade will come too drowsily,

And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.

This is where the effect of being drowned is identified with a state of drowsiness, which is how the mythological river of Lethe combines with poisonous wine of ‘wolf’s bane’. Invocation of the

mythological figures resonates with the mournful temper of the first section. Proserpine carries the association of the pang of separation, as she is made to stay six months with her kidnapper lover Hades and another six months with her bereaved mother Demeter. The “mournful Psyche” evokes that episode in the Greek myth where Psyche is prohibited from having a glimpse of her lover Cupid at night even as she could share marital joy with him. Both Proserpine and Psyche are symbols of beauty, yet suggestive of the emotional state evoked by ‘melancholy’. This last two lines of the first section provides an explanation for the dissuasion hitherto offered by the speaker.

(ii)Section II:

In contrast to the dissuasion of the first section, the second section is a persuasion for excess. Before such exhortation, the context is bought forth that requires such vehement celebration of positive acts. The obvious context is the sudden onslaught of melancholy. Keats, however, relishes in concretization of abstraction whose result in fact translates melancholy into an intuitively perceptible image of beauty. In other words, the image and effect of melancholy , in Keats’s poetic vision, immediately translates into an image of beauty:

“But when the melancholy fit shall fall
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all
And hides the green hill in an April shroud”

Sudden grip of melancholy finds its metaphor in the sudden April shower that originates from a ‘weeping cloud’, and whose effect is not negation of life but its re-affirmation, as suggested through rains refreshing the ‘droop-headed flowers’. ‘Hiding the green hill in an April shroud’ speaks of the heaviness of rain, a sudden downpour which pleasantly surprises us. The next image is that of a morning rose. The morning rose, after the rains presumably the previous day, is a serene, lovely sight. Similarly, rainbow in a ‘salt sand wave’ is not just a feast to the eye but constitutes a sensuously rich experience by combining visual, tactile and gustatory image. The next image offered is that of flowers: ‘globed peonies’. Look at how it suggests the flowers being cupped softly by the hands. Thus, the varied sensuous world itself provides a way out of melancholy that propelled the speaker to embrace death. The concluding suggestion offered in this section relates to the human world. The Speaker’s mistress ‘shows’ ‘some rich anger’, suggesting a familiar, everyday domestic world. Yet, it is neither

mundane, nor distressful because the anger is only artificial, and elicits a response more conducive to the mistress.

The retaliation to the raving mistress's anger by feeding 'deep, deep upon her peerless eyes' constitutes an image of love in the familiar arena of domesticity. Keats here dramatizes a moment from the all-too-familiar world of relationship to provide a counterpoint to the airy, drowsy melancholy that pervades in the first section.

(iii)Section III:

It is in this concluding section that Keat's vision attains a comprehensiveness and complexity. From the familiar image of love reflected through pacifying the angry mistress by watching her with admiring eyes, we arrive at a more thoughtful statement:

"She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die"

It is a kind of synthesis of ideas we are exposed to till now through contrary images of death and jubilation. For one thing, it is also a distillation of ideas we are exposed to through , for instance, the image of sudden April shower. The April shower is posited as a metaphor of melancholy, but also connotes beauty and transience. The association of melancholy with beauty was , however, not the speaker's conscious intent but strikes us intuitively, thanks to linguistic articulation of the image of the rain. Now, this intuitive link is posited as a truth. We have all abstractions personified: Beauty, Joy, Delight, Pleasure, Melancholy. Once personified, the abstractions are fit to be presented in concrete terms. Thus, we are heading for definitions here. 'Beauty that must die' suggesting that there is no pure timeless beauty uncontaminated by a tinge of melancholy inherent in its transience. It also suggests the death of Psyche when she violates prohibition, and attains an immortal divine existence. Similarly, Joy is tied to the pang of separation, reminiscent of Proserpine's fate.

On the other hand, the suggestion of overabundance of sensory experience contained in the second section is undercut by an awareness of the fatal consequence of sensory gratification:

"...Aching pleasure nigh

Turning to poison while the bee-mouth seeps"

Pleasure is also not an eternal state, because pleasure gives in to pain after the moment of gratification. Compare the word 'bee-mouth' to 'death-moth'. What dies is the moment of pleasure, and this gives rise to unfulfilment.

The next spacial image of the temple and shrine reiterates the fact of coexistence of the contrary states of Melancholy and Delight, but Keats does not endorse a pious asceticism. But his realization of how unavoidable contraries constitute human condition can be shared by one “whose strenuous tongue/Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine”. The word ‘burst’ intensifies the sensuousness as well as the joy implicit in the very act of eating, even though the fruit is allegorical (‘Joy’s grape’). The last two lines reveal an irony because realization of the contraries in the world of mind only subjects one to the power of Melancholy, while the overt intent of the speaker’s persuasive utterance is to provide a way out of it.

7.7 “Ode to Autumn”

7.7.1 Context of the poem

The timing of the poem is significant in that it might offer us clues to the preoccupations articulated in the poem. As I have already said, Keats left unfinished the poem *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, sensing that he was now propelled by fresh sensations. It is around this time that he composed the ode. The *Fall of Hyperion* is about the “downfall of old gods and the rise of new gods who are marked by their strength and beauty” (Carter: Routedledge History, 214). In *To Autumn* we have a vision of transformations of life and death in terms of transformations of seasons.

7.7.2 Reading the Poem

“Ode to Autumn” is a poem that attains rare perfection in terms of structure , form and execution of ideas or feeling. It is divided into three stanzas of eleven lines each, and they explore three different aspects of the season of autumn. (Of course we will illustrate the obvious, ‘denotative’ meaning of the term, but let me tell you- ‘autumn’ can as well be seen as a metaphor for something else, but of that, later.) “To Autumn” is certainly about a season, but it is not just an eulogy of that season. Through this poetic meditation of autumn, Keats articulates a set of feelings that also runs through other odes such as “Ode on

Melancholy”, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, “Ode to a Nightingale”. What ‘happens’ in “To Autumn”, then?

Autumn is directly addressed with wonder and admiration: mark the note of exclamation in the beginning line-

Season of mist and mellow fruitfulness!

Look at the pattern of stress and alliteration of s, m, f and the way they create a rhythm. The recurring sounds are employed to emulate the feel of a new season that has dawned. Conspiracy concocted with the sun carries a tinge of pleasant surprise, a comic irony. Ordering of words in the lines fulfils the needs of stress pattern and rhyme (for instance, the third line ends with the word ‘bless’ to rhyme with the corresponding term in the first line, ‘fruitfulness’. The rhyming words here, as you can see, also carry a semantic link: the result of ‘blessing’ can be instantly guessed at with a prompt, retrospective look at the import of ‘blissfulness’) but word order also creates a dynamic perspective to visualize the images offered. Look at the line-

With fruit the vines that round the thatched eaves run.

We don’t have a whole composite image which can be grasped all at once. The speaker orders the smaller images into a definite sequence: the loads of apples weigh heavy, the branches of apple trees bow down with the load of opulent fruits. A bemused curiosity built up in the first image is satisfied with a complete picture that answers this curiosity. This sequential ordering of images allows a reader a mental movement across scenes that register a state of abundance. Another important feature of Keats, his ability for creating phrases that allows speculation and invite imagination. Consider the phrase ‘the moss’d cottage trees’. It suggests many a thing: an imagined state of living amid pristine nature, an aura of nature’s ‘ancientness’, a serene stillness, absence of humans. the state of fruition is not merely emphasized here but posited as a consequence of a set of actions which defines the ‘conspiracy’ of autumn. These actions are suggested by a number of active verbs such as load, bend, fill, swell, plump. Thus, in the first stanza, autumn is imbued with creative, transformative energy. These actions bring forth not just a state of abundance or ubiquity of ripe fruits but also create an air of heaviness. This pleasant heaviness is contrasted with lightness of mists hovering in the landscape before ‘maturing sun’ takes over, in the first few lines. Does this shift from lightness to heaviness suggest a vexed

abundance, the culmination of an achieved state, or does autumn have in store more transformative energy?

We have some answer in the subsequent imagery of vegetative development:

To set budding more
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease;
For summer has o'erbrimmed their clammy cells.

It suggests, in the first place, that autumn's magical creative power is not exhausted: a perpetual process of vegetation is in sight, as we gather from the emphasis on 'more' ("more/and still more"). Here is also noticeable a shift from the scene of fruits to a more subtle view of leaves and flowers as well as a trajectory of growth from birds to deluded bees hovering on the blossoms. What is remarkable in this trajectory is the imagined delusion of the bees. Their delusive sense of the seamless continuity of the seasons triggered by a state of overabundance invites a somewhat bemused, yet detached appreciation. The stanza ends with the image of 'clammy cells'. The overbrimmed beehive's tactile and gustatory qualities are implicit in the above phrase. A season is an abstract thing, a division of time; Keats transfigures it into a sensuous, intimately perceptible object.

The conspiracy depicted in the first stanza eventually endows the season with a certain personality and a mentality, invoking a deity-like figure. Yet, it remains as a vague presence. The second stanza invokes autumn as a perceptible human figure, beginning with a rhetorical question-

Why had not seen thee oft amid thy store?

The speaker places the personified autumn in the everyday realm of autumnal activities. The everydayness of autumnal presence is suggested by the word 'whoever', implying that it is not a rare, exceptional phenomenon. Does autumn, then, lose some of its charms because of this suggestions of ordinariness? We must see that within the ordinary activity of winnowing a moment of pause and carefreeness is highlighted.

"Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind"

(A thing not difficult to imagine in our time of pervasive visual culture, a scene of a woman's wavy hair floating in the waves of wind caught in slow motion-just for a digression!)

Think about the imagined beauty and sensuousness of the surrounding world that leaves the person (autumn personified) enchanted and oblivious of everything:

“Or on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep”

Images have achieved such directness and poignance that we cannot but be bemused yet curious. The autumnal activities are, as it were, a pretext to perceive the season’s vigour and sensuousness. Let us remember at this point an oft-quoted line from Keats’s letter: “O for a life of sensation rather than of thought.” Back to the second stanza, we are offered a state of thoughtlessness, a state overladen with sensation. The reaper lies in airy thoughtlessness in consequence of the effect of olfactory sense (‘fume of poppies’). This thoughtlessness does not imply disregard any concern for future. Life’s cycle across the seasons must roll on. The reaper, therefore, has spared some of the crop while reaping, in anticipation of regeneration.

The image of the gleaner slightly contrasts the previous images of personified autumn, is that of an agile person who steadies the load of harvest while cutting across a brook. It is the only image of movement, slow and steady, stripped of much anxiety. In the final scene of the cyder presser, lingering presence before the press and perpetual gaze at the ‘last oozings’ is, as it were, a wistful gesture to block the passage of time. In all these images, except for that of the gleaner, the temporal dimension is hardly considered, and a blissful state of stasis is upheld. However, there is some tacit articulation of anxiety at the transience of earthly experience. ‘last oozings’ signals the end of the sensuous experience. Cyder press conjures up a suggestion of wine and the pleasant intoxication associated with it. But, as suggested, this drowsiness is not destined to be eternal.

The third stanza starts with a sense of loss as autumn is apparently felt to be bereft of musical qualities which are usually thought to be a trait of spring. However, this sense of loss is promptly pushed aside with an assertion of the season’s musical endowments. But, as you would see, this note of reaffirmation turns out to be less jubilant and eventually gives way to a pensive, even elegiac mood. We are provided with an evening landscape:

“When barr’d clouds bloom the soft-dying day”

Look the implicit image of a cosmic flower which denotes crimson beauty of evening sky. But don’t you also have an inkling of the approach of winter which, however, does not arrive abruptly (‘soft-dying day’)? The contrast perceptible now between the ‘maturing

sun' of the first stanza and 'soft-dying day' of the last is complete and unmistakable. But 'blooming' takes place at a sudden, startling moment, as suggested by the reverberating sound of the word 'bloom'. It is a sudden, heightened perception of beauty while inevitable process of life cycle slowly pushes everything towards closure and death. The 'small gnats' mourn the death of the day, and the 'wailful choir' adds a touch of subtle religious supplication against the approach of darkness (and death), and creates a profound poetic effect. Intermittent humming of insects as they float on the shifting waves of wind invoke an atmosphere suffused with the elegiac mood. The sharpness of 'loud bleat' of the well-fed lambs is apparently not consonant with the soft choral music of the gnats, but reveals an anxiety for homecoming and wish for reassurance of shelter.

The third stanza is replete with sound image. It brings together notes of various tonalities. As we shift here from the fields to the homestead, we hear the 'hedge cricket' and 'redbreast'. The heightened beauty of their whisper acquires a resonance in the context of the impending winter which makes swallows migrate to distant, warmer territories. The final image of swallows twittering in the sky in their bid to leave the place heightens this tragic transience of life's plenty.

Summing Up:

In this unit we have learned about the life of the poet and obtained a general idea of his work. We have also situated Keats in the context of the British Romantic Movement and assess his contributions. By now you have gained a familiarity with the poems "Ode on Melancholy" and "Ode to Autumn" and learned of the themes and ideas. You have gained an idea of how to critically appreciate the poems under discussion with particular attention to language and style. For more about Keats, you may now go through the supplementary unit that follows this unit.

7.8 Reference and Suggested Reading

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Unit 8

John Keats: “Ode on Melancholy”, “Ode to Autumn”

Supplementary Unit

Unit Structure :

- 8.1 Objectives
- 8.2 Introduction
- 8.3 A Note on the Great Odes
- 8.4 How to Read John Keats
- 1.5 The Mind of the Poet: The Keats Letters
- 8.5 Other Study Suggestions
- 8.6 Probable Questions with suggested Answers
- 8.7 Summing Up
- 8.8 Reference and Suggested Reading

8.1 Objectives:

In this unit you will be able to

- Evaluate Keats in terms of the other odes he wrote towards the end of his life
- Gain some understanding of the poet through a look at critical evaluations by critics-scholars
- Assess Keats in terms of his critical engagements manifested in his letters
- Learn the basic themes and ideas dealt with by Keats in his poems, especially in the two texts already discussed
- Answer questions pertaining to the texts discussed
- Obtain information for further reading of the poet

8.2 Introduction:

In the previous unit you must have gained some idea about Keats the poet in general and learned about the themes/ideas dealt with in the two poems. Obviously literature always calls for further explorations and study, and you, being a learner of literature, cannot stay contented with the little understanding you have gained from them. Especially reading of poetry needs whole-hearted engagement of the reader. But the more you learn about the ‘contexts’(mind the plural form! There may be various contexts of any given piece of writing—biographical, historical, sociological, philosophical, literary, psychological, linguistic, stylistic, to name a few) the more enriched will be your ‘reading’. John Keats, the most remarkable among the second generation of Romantic poets, is indeed a poet to whom you will always return for the sheer love of his poems. Keats hardly had any vision other than the vision of beauty, and his pursuit of Beauty in effect translates itself into a handful of beautiful poems which have kept him alive across periods of varying sensibilities till date.

8.3 A Note on the Great Odes

An ode is an elaborate and elevated lyric poem addressed to a person, a thing or an abstract idea. It is a serious and dignified composition, always with rhyme. Some of its identifiable characteristics are—1.its subject matter: (b) its length: usually it is longer than lyric (c) Its mode of address :it is often addressed directly to a person or a thing. Compositionally, it has usually three parts: a strophe, an antistrophe and an epode. Odes are often intended to be recited or sung by two choruses (or individuals), with the first reciting the strophe, the second the antistrophe, and both together the epode. Over time, however, different forms of odes have developed with considerable variations in form and structure, but generally showing the original influence of the Greek Pindar or Roman Horace. Forms of odes appear in many of the cultures that were influenced by the Greek and Latin. Before Keats there was a distinctive English tradition of odes from Spenser, Milton down to Gray, Collins and Wordsworth. Gray’s Progress of Poesy and The Bard are written in groups of stanzas with

each group comprising three stanzas. Spenser's Four Hymns, *Epithalamion*, *Prothalamion*, Milton's *Nativity Hymn*, Dryden's *Song for St. Cecilia's Day*, *Alexander's Feast*, Gray's *Eton College*, Collin's *The Passions* were some of the important odes in English poetic tradition. Among the poems of Keats's contemporaries and descendants, Shelley's *To the Skylark* and *Ode to the West Wind*, Coleridge's *Ode to Dejection*, *Hymn Before Sunrise*, Tennyson's *Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington*, Swinburne's *Hymn to Proserpine* stand out as distinctive specimen of this poetic sub-genre. What Distinguish Keats in his handling of the form are 1. A unity of thought and preoccupations that informs his great odes 2. His technical accomplishment and extraordinary felicity of language. In "Ode to Indolence", "Ode on Melancholy", "Ode to Psyche", the very title suggests that the poet deals with the inner life and its irresolvable dualities. In "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode to a Grecian Urn" and "Ode to Autumn" the subject is something external to the mind. Even so, they are only pretext to his meditations on the destiny of man's inner life and the tragic conflict between longing for eternal beauty and transience of life. It is, thus, worthwhile to read these odes in terms of their interrelations, not as isolated meditations on life and mind. Douglas Bush says, and rightly so, that the odes are variations on some central idea which had haunted Keats for long.

The odes are meditations on the dualities of inner life. They are not simple lyrics that attend to the contours of a definite feeling. Through them, Keats explores certain questions about life and the life of mind. And he explores interrelations of such dualities with brilliant poetic force. *Ode to a Nightingale* is a typical Romantic poem, a slow-paced utterance that evokes poetic emotions that shift with the graceful movement of the poem. But here the nightingale represents a yearning for the eternal above the mundane contingencies of troubled earthly life. The poem articulates a deep-seated wish to escape from the bounds of time and condition of mortality but the medium that makes it at least temporarily possible is a state of drowsiness which is, ironically redolent of death itself. Thus, this drowsiness is characteristic of the aspiration for the timeless. *Ode on a Grecian Urn* probes the problem of arresting life by art and its contrary ramifications. Art is a means to achieve eternity at the expense of unfulfillment. Such paradoxes might not seem at odds with Keats's short and, in some sense tragic, life where poetic vocation seemed to be the only possible alternative to the aches and afflictions of life where Keats saw his brother withering away at

hospital. The figures in the urn symbolize beauty and permanence, but stripped of the pulsating life of the real, mortal world. Ode to Autumn brilliantly renders a season's absorbing serenity, and a mood. It is also a perfect example of English landscape poetry. Ode on Melancholy is devoted to an emotion where its visible, perceptible metaphors betray the obverse of the emotion—joy and beauty. The odes are also known for Keats's mastery of poetic language and his capacity to articulate varied emotional states: speculative, lyrical, thoughtful, grieving, solemn, wistful, and celebratory. These are also testimony of Keats's conception and articulation of brilliant imagery.

As for the felicity of language, its most immediate manifestation is his felicity of phrasing. To read Keats is to come across sensuous images which are also intensely poetic and articulated through brilliant expressions. The odes are replete with compound expressions such as 'soft-conched', "wailful choir", "verdurous gloom". Keats's language is also a testimony of his relish in variegated sights and sounds of a sensuous reality. As I have already mentioned, Keats wrote all these odes within the time period of a couple of months in 1819. It is pertinent to mention here that Helen Vendler, in *The Odes of John Keats*, emphasizes the relations between the odes and argues that each of these odes ought to be read in the context of the totality of the other odes.

Stop to Consider

Lord Houghton concludes his book illustrating Keats's significance and importance with this deeply speculative note. Here is how Houghton finally sums up his assessment of this second generation Romantic poet:

"One still graver lesson remains to be noted. Let no man, who is anything above his fellow, claim, as of right, to be valued or understood: the vulgar great are comprehended and adored, because in reality they are in the same moral plane as with those who admire; but he who deserve the higher reverence must himself convert the worshipper. The pure and lofty life, the generous and tender use of the rare creative faculty; the brave endurance of neglect and ridicule; the strange and cruel end of so much genius and so much virtue; these are the lessons by which the sympathies of mankind must be interested, and their faculties educated, up to the love of such a character and the comprehension of such an intelligence. Still the lovers and scholars will be few: still the rewards of fame will be scanty and ill-proportioned: no accumulation of knowledge or series of experience can teach the meaning of genius to those who look for

it in additions and results, any more than the numbers studded round a planet's orbit could approach nearer infinity than a single unit.”
(Keats 334)

8.4 How to Read John Keats

Let us ask ourselves this question: how to read Keats's poem? This is apparently a naïve question. In today's time of the internet aren't we sometimes prone to put all sorts of 'how to' questions on the search engine to seek a readymade answer? As for the reading of literature, especially poetry, do we have any such handy tips at our disposal? Any 'tip' about reading a literary work cannot rule out the necessity of attentive reading of the text. However, it is rewarding sometimes to ask oneself such questions as is indicated in the title. 'How to read a poem' would be a general question, but it cannot answer specific challenges and rewards of reading specific poets. (for the general question of reading a poem, you may refer to the Supplementary Unit of S.T. Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*).

Coming to the specific issue of reading Keats, let us put it in this way: that Keats is a romantic poet and even a cursory reading of his poems would make you feel the peculiar aura of his poetic art vastly different that of, say Alexander Pope or Jonathan Swift. But among the Romantics he has his distinctive voice , quite different from Wordsworth, Coleridge or Shelley. This difference can be felt both in terms of is preoccupations and his peculiar poetic sensibility. Some understanding of such differences would enable to read Keats in more meaningful ways than you would without such 'a priori' knowledge.

Reading of Keats requires an acute sensitivity to his language. Keats was deeply alive to the very life of language. Language to a neo classical poet, an Augustan is for all their wit and brilliance, an instrument to represent something . To Keats language is not just an instrument but a destiny, an object of pursuit. To him language is almost a physical, sensory experience rather than a domain of fixed symbols. His poems are replete with images and many of them create startling effects. But these images are the effects of the words conjured up in its specific configuration which often resists 'habitual organizing propensity of words', as Garrett Stewart says. () Please remember that Keats is not a

poet of ideas, but an artist who is obsessed with the problem of finding an exact correspondence between a sensation and the lexical and phonetic dimensions of language. Perhaps we can replace even this notion of correspondence with one of preoccupation with the possibilities of the resources of language. Keats believed that a poet does not deploy words with cool rationality to describe the contours of feeling nor does he/she have a palpable design on the reader. Intentionality springs from a rational framework of mind, but beyond or beside an intention lie much in human consciousness, and good poetry articulates much of such feeling or thought in the intensity of his engagement with words. This is one reason why he admires Shakespeare. Reading of Keats should sensitize you to an entire host of his verbal/linguistic strategies such as the use of pun, metaphor, inverted syntax, syntactic ambiguity, internal rhythm, echo, varying verbal music, and synesthesia and a host of figures. Besides, he introduced many neologisms to bring forth unexpected shades of meaning. Words are immensely important in Keats. Words are not just a medium to convey some meaning but, as Stewart argues, become his meaning. (“Keats and Language” 179)

You can read the chapter by Stewart referred to in parenthesis above to know how words ‘become’ theme in Keats. The final stanza of “Ode to Autumn” starts a plaintive note about autumn lacking in spring’s vigorous music. But this lament is suddenly brushed aside with an assertion: think not of them, for thou has thy music too.” What follows is a description of autumn’s ‘music’-songs of birds, insects and sound of cattle. As if to emulate this ‘musical endowment’ of the season, Keats employs words in specific configurations whose phonetic texture also create varying music: “wailful choir”, “small gnats”, “mourn/Among the river sallows , borne aloft”, “redbreast whistles”, “swallows twitter”. (190)

Keats was a man of extraordinary poetic sensibility and opposed the overtly artful, deliberate designs of poetry. He calls for spontaneous effervescence of poetic thought and a naturalness which he acquired through relentless practice and self-critical awareness. *Endymion* incited series of invectives from the anonymous reviewers of the *Blackwood’s Magazine* and *Quarterly Review*. They did not obviously jeopardize his life as many suspected. But he also realized the pitfalls of his poem. If you go through the preface to *Endymion*, you will get to learn about his self-critical stand. But ‘sponteneity’ and profession of sensation should not have you believe that his poetry was stripped of any thought content.

Especially towards the later part of his life he was more inclined towards a philosophical understanding of life and its varied dimensions. Circumstances of his life also gave the poet a deeply speculative nature.

A recurrent theme of Keats' poems is time and permanence. "In Ode to Autumn" you will see that the poem explores autumn comparing it to three temporal stages of a day from sunrise to sunset. The plenitude of the first paragraph seeks to give us comfort of eternal bliss and a sense of continuity. The bees are deluded into this perception of continuity of summer, and in the second stanza this delusion transformed into a yearning, when the wistful cyder-presser keeps gazing at the last drops of apple juice falling from the machine. Life moves on, which for Keats was also a tragic realization. If one snatches a moment out of this vast abyss of time, one would see that the moment itself is saddled with contrary feelings of joy and anguish. There is no way in which a moment of pure joy can be separated and secured for oneself. Especially through the odes, Keats presents his meditation on issues of time, permanence, immortality, melancholy, beauty, dichotomies of aspiration and reality.

8.5 Critical Reception of Keats:

Keats was not well received as a poet during his lifetime. *The Quarterly Review* and *Blackwood's* published denigrating reviews and comments on the poet, as you have already learned. Neither in his lifetime nor close to three decades after his death had that Keats received appreciative assessments. He had his admirers and associates who tried to recuperate his reputation. Keats's relationship with Shelly and the latter's admiration of the former is now a known fact. Shelley died in 1822 by drowning, and a copy of Keats's poems was found in his pocket. (Amy Wilcockson) in water, and his dead body was discovered with a copy of Keats's poems. In 1848 Lord Houghton published a biography and an edited anthology of Keats, *John Keats: Life and letters (1795-1821)* was a significant signpost in the trajectory of Keats's literary afterlife responsible for a significant beginning of his rise to fame.

Keats was a major influence on the Pre Raphaelite Brotherhood and their poetry and painting. His poetry provided subject for John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt. Tennyson and Browning were

admirers of Keats while Tennyson carried his influence in his poems. Matthew Arnold's assessment of Keats is not not a blind eulogy but an appreciation with reservations. Arnold reprimanded the sensuousness of Keats as something that led him astray. Keats's letter to Fanny Browne with their overt, expressions of emotional intensity of love, the feverish, bellowing note of yearning for his beloved is something Arnold disapproves of it. This sensuous self of Keats shows aspects of his character which is ignoble and underbred, and shows lack of proper training. To Arnold, poetry is an interpretation of life, and hence, a poet must go beyond his sensuousness.

Keats has a feeling for Beauty, and he perceived Beauty's connection to truth. Pursuit of beauty in Keats is not that of a sensuous poet nor of a sensuous man, but manifestation of one striving to see beauty in all things. His sense of beauty is his deepest spiritual passion, not a shallow extraneous yearning after some facile thing of beauty. This aesthetic and spiritual vision is manifested in his poems and is responsible for his achievement in poetry, something for which Arnold ranks him with Shakespeare.

8.6 Other Study Suggestions

(A)

Douglas Bush's *John Keats: His Life and Writing* recounts the poetic career of Keats and places his poems in the context of contingencies of his lived life while also reading some of the individual poems with discrimination and critical spirit. You can read the sixth chapter here viz The Great Year : II (March-May, 1819). What is important for you in this chapter is Bush's reading of the five 'great odes' where he relates them to Keats's developing poetic power, his borrowings and appropriations of various elements from the poetic tradition. He also examines with acute discriminations the ways in which Keats displays his originality and mastery over the poetic form and language without being blind to weaknesses. For instance, he argues that in the first ode, Ode to Psyche, his handling of the form and his relative lack of mastery while dealing with human/mythical figures compared to his

treatment of thing. He also offers a comparative evaluation of the odes and finds that Keats's poetic power reaches a zenith whenever he starts with a central symbol and attends to an immediate sensuous reality. On the other hand, in poems where a certain subjective state is articulated, we have a drift towards an airy emotional luxuriance, bereft of a consciousness of human suffering. Bush also explores various sources of details in the poems as well as literary allusions.

(B)

F. R. Leavis's book *Revaluations* concludes with a chapter on Keats. Leavis calls Keats a martyr of poetry, but his evaluation of Keats's poetic genius betrays some sense of the poet's limits. Therefore, he does not celebrate Keats's achievement as much as he points to his potentialities. Having recognized that Keats is a major influence in the nineteenth century poetry, Leavis asserts Keats's potentialities on the basis of the qualities of his poetry. He argues against Middleton Murray's line of argument that establishes Keats's greatness in terms of the greatness of his soul, as he believes that value judgment cannot be done on the basis of extrinsic considerations, divorced from a necessary focus on the poems. On the other hand, Leavis also contests Arthur Symon's aestheticist evaluation of the romantic poet, suggesting that even as he betrays an aestheticist inclination, he transcends it. Referring to A.C. Bradley's comparative assessment of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and Shelley's "To a Skylark", Leavis contends that Keats's poetic worth cannot be gauged from the gift of details and images if they are seen separately. Rather, the critic looks at the delicacy of touch reflected in the effect of the concrete totality of the poem, and argues that the poem combines a varied interplay of motions. He attends to Keats's fine artistic sensibility in terms of his ability to strike a balance and contrast, or his suggestively and use of tones. Leavis is keenly alive to the fact that memory of the poem might reduce its living totality into a lopsided or inappropriate emphasis which is why he reiterates the need of re-reading. Leavis is among the very few of the modern literary critics who is known for his acute sense of discrimination and balance. He denounces the comparison made between Keats and Shakespeare as 'extravagant', and says, instead, that the odes suffer in memory. He ascribes Keats's limitations to his choice of the material, and his indulgence in luxury. Keats, he says, has a limiting aestheticism. For one thing, his notion of beauty is suggestive of loveliness which excludes all disagreeables, as

expressed in “Ode on a Grecian Urn”. However, Keats’s aestheticism is not, like Tennyson and the Pre-raphaelites, cut off from direct experience of life, but even so, his artistic vision has its limits. A serious consideration of Leavis’s view of Keats may add depth insight to your response to the poems concerned

8.7 Questions and Suggested answers:

(i) Do you think that Keats’s notion of the poetic self is reflected in his poems? Give a reasoned answer.

Answer: Answer: Keats’s notion of the poetic self can be understood from a reading of select letters. I have already discussed in brief how the poet conceptualized the poetic self in his letters. First, Keats speaks of the poet’s capacity to be in uncertainties and doubt. (See ‘negative capability’ in Glossary section of this unit). It denies a fixed poetic self which negotiates experiences from a definite and rigid subject position. This denial of fixity is in turn an affirmation of endless possibilities of ‘informing other selves, other objects. Eliot’s theory of impersonality of poetry, which has affinities with Keats’s notion of poetic self, forecloses expression of ‘personal’ emotion in poetry and calls, instead, for articulations of emotions through the linguistic medium. Thus, in answering the question, you will notice two things:

- How the (poetic) self follows the dictates of imagination and submits to its whims and its transformative demands.
- How without being overtly vocal about subjective states, the speakers in the poems articulate a set of feelings through a language that largely relies on the sensuous qualities of the experiential world.

With these points in view, you will read poems such as “Ode to the Nightingale”, “Ode on Melancholy”, “Ode to Autumn” etc. Of course your answer does not necessarily include thorough analysis of these poems. But your arguments must be supported by reference to these poems.

(ii) Do you think that “To Autumn” celebrates sensuous beauty of nature alone? Or is there a brooding awareness of the transitory existence this beautiful world, of the passing of time?

Answer:

If you closely read the poem, there should not be any doubt that celebration of autumn’s beauty can be perceived right from the beginning. See how the poem offers images of abundance and plenitude, as well as a sense of continuity of the present state of blissfulness. Look at the first stanza particularly. Also notice how this abundance inspires forgetfulness of time’s passing. (Look, for instance, at the bees, and what they are speculating about!) Yet, from the second stanza, especially from the image of the cyder presser, you will feel a vain attempt on the part of the subject to fix the blissful, living moment to an eternity. Some anxiety is built up about the present beauty slipping into the past, about the mortal character of this checkered, jubilant scenery of nature, of the autumn itself. This pensive, almost tragic tone of life’s transience is stronger in the sights and sounds depicted in the third stanza. Therefore, celebration of autumn’s beauty is depicted together with this tragic awareness of its transience. Keeping these in mind, formulate your reading of the poem.

(iii) Write a Critical appreciation of Keats’ poetry with reference to “Ode on Melancholy” and “Ode to Autumn”.

Answer: You must talk about the general features of Keats’ poetry in general in the first place. As I have mentioned, Keats achieved artistic excellence towards the end of his writing career of which the odes are a harvest. By now you must have gathered some idea of Keats’ preoccupations as they are reflected in these two poems. But critical appreciation requires you to be sensitive to how Keats was sensitive to the felt life of language. Emotions and feelings are here not just stated in any practical, abstract language but created through a special use of language.

Keats was acutely sensitive to the vibrant life of language and utterance. The words, as Garrett Stewart maintains, become his theme, and not just a medium to convey something, an instrument. Words and ideas are deeply welded together. He was alive to the structure of language, its bodily texture and tension and release. The physicality of language, its ‘rhythmic corridors of breath’ (179) as well as a specialist of its origins

and mutations. He was so greatly preoccupied with nurturing his verbal gift. At times images that strike us are but a challenge to the habitual organizing propensity of words, which provides a jolt. Keats is not a poet of ideas primarily, but an artist who is obsessed with the problem of widening the possibilities inherent in language. To answer the above question, therefore, you must see how the poet uses pun, syntactic ambiguity, phonetic echo, and introduces tweaks in the lexicons so that mere phonic texture emulates the theme of the poem.

8.8 Summing Up

In this unit, you have gained some idea of the poetic sensibility of Keats and how you can approach the poet. You must keep in mind the fact that among the Romantics Keats has a distinctive position. Especially his aestheticist vision of poetry and his acute sensitivity to the life of language as well as to that of sensuous nature is what lends him a distinctive place in the history of English poetry. This unit should also enable you to read on your own Keats with a fresh perspective.

8.9 References and Suggested Reading

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BLOCK 3

Unit 1

Elizabeth Barrett Browning: “Sonnet 22”

Unit Structure :

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introducing the Poet
- 1.3 Her Works
- 1.4 Critical Reception
- 1.5 Context of the Poem
- 1.6 Reading the Poem
- 1.7 Summing Up
- 1.8 Glossary
- 1.9 References and Suggested Reading

1.1 Objectives:

This unit aims to introduce you to one of the popular sonnets composed by the Victorian era poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. As you read on, you will get a glimpse into Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s life and work. You will see the basic concerns which overwhelmed much of her poetic works, and what made her so unique for her times. Attempts have been made to situate Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her time and society in order to explore the complexities that characterized her life and made her a successful female poet. This unit is designed to help you understand “Sonnet 22” in the poet’s oeuvre and see the circumstances that led to the popularity of a love poem such as this from among so many great works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

With the above objectives in view, the unit has been designed to help you

- Situate the poet in her historical time and society

- Connect the poet's life and work
- Understand the social, political and literary preoccupations that enriched her work
- Interpret the prescribed sonnet
- Appreciate the work and the artist presented to you in totality

1.2 Introducing the poet:

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was born to Edward Barrett and Graham Clarke on 6 March 1806 in County Durham, England. She was the eldest of twelve children in a prominent and prosperous family much of whose wealth came from sugar plantations in Jamaica. It is said that the Barrett family was part Creole and had lived in Jamaica for more than two centuries. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, born in the family house Coxhoe Hall, was the first of the Barrett family to be born in England. Educated at home, E.B. Browning was a precocious reader and writer. By the age of twelve, she had read the works of John Milton and William Shakespeare and was also well-versed in the histories of England, Greece and Rome. She also wrote her first book of poetry, *The Battle of Marathon*, by the age of fourteen.

By the time E.B. Browning reached her adolescence, she had to face a number of setbacks in terms of her health as at age 14, she developed a lung disease from which she suffered her whole life, and then at 15 years of age, she fell and suffered a spinal injury while saddling a pony. Such setbacks however, did not deter her as she lived an active literary life by continuing to learn and write. She learned Hebrew so that she could read the *Old Testament*. As she was greatly interested in the classics, she also taught herself Greek and Latin. Her ill health which prevented her from excessive social interaction probably came as a blessing to her, as she not only had the opportunity to read many of the prominent Greek and Latin writers, but also several plays by French playwrights such as Racine and Molière. She also ventured into revolutionary and radical

philosophy through the works of some of her predecessors such as Tom Paine, Voltaire, Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft.

In 1828, she lost her mother, and the family's economic status gradually fell. The Barrett family first moved from one rented cottage to another till they settled in London by 1836. During these years while her siblings were sent to Jamaica to help in the family estates, E.B. Browning had to stay at home due to her ill health. Her distant cousin John Kenyon, introduced her to the British literary society in London where her individual poems were becoming known and appreciated. At one point of time, she went to live with her brother Edward Barrett at Torquay so that she may find relief from her ill health. However, instead of finding relief, she returned home emotionally broken by his death. The tragic incident turned her into a recluse. But even as she confined herself to her bedroom in her father's house, she found solace in writing.

The vast knowledge accrued through reading are reflected in E.B. Browning's works right from the beginning. Her second book of poetry, *An Essay on Mind and Other Poems* (1826), which was published anonymously, as well as *Prometheus Bound* (1833), a translation of the ancient dramatist Aeschylus' Greek tragedy, exemplify her preoccupation with Greek antiquity. Her first venture into the public world of readers using her true identity was through *The Seraphim and Other Poems* (1838) where she explored religious themes.

The literary product of those years of self-imposed isolation in her father's house was seen in the form of a book titled *Poems*, which was published in 1844. This was the definitive book of poems which caught the readers as well as the reviewers' attention, thus establishing her as one of the leading poets of her times, both in Europe and the United States of America. More importantly, it was this book which also caught the attention of Robert Browning. It is said that he was so impressed by E.B. Browning's poetry that he wrote a letter to her, expressing his admiration not only for her poetry, but also for her. After a series of letters and a few meetings between 1845 and 1846, E.B. and Robert Browning got married and subsequently left for Italy.

In a letter dated 10th January 1845, Robert Browning is said to have written, "I love your verses with all my heart ... and I love you, too." What followed was the exchange of a series of letters between the two till they met for the first time in the summer of 1845. They grew closer after that meeting and is said to have exchanged more than 500 letters before they secretly got married on 12th September, 1846. The marriage was kept a secret from E.B. Browning's father who did not want any of his children to get married. After the marriage, she continued to live at her father's home for about a week or two, after which they moved to Italy. They made their home at Casa Guidi in Florence where they found themselves in a social circle which included people like the American sculptor Harriet Hosmer, the British novelist William Makepeace Thackeray, Harriet Beecher Stowe, the American novelist and abolitionist, Margaret Fuller, George Sand, Thomas Carlyle, Charles Kingsley and John Ruskin among others.

Italy and marriage with Robert Browning proved to be much beneficial not only to E.B. Browning's health, but also her literary career. Some commentators who give much precedence to her relationship with Robert Browning than her literary output, like to say that she gained a kind of a freedom in Italy, which Victorian English women couldn't have imagined. Her seminal work, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* was published in 1850, a year after the birth of her son Robert Wiedeman Barrett Browning. She participated in the politics of Italy by expressing her views in *Casa Guidi Windows* (1848-51) and *Poems Before Congress* (1860). Her deep social and political concerns find expression in much of her works including *Aurora Leigh* (1856), an extensive and radical work written in the epic form. In the 1840s and 1850s, E.B. Browning's poems were widely read and reviewed. In fact, she enjoyed more popularity and critical success than her husband in the 1840s and 1850s to the extent that she was considered for the position of England's Poet Laureate after William Wordsworth's death in 1850. Except for having to face severe criticism and negative reviews for the three of her later works, her reputation as a great poet remained so till she died at the age of 55 years in 1861.

SAQ

What were the influences in E.B. Browning’s formative years that contributed to her literary career? (50 words)

Do you think E.B. Browning’s relationship with Robert Browning gave her confidence as a poet? Explain. (50 words)

1.3 Her works:

This section will introduce you to some of E.B. Browning’s major works which were instrumental in building up her reputation as a poet.

Encouraged and supported by her father, E.B. Browning’s literary career began early in her life. Her first book of poetry was *The Battle of Marathon*. It was published privately in 1820 when E.B. Browning was only 14 years of age. It was an epic poem in four books based on the ancient Greek battle against the Persians in 490 B.C. It is a clear indication of the degree of influence that Greek classics had on the young poet. In the “Preface” to the book she claims the influence of Homer in her style and method. Following the epic conventions, she begins Book I of *The Battle of Marathon* with an invocation while the main part of the poem contains rich depiction of the classical hero figure, heroic battles, and the machinations of the gods among the mortals. This preoccupation with Greek and Latin antiquity would continue to be expressed even in her second work, *An Essay on Mind and Other Poems* (1826) published anonymously. The title of the book

also shows the influence of the 18th century English poet, Alexander Pope. Like Pope's "Essay on Man", Elizabeth Barrett Browning's title poem in the book, "Essay on Mind" is a long verse essay where she explores the intellectual greatness or genius of great historians, philosophers, scientists and poets as manifested in their works. The poems in the book also heavily display her fascination with Lord Byron. Like the Neo-classical Pope and the republican and radical Byron, we see in Browning's poetry a fascination with classicism, republicanism and the crucial role played by the poet in the society.

This fascination would find expression further in her translation of Aeschylus' Greek tragedy *Prometheus Bound* in 1833 and her next book of poetry, *The Seraphim and Other Poems* (1838). The title poem in the collection is "The Seraphim", a long dialogue that takes place between two angels Ador, the strong and Zerah, the bright who witnessed the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Despite the Christian theme, the poem is composed in the form of a classical Greek tragedy. As put by her in the "Preface" to the collection, she was of the opinion that had Aeschylus been alive during the time of Christ and seen his crucifixion, he would have found it to be a subject worthier of a great tragedy than the story of Prometheus. Aware of the rise of literary works with religious themes in the 19th century literary market, and also well aware of the controversial position she, as a woman would be in writing such a poem, E.B. Browning uses the preface to participate in the ongoing debate about the significance of theological poetry. This debate also surfaces in the dialogue between Ador and Zerah, the two seraphs of "The Seraphim". Apart from the title poem, there are other poems with religious themes, such as, "Isobel's Child", "The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus", and "The Weeping Saviour".

Religious concerns and their exploration find place in many of E.B. Browning's poems. One such poem is "Drama of Exile", a long poem which was published with other poems in her 1844 collection, *Poems*. In the "Preface" to the book, she described the "Drama of Exile" as her most important work. As in "The Seraphim", Browning uses the form of Greek tragedy in order to portray the Christian story of the fall from

Paradise. She highlights the grief and guilt of Eve, for bringing about the fall of man, and for the consequent exile from Eden. As the narrative of the fall of man is told from Eve's perspective, we may say that the age-old story finds gendered telling. By 1844, it was clear that the gendered Victorian society with strictly defined roles for men and women, as well as the precarious position of the woman poet were concerns that preoccupied E.B. Browning. They find expression in other poems in the collection such as the sonnet pair "To George Sand: A Desire" and "To George Sand: A Recognition", written in praise of the 19th century French novelist Amantine – Lucile - Aurore Dupin who used the pseudonym George Sand.

She begins "To George Sand: A Desire" with the line "Thou large-brained woman and large-hearted man, / Self-called George Sand!" instantly attributing to the novelist the two qualities which are otherwise seen as strictly confined to one or the other gender. E.B. Browning claims to see in George Sand the intellect of a man ('large-brained') as well as the emotions and sensitivity of a woman ('large-hearted'). In the following sonnet "To George Sand: A Recognition", Elizabeth Barrett Browning celebrates the incredible courage of George Sand to be different, to break free from the shackles within which women of their times were otherwise confined, and for standing up as an epitome of the bold and fearless woman who dared to survive in the male domain of the world of literature. A similar note is seen in "Lady Geraldine's Courtship: A Romance of the Age" where Lady Geraldine is depicted as a woman who rejects the image of female passivity and appears to have a voice, a choice and an agency of her own. So much so, that she is shown to claim her special preference for the 'low-born' poet Bertram among a gathering of aristocratic guests.

The poems in the 1844 collection reveals E.B. Browning's participation in crucial issues and debates of the era regarding society, politics, literature, women's position, slavery, child labour, etc. "The Cry of the Children" is an important poem in the collection and was considered to be the most influential. It was first published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1843 and is an indictment on the society that uses children for manual

labour. *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1844) was an instant success both in England and America, and she received more positive response than negative, probably for the first time in her literary career so far. With this, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was established as a matured poet and a formidable commentator on contemporary socio-political issues.

E.B. Browning's next significant work appeared in 1850, after she had married Robert Browning and born him a son. Called *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, it was a sequence of 44 sonnets written during 1845–1846 when her relationship with Robert Browning had moved on from literary to a romantic one. If it had been left to the poet's wishes, these love sonnets would never have reached the public as she thought they were too personal. However, Robert Browning believed that they were some of the best sonnets in the English language since Shakespeare and advised her to publish it in her second volume of *Poems* (1850). The title of the sonnet sequence was intended to disguise the personal nature of the sonnets and was derived from Robert Browning's nickname for Elizabeth, whom he called "my little Portuguese". This nickname in turn, was derived from one of her earlier poems "Catarina to Camoens" (1844) which Robert Browning had loved. Unlike the traditional Petrarchan or English sonnets where the poet/lover expresses his love for an unattainable beloved, E.B. Browning's love sonnets expresses a sense of surprise and gratitude for the love received by her. The 44 sonnets thus trace the poet's changing response to Robert Browning's love from reluctance to give in (due to her ill health) to not only acknowledging her own love for him, but also the decision to marry him. Sonnet 1 ("I thought once how Theocritus had sung") expresses the deep anguish and loneliness she often felt due to her ill health and how she had often felt her impending death looming large. However, the 'mystic Shape' which she had thought to represent death takes her by surprise as it was "Not Death, but Love". From surprise at receiving love, we see her expressing the pleasant and positive changes brought upon her by Robert Browning's love in Sonnet 12. She proudly claims:

Indeed this very love which is my boast,
And which, when rising up from breast to brow,

Doth crown me with a ruby large enow

To draw men's eyes and prove the inner cost, -

Love received by her, she claims, has not only brought visible happiness to her, but also given her the confidence to love back. Yet, her reservations to own or express that love returns in Sonnets 13 and 14. However, in Sonnet 22, her confidence returns and she is again able to claim her love. By the time she wrote it, E.B. Browning seems to be so sure of the love she shares with Robert Browning that she imagines the union of their souls. She claims that the heavenly bliss she finds on earth because of it is much higher than what heaven itself would give her. Her most popular sonnet from the collection is Sonnet 43, more popularly known as "How do I love thee?". It is an intense and passionate expression of her love for Robert Browning with all reservations clearly removed.

SAQ

Analyse the circumstances in E.B. Browning's life that led to the publication of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. (50 words)

How is E.B. Browning's sonnet sequence similar or different from established sonnet traditions of England?

Sonnets from the Portuguese has remained E.B. Browning's most popular and positively acclaimed work; sometimes, at the cost of her later works which 20th century critics consider to be more powerful. These later works are *Casa Guidi Windows* (1848-1851), *Aurora Leigh* and *Poems Before Congress* (1860). *Casa Guidi Windows* was written in two parts. The first part completed in 1848 celebrated the enthusiasm and the hope associated with the initial phase of Florence's struggle for

political autonomy and unification. It records the celebrations and rejoicing seen in the streets of Florence on 12th September, 1847 when Leopold II restored to the citizens their civil liberties. The second part written in 1851 records the march of the Austrian army headed by Leopold II through the Florentine streets between 2nd March to 5th March of 1849, thus replacing the celebratory crowd of the previous part. It reveals a sense of that initial enthusiasm and hope weakening with the recognition that the political process she was witnessing in 1848 would be a long-drawn one. Together, the two parts of *Casa Guidi Windows* help establish E.B. Browning's affiliation to a politics that stands for human liberty and freedom. These are the same concerns which find place in her 1860 publication *Poems Before Congress*.

In the "Preface" to *Poems Before Congress* regarding this and her earlier publication, she says, "What I have written has simply been written because I love truth and justice ...". The "Preface" to *Poems Before Congress* is significant as it carries an indictment against England for failing to support Italy in its struggle for liberty, more popularly known as the Risorgimento. "Napoleon III in Italy", the first poem in the collection presents Napoleon III as the liberator of Italy and emphasizes the maturity and unanimity of the Italians during this phase of the Risorgimento. "An English poet warns thee to maintain / God's word, not England's ..." – says she, clearly expressing her disillusionment with the role, or rather the lack of role taken by England in Italy's politics and the faith she placed on Napoleon III for Italy's liberty.

The most remarkable and the most controversial of the poems in *Poems Before Congress* was however, "A Curse for a Nation". Many British reviewers read it as an indictment of Britain's failure to support the Italian cause, and thus unpatriotic. Though E.B. Browning denied this reading, "A Curse for a Nation" can be read along with a number of poems by her published individually as well as in collections, which are socially and politically relevant not only in England or Italy, but also in America.

We must understand that E.B. Browning was able to establish herself as a poet due to the support of her family, especially her father and brothers. Without such a support from the patriarchal society, it would have been very difficult for her to find success in the male-dominated literary world, more precisely, the world of poetry. However, had she remained in the countryside and wrote her poetry, while her father helped her to publish them privately, she would never have gained the fame she did. Economic misfortunes of the family and their movement to London came to E.B. Browning as blessings in disguise. John Kenyon and her interaction with others from the literary circle provided her the opportunity to be known as a poet in the public domain.

Aurora Leigh (1856) is now considered to be E.B. Browning's magnum opus. It is a long verse narrative written in blank verse and extending up to nine volumes. The book is dedicated to John Kenyon, the cousin who had initially introduced her to the London literary circle. In her "Dedication", she calls the book "the most mature of (her) books" carrying her "highest convictions upon Life and Art". The verse-narrative traces the life of Aurora Leigh, a lady born to wealth and brought up on her father's rich library. She struggles to be a poet, considers the issues involved in writing an epic, refuses to follow the set norms for women of her times, refuses to marry her cousin Romney Leigh initially as he doesn't believe in the artistic abilities of women and travels alone from England to France and then Italy. The narrative of Aurora's life serves as an excuse for E.B. Browning to explore some of her concerns regarding poverty, women's education, pitfalls of marriage for some women, importance of poetry as well as the individual's responsibility towards society. While *Aurora Leigh*, despite its popularity failed to garner positive response from critics, this was the book which helped in the rediscovery of E.B. Browning by feminists in the 1970s.

"A Curse for a Nation" was published initially in 1856 in *The Liberty Bell by Friends of Freedom*, a Boston-based abolitionist annual magazine. The nation in question is the United States of America, and the cause of the curse was the prevalent system of slavery. The curse itself begins by harking back to America's history of revolution and liberty from Britain, and how despite such an experience, it continues to debar others from liberty. A similar tone critiquing the hypocrisy of America's founding myth is seen in her earlier poem "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" which was also published in *The Liberty Bell* in 1848. The poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by a runaway female slave. While the runaway slave stands on Pilgrim's Point and highlights the hollowness of America's founding principles of liberty and freedom, the poet reveals her anti-slavery politics.

Stop to Consider

E.B. Browning gained immense fame during her lifetime as a poet of exceptional originality and intellect. Yet, throughout her lifetime and a few decades after her death, it was her ballads and sentimental love sonnets on which her fame rest. Her politically polemical and combative poems touching upon socio-political issues, or gender issues were more or less ignored by critics. In order to understand this, we must look at the times she lived and wrote in. She began writing towards the end of the Romantic period and gained maturity and fame in the Victorian period. In the world of Romantic era poetry, women poets were conspicuously absent, while in the Victorian era society, to be passive and subdued, were considered virtuous of women. By choosing to write poetry, and demanding to be heard (through publications), E.B. Browning did not fit into her time and society. If women at all wrote and published, they were expected to write sentimental and melodramatic ballads, not comment on contemporary socio-political conditions. Contemporary critics and reviewers probably did not know what to make of a female poet whose poetic capabilities they wished to admire, but who often thwarted them by writing on highly radical and controversial topics. This is probably why her political poems were ignored while her ballads and sonnets gained popularity.

Check Your Progress

1. What landmark changes in E.B. Browning's life influenced her poetic career?
(Hint: Moving to London, brother's death, meeting Robert Browning, moving to Italy)
2. What are the main concerns in her poetry?
(Hint: Religious poetry, child labour, slavery, women and literature, republican politics)
3. Do you think E.B. Browning's gender and choice of genre hampered her literary career?
(Hint: Consider her losing out on the position of the Poet Laureate to Tennyson, the response of her critics to her religious, social, political or gendered themes in her poetry)

1.4 Critical Reception:

The Seraphim and Other Poems (1838) was the first of E.B. Browning's publicly released poetry book. Due to the religious theme of the title poem, the book was not received well by some contemporary reviewers. *The Examiner*, the leading intellectual periodical of the time suggested the work to be over-ambitious while *The Athenaeum* criticized the poet for her lack of "discriminating taste". *The Naval and Military Gazette* however, was full of admiration not only for the preface which was a "beautiful composition", but also for the title poem which the reviewers say was full of "beauty, pathos, and power". As early as 1838, the reviewers of *The Naval and Military Gazette* drew a comparison of the young poet with Coleridge. Although *The Metropolitan Magazine* expressed their doubts about using Christian religious themes in poetry, they thought "The Seraphim" was a "poetry of the highest order without its rhythm". Like *The Naval and Military Gazette*, most reviewers in England and America appreciated *The Seraphim and Other Poems* and hailed the young poet as an extraordinary and promising one. Through "The Seraphim" and the "Drama of Exile", the first poem in her 1844 collection *Poems*, E.B. Browning made her place in a very masculinist literary world by portraying herself as a Christian prophetess-poet. So

much so that, George Gilfillan described her as the “most masculine of our female writers in his article on the poet for *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*. *The Eclectic Review* recognizes “the fulness of her Christianity” as the poet’s distinguishing quality. However, it was the sentimentality in the poems published in her 1844 collection that won for her much appreciation. *The Monthly Review* admired the maturity and the “more resolute avoidance of the obscurities both of thought and construction” seen in the poems. Christian Johnstone, in his review of the book in *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* found the sentimental ballads to be the most attractive poems in the collection. While charges of vagueness and obscurity continued, many reviewers praised *Poems* for the poet’s originality, intellect and boldness of thought. Substantial reviews of *Poems* (1844) in England and America established E.B. Browning as an influential poet of international repute.

Stop to Consider

Even a cursory examination of E.B. Browning’s reception history would reveal that her contemporary reviewers were reluctant about accepting her as a serious poet though they ‘indulgently’ celebrated her as a great poet among women. You may want to think about the reasons for her fame during her lifetime and compare them with the critical reception her later works got in the second half of the 20th century.

Poems (1850), despite containing the most remarkable sonnet sequence *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, initially went unnoticed as most poems in the volume were reprints of earlier works. The few reviews it inspired were mostly positive except for charges of vagueness, exaggeration and obscurity labelled by the *Spectator*. The sonnet sequence itself however received positive response from the periodicals of the time such as *The Examiner*, *The Athenaeum* and *The English Review*. By this time, E.B. Browning was an established name among poets of the time. She not only enjoyed more fame than Robert Browning, but was also considered for the position of the Poet Laureate of England after the death of Wordsworth in 1850. Considering the times and the conventional position of women in Victorian society, one is led to believe that she lost the position to Alfred Lord Tennyson only because she was a woman.

After 1850, readers and critics were exposed to E. B. Browning's more political poems. While critics could ignore the political nature or social criticism of some of her earlier poems, they could no longer do so with *Casa Guidi Windows* or *Poems Before Congress*. While the poems on the Italian question of liberty brought her much appreciation and support from intellectual, artistic and revolutionary circles, many reviewers found them too controversial for a woman poet. *Aurora Leigh*, published between the above-mentioned two volumes, was the most controversial of all her works as it addressed the issues of gender norms and accepted literary standards. While George Eliot considered it to be the "greatest poem" written by "a woman of genius", the *Dublin University Review* considered it coarse and unfeminine. While the poet herself had claimed it to be her "masterpiece", and while the initial sales for it were quite high, *Aurora Leigh* failed to garner the kind of appreciation her earlier works had received. A reviewer of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* called E.B. Browning to be a "belligerent Joan of Arc" who "challenges a truthful opinion" given on account of her gender. *The Westminster Review* believed that *Aurora Leigh* crossed the "bounds of reason" and was written to challenge ethical criticism. Such was the reputation of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work when her *Poems Before Congress* was published containing a poem like "A Curse for a Nation". Although from its 1856 publication in *The Liberty Bell*, it was made clear that "A Curse for a Nation" is an indictment against the cruel system of slavery in America, "A Curse for a Nation" in *Poems Before Congress* created a storm among the English reviewers and critics. The poem was perceived to be an indictment on England's non-participation in the Italian cause, and they found it outrageous that the volume which ends with that begins with a poem such as "Napoleon III in Italy" which praises him highly. While *Blackwood's* criticized the intervention of a woman in politics, *The Saturday Review* called her an "illogical renegade" and a "denationalized fanatic".

SAQ

What is the main theme of *Aurora Leigh*? Why did it fail to garner positive response from critics?
(50 words)

As though the reservation held by *Blackwood's* against women's intervention in politics was shared by most of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's contemporary audience, it was her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* which gained more fame than any other work. More importantly, her later political poems were gradually forgotten and she came to be celebrated for her ballads and love sonnets for the rest of the century. After her death in 1861, a review appeared in Boston's *Christian Examiner* which praised the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* for their purity, humility, tenderness and "lofty self-abnegation", and in quality, were held to be even higher than Petrarch or Shakespeare's sonnets. The *Southern Literary Messenger* in America too called her "the Shakespeare among her sex" in their obituary to the poet. That she was a powerful poet with extraordinary intellect was acknowledged by most reviewers of the 19th century although her works such as *Casa Guidi Windows*, *Poems Before Congress* and *Aurora Leigh* were mostly forgotten. After her death in 1861, it was Robert Browning's reputation as a poet that preceded Elizabeth's, accentuated as it was by the romantic legend that surrounded the couple, and exemplified by the poetic voice in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. In other words, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's reputation was overshadowed by a romantic narrative about how she was rescued from the house of her tyrannical father by Robert Browning. It remained so at least till the time she was rediscovered for her powerful poetic commentary on contemporary politics and society by feminist critics in the 20th century.

It was Virginia Woolf who first commented on the neglect of E.B. Browning's magnum opus *Aurora Leigh* by contemporary critics in her 1930 essay published in *Times Literary Supplement*. Apart from Virginia

Woolf, there were many writers whom her works inspired. For instance, among the 19th century American writers, Edgar Allan Poe and Emily Dickinson were greatly inspired by her poetic genius. As mentioned above, despite the advocacy of Virginia Woolf, E.B. Browning's reputation remained more or less subdued till feminist critics in the 1970s restored *Aurora Leigh* to its central place in E.B. Browning's canon as part of their efforts to recover lost traditions of women's writing. Since then, her reputation has remained more or so secured with her works being viewed from a feminist perspective. Though *Sonnets from the Portuguese* are still widely read, *Aurora Leigh* has received more critical attention.

Check Your Progress

1. What qualities in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* contributed to its popularity?

(Hint: Theme of love, subdued and passive character of the poet-persona, autobiographical element)

2. Why did "A Curse for a Nation" create a storm among contemporary reviewers when it was published in 1860?

(Hint: E.B. Browning's stance in the ongoing Italian crisis, her opinion about Napoleon III, her frustration at England's non-participation in Italian politics, contemporary reviewers' misreading of the poem)

3. Examine the causes for the restoration of *Aurora Leigh* as E.B. Browning's most important work in the 1970s.

(Hint: Woman's position in patriarchal society, women and art, portrayal of a bold female protagonist who decides to live life on her own terms)

1.5 Context of the Poem:

From the above sections, you have understood that *Sonnets from the Portuguese* was a sonnet sequence containing 44 love sonnets which E.B. Browning had composed between 1845 and 1846 and was

published in *Poems* (1850). It was received by contemporary readers with much appreciation and continued to remain her most popular work. The sonnet sequence traces the changing relationship and the development of the poet's love for Robert Browning from initial hesitance to complete acceptance. Sonnet 22 is one of the poems in the sequence and records the high value she places on the love between herself and her future husband. This sonnet covers almost the half of the sonnet sequence and shows the emerging confidence in her upon her love after having fluctuated between reservation and hesitation, and gratitude and acceptance.

Sonnets from the Portuguese established E.B. Browning's reputation as the most renowned sonnet writer of the Victorian era. E.B. Browning was neither the first English sonneteer nor the first woman to dabble in this form. The form was far well established and perfected by great poets like Edmund Spenser, Phillip Sidney and William Shakespeare in the 16th century. Anne Locke and Lady Mary Wroth had already found fame in the 16th century as female sonneteers. Yet, the subject of their sonnet was mostly religious, while their contemporary male sonneteers dealt with matters of love. E.B. Browning's sonnets had a sense of novelty as despite being written by a woman, they mostly spoke of love. In traditional love sonnets coming from Petrarch's influence, the speaker of the poem expresses his love for an unattainable beloved, and oscillates between attempting to woo her and complain about the neglect he faces. In the sonnet sequence by E.B. Browning, there are no such complains. The speaker has already received love from her lover and if she oscillates, it is only between hesitation and acceptance of that love. As such, by writing love sonnets, the poet not only intrudes into a male world, but also introduces a new form of expression.

1.6 Reading the Poem:

E.B. Browning expresses a certain level of confidence in her love through Sonnet 22. Now that there is acceptance and acknowledgment,

the poet-persona of Sonnet 22 presents her and her lover's love as self-sufficient. While one wishes to attain heaven in love, she emphasizes the benefits of remaining earth-bound. By saying so, she attributes immense value to the love she shares with her lover.

When our two souls stand up erect and strong,
Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher,
Until the lengthening wings break into fire
At either curvèd point

The opening lines of the poem portrays the growing love between her and her lover as they grow “nigh and nigher”, their souls strengthened by the overwhelming love. This first quatrain draws up the image of a wedding between two souls standing in silence in front of each other just before they merge into one another and be one. They are strengthened by their love and appear to be elevated from their humane existences. Connected at the level of their souls, the image that we get from the first quatrain, is that of the lovers rising up to heaven with their raised wings which “break into fire”.

SAQ

What is the imagery used by the poet in the first four lines of Sonnet 22? (30 words)

What is the significance of this imagery in perceiving the poet's growing sense of confidence in her love? (50 words)

In the following lines, she asks her lover to think what harm could come to them on earth united as they are through their souls. By comparing the heaven's bliss and angelic blessings with the blissfulness of her love, the poet-persona clearly shows that she holds her love at a higher value than what heaven can provide. She questions and pleads her lover to think in the following words:

—what bitter wrong

Can the earth do to us, that we should not long
Be here contented? Think. In mounting higher,
The angels would press on us and aspire
To drop some golden orb of perfect song
Into our deep, dear silence.

The blissfulness in her love is due to the “deep, dear silence” between the lovers, calm and happy that they are with each other. If they go to heaven, they would have to forego this silence, which is symbolic of the tranquility they enjoy with each other. Their “deep, dear silence” would then be disturbed by the angels who would want to shower on them their blessings. The speaker brings out the heavenly aspect of her relationship with her lover by comparing it with the joys of heaven. If they go to heaven, “The angels would press on us and aspire” to bless them, she says, telling her lover that they would want to be a part of their perfect love. She seems to be implying that there is nothing more perfect than their love, as even the most perfect beings such as the angels want to participate in it. The love between the lovers is clearly fresh and only beginning to grow, and the poet-persona feels a sense of ‘heaven on earth’. She feels blissful and calm and pleads to her lover to remain in that state of pure happiness without aspiring for more. Heaven cannot give them more than the happiness they already feel. The wonders that heaven can shower on them has already been showered upon them by their love, and hence, there is no need to aspire the “golden orb” or “perfect song” of heaven.

SAQ

Why does the speaker do not aspire to go to heaven? What would happen if the lovers go? (30 words)

What does the speaker imply by wanting to remain on earth? (50 words)

In response to her earlier question, “what bitter wrong / Can the earth do to us...?”, the speaker assures her lover that no wrong would befall them. Pleading with him to stay on earth, she says:

Let us stay
Rather on earth, Belovèd,—where the unfit
Contrarious moods of men recoil away
And isolate pure spirits, and permit
A place to stand and love in for a day,
With darkness and the death-hour rounding it.

Instead of aspiring to be in heaven, the speaker tells her lover that it is best to stay on earth as here, fellow human beings would leave them alone to enjoy their perfect love. Instead of wanting to participate in their joy, they would rather “recoil” from them, who have been purified by their love and has thus become “pure spirits”. On earth, instead of being surrounded by angels eager to bless them, they would be left alone to love each other to the fullest.

While the speaker pleads with her lover about the advantages of remaining on earth, two ideas emerge from the sestet. The first is the contrary moods of man on earth. This notion seems to be a commentary on human nature, which instead of celebrating or participating in the joys of “pure spirits”, choose to stay away. The second idea emerges from the last line of the sonnet: “With darkness and the death-hour rounding it”. This line speaks of the inevitability of death in every life and introduces an element of *carpe diem* in the sonnet. She seems to be

Stop to Consider

As we interpret the last line, we must keep in mind E.B. Browning’s life-long ill health, which in all probability must have kept her preoccupied with death. This notion can be drawn from the first sonnet in the sonnet sequence *Sonnets from the Portuguese* where she realizes with relief that what looms large over her is “Not Death, but Love”. Now, in Sonnet 22, it is this love for which she wants to live and not think about heaven or death. Thus, she expresses that in loving Robert Browning, she has attained heaven on earth.

asking her lover to make best of the time they have on earth, by loving

each other in peace and solitude without thinking about heaven (or death).

Check Your Progress

1. What is the significance of E.B. Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*?

(Hint: The form and style of traditional English sonnet, difference between E.B. Browning's sonnets and earlier sonnets written by women, her treatment of the theme of love)

2. Analyze the importance of Sonnet 22 in the whole sonnet sequence.

(Hint: Sonnet 22 completes the first half of the 44 sonnets in the sequence, there is a change of tone as the speaker expresses confidence and portrays her love as perfect and self-sufficient)

3. What imagery does the poet use to portray the perfectness of the love between her and her lover?

(Hint: Union of souls, heavenly bliss, angels desiring to bless them, their "pure spirits")

4. What are the two ideas that emerge from the sestet?

(Hint: Human nature, imperfect beings, inevitability of death, *carpe diem*)

1.7. Summing Up:

In this unit, you have been introduced to one of the most remarkable women poets of all time. She began her literary career in the last phase of the Romantic period and went on to be a popular poet during the Victorian era. By not confining herself to the usual genre of fiction in which women of the period were generally seen to write in, E.B. Browning in a way broke some conventions. She did not only write poetry and enter into a very masculine world, but also crossed the limit made available to women of her times, by writing poetry about theological debates, politics, socio-economic issues and the women question, and not only love. She baffled contemporary reviewers by pleasing them with ballads and sentimental poetry at times, and surprising them with political and controversial poems. In other words, her critics did not know how to deal with her later poems. This has been

brought to you through the section where you get to read about her reception history.

During her lifetime, she gained fame for her ballads and sonnets and was praised as the most noteworthy female poet of the time. Her value can be judged by the fact that she was considered for the Poet Laureateship during a time when women were not even expected to write poetry and have them published publicly. You have had a chance to go through her major works in this unit which will help you to gauge her important position in the history English literature. There has also been an attempt to look at the causes that made her sonnets so popular during and after her lifetime. In the course of it, Sonnet 22, which is your prescribed text has also been looked into.

1.8. Glossary:

Classicism: High regard for ancient Greek and Latin traditions in literature and art.

Epic: A form of a long narrative poem that tells the story of great battles or events of great national or international significance, with noble and brave heroes as characters.

Feminist critics: Critics who emerged out of the feminist movement of the 1970s. They interpret art and literature through the principles and politics of feminism. Discovering and developing female traditions of writing, interpreting texts through the sexual politics of language and style and analyzing female writers and their works through women's perspective are some of their goals.

Radicalism: Strong advocacy of socio-political reforms against accepted conventional practices. It was also the name of a political movement which arose within liberalism in the late 18th and early 19th century, and which advocated for human liberty and freedom.

Risorgimento: In English, it roughly means 'resurgence'. It was the name given to the 19th century socio-political movement which took

place throughout Italy for the unification of all the states into one single nation.

Romantic period: The period roughly between 1797 (publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*) to 1850 (death of William Wordsworth). It was marked by a philosophy of romanticism in literature and art which gave precedence to emotion over reason, spontaneity in art over discipline and technique, nature over the city, etc.

Sonnet: Fourteen-line poem traditionally written in iambic pentameter. Its rhyme scheme and subject matter may vary. But most often, the sonnet reflects one single sentiment. The sonnet form came to England in the 16th century (Renaissance period) through Sir Thomas Wyatt, who was introduced to it through the works of the 14th century Italian poet Petrarch.

Sonnet sequence: A series or collection of sonnets connected by a single narrative is called sonnet sequence.

Theological poetry: Poetry that contains religious teachings, themes or debates.

Victorian era: The period roughly corresponding to the reign of Queen Victoria in England between 1820 to 1914. Britain during this period was characterized by a stable government, booming economy, rich culture, growth of empire abroad and growing sense of patriotism and nationalism.

1.9 References and Suggested Readings:

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Unit 2

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Sonnet 22"

Supplementary Unit

Unit Structure :

2.1 Objectives

2.2 Introduction

2.3 How to approach the poet

2.4 Probable questions and suggested answers

2.5 Important essays/books/materials on the poet

2.6 Any other study suggestions that may help a learner in understanding the poet

2.1 Objectives:

After going through this unit you will be able to

- Orient yourself to the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning
- Answer important questions from her poetry
- Know about the resources about the poet

2.2 The Poet: Elizabeth Barrett Browning

The most commonly read poets associated with the Victorian era are Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning. E.B. Browning's name has only recently begun to figure in the list of remarkable poets of that era. Yet, she is more popular for her sonnets than other poems, and the story of her love and marriage with Robert Browning is often discussed more than her literary achievements. While reading E.B. Browning, we must remember not to make the above-mentioned errors and attempt to look at her from all dimensions.

With a literary career that began towards the end of the Romantic period and flourished during the Victorian era, E.B. Browning revealed both Romantic as well as Victorian concerns and sensibilities in her literary productions. While she is more often approached as a Victorian poet, we must remember that E.B. Browning's formative years were influenced by the Romantic period. While her ballads and dramatic monologues reveal the influence of Wordsworth's poetics, many of her poems are attuned to the Hellenism and revolutionary energy evident in the poetry of Byron, Shelley and Keats, the later Romantics. Byron, in fact, as claimed by E.B. Browning herself, was her childhood hero, an epitome of freedom and liberty. *Aurora Leigh* (1856) is often read in relation to Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850), as the narrative of the growth of a poet. Yet, much of her oeuvre reflects her fascination with classical figures like Prometheus and Pan, her concern for liberty and freedom, which she derived from the later Romantics, also known as the Satanic School. Her title poem in her first publicly published work *An Essay on Mind and Other Poems* (1826) addresses the great minds in the fields of science, history, literature and philosophy as Prometheus of this earth. In "Stanzas on the Death of Lord Byron" in the same collection, she mourns the death of Byron thus, "Britannia's Poet! Graecia's hero, sleeps!"

Irrespective of her strong affiliation to the Romantic period, E.B. Browning has more often been read as a Victorian poet. One reason for this could be the fact that she began to gain popularity as a poet in the late 1830s when Romanticism was considered to be more or less at an end. As a Victorian poet, she is considered one among the greatest poets of the era, as the foremost among a number of remarkable female poets of the age such as Christina Rossetti. Lamenting the fact that the names of Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning often eclipse E.B. Browning's, many commentators attempt to show that she began writing before them, and was greater than them. Their claim rests in the fact that she produced greater number of dramatic monologues, a representative literary style of the period, than the other two.

E.B. Browning gained fame through her ballads and sonnets, through a sentimentality expressed towards the corruption and evils in society and sometimes through her religious poems. Yet, we must remember that what made her famous was also what established her as a female poet, a “poetess”, not a poet at par with the numerous male poets of the Romantic as well as Victorian eras. As a “poetess”, she of course, was not the first. She was part of a long tradition of women poets who came before her such as, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, Felicia Hemans, or Letitia Elizabeth Landon. Their poetry was mostly confined to the feminine spheres of sentimentality, morality and religiosity. Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon were E.B. Browning’s Victorian era precursors. While Felicia Hemans gained popularity through her works such as *The Forest Sanctuary* (1825), *Records of Woman* (1830) and *Songs of the Affections* (1830) where she addressed feminine concerns such as marriage, motherhood, grief, spiritual and romantic love. Letitia Elizabeth Landon’s concerns were closer to that of E.B. Browning as her works such as “The Marriage Vow” addressed the issue of women, and women’s art and fame, while her poems like “The Factory” addressed contemporary social issues. In Landon and E.B. Browning we sense a desire to be known as worthy poets concerned about contemporary social, political, economic and literary issues, and not just feminine themes.

SAQ

What are the different ways of approaching E.B. Browning? (50 words)

What are the implications of calling E. B. Browning a “poetess”? (30 marks)

What makes her an important poet for the 20th century feminists? (30 words)

E.B. Browning indeed was made famous by her ballads and sonnets which placed her in a tradition of a community of women poets of the 19th century writing about feminine concerns. As a formidable voice commenting on contemporary issues, she was very much the poet of her age which has been identified as the Victorian era. However, her poems show an immense fascination with classicism and radicalism characteristic of the later Romantics. If there are traits of both the Victorian and the Romantic eras in E.B. Browning's works, her works also reveal her affiliation to the 19th century women activists. In fact, some of her ballads such as "The Romaunt of Margret", "The Romaunt of the Page" and "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" have been read as exhibiting a subversion

2.3 How to approach the poet

E.B. Browning was almost lost to world had it not been a resurgence in the study of her works by feminist critics since the 1970s. Yet, when alive, she wrote prolifically and was also appreciated and loved by her readers and critics. It would not be wrong to say that she was the most loved 'poetess' of England when she was alive. From 1820 to 1861, we see a steady growth in her poetic style and concern. From appealing to her father's appreciation as a child through her *The Battle of Marathon* (1820) to dealing with religious and sentimental feminine themes in her sonnets and ballads published in various journals, magazines as well as various volumes of poetry, and appealing to contemporary readers and critics, E.B. Browning may be said to have had a successful literary career. During her later years though, E.B. Browning is seen to have moved away from her appealing tone to a more overtly political tone. From *Casa Guidi Windows* to *Poems Before Congress* and *Aurora*

Leigh, we see her dealing with radical and controversial issues which in a way creates a rift between her and her critics. While some reviewers simply ignored these later poems and concentrate on her *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, celebrating her love sonnets, others criticized her vehemently for entering into a domain which is not available to her by talking about politics. In the years following her death in 1861, a sort of a legend surrounded her at the center of which was the story of her love and marriage with Robert Browning, and how the latter rescued her from a tyrannical father. This narrative and the discovery of the autobiographical nature of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, brought immense fame to both the volume of sonnets and Robert Browning, albeit, at the cost of E.B. Browning, the beloved ‘poetess’ of England who ‘dared’ to write about grief and love, religion and art, women’s position and politics.

The tendency to concentrate on her sonnets and more or less ignore her more political and controversial poems has continued till now despite the existence of various feminist study on her life and works. However, it must be kept in mind that a fuller understanding of the poet will be achieved only after considering her entire oeuvre. For reasons of convenience, E.B. Browning’s poems would be divided into early poems (1820-1844) and later poems (1845-1861). Though the significance in her poetic career of the various volumes of her poetry would be highlighted, only the most relevant poems will be discussed in details.

SAQ

Why do you think E.B. Browning lost her fame as a remarkable poet after her death? (50 words)

What do you think are some of the concerns with which E.B. Browning dealt with in her poetry? (30 words)

II.1: Early Poems (1820-1844)

Though *The Battle of Marathon* (1820) was only published privately and distributed among a few family members and friends, it provides an important lead to E.B. Browning's literary concerns. It is an epic, the form of the heroic poetry which had gained such popularity in the 17th century especially through the success of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). In the "Preface" to the book, E.B. Browning places herself in the tradition of Homer, whose style she says, she imitated "too often and too closely" (XIV), Alexander Pope, whose use of rhyme she followed and John Milton whose footsteps she followed in attempting an epic. However, what is most significant in this particular preface is the young poet's poetic philosophy. She upholds poetry as the greatest of arts a number of times throughout the preface. She rejoices the fact that unlike during the days of Pope, even women have the freedom to write poetry, which, according to her is "the parent of liberty, and of all the fine arts". She justifies her choice of subject matter for her epic by referring to the Battle of Marathon as a great battle guided by patriotic spirit and heroic virtue, and the poem about it as capable of rousing the greatest feelings of liberty. We must remember that she was only 14 years of age when this book was published. She was fascinated by Greek classicism and the epic form, believed in the importance of human liberty and freedom, and was aware that for her gender, writing poetry was still a novelty. *The Battle of Marathon* is significant because here, we see the young poet's uninhibited expression of her thoughts on women, liberty and poetry, as well as her desire to be part of a long tradition of male poets such as Homer, Aeschylus, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley.

The desire to be part of that tradition is further revealed in her celebration of the human genius in the title poem of *An Essay on Mind and Other Poems* (1826). "An Essay on Mind" is bound to make the

reader recall Pope's *An Essay on Man* (1733) in the choice of the title as well as the style of the verse. While Pope's subject in his poem was the affirmation of faith by reminding mankind of his fallen state, E.B. Browning's poem extols the greatness of the human mind and its greatness revealed through metaphysics, science, history, and most significantly through poetry.

For Poesy's whole essence, when defined,
Is elevation of the reasoning mind,
When inward sense from Fancy's page is taught,
And moral feeling ministers to Thought.

*(An Essay on Mind
and Other Poems, 69)*

With such lines as mentioned above, she exalts the role of poetry in mankind's achievement of perfection. She says that a poet must derive inspiration from nature and celebrates the greatness of Shakespeare's drama, Milton's epic, Pope and Horace's satire, while echoing Wordsworth's worship of nature.

Two of the poems in the volume are tributes to Lord Byron on his death. "Stanzas on the Death of Lord Byron" begins with the announcement,

HE was, and is not! Grecia's trembling shore,
Sighing through all her palmy groves, shall tell
That Harold's pilgrimage at last is o'er

...

For lo! The great Deliv'rer breathes farewell! (117, lines
1-5)

From *The Battle of Marathon*, we already know what great significance liberty had for her. In this, E.B. Browning resembled her Romantic period predecessors, and like them believed that where there is liberty, "the arts, genius, every congenial talent of the mind, spring up spontaneously, and unite in forming one bright garland of glory around the brow of independence" (*The Battle of Marathon*, XI). Thus, Lord Byron who had joined the Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire and died of a fever, is in the young poet's view, a hero, a "great Deliv'rer". She repeats the same sentiments in "Stanzas

Occasioned by a Passage in Mr. Emerson's Journal" where through the voice of a Captain Demetrius laments the loss of Lord Byron whose name is considered synonymous with liberty, thus:

Name us the generous and the free,
And we must think of him!
For his voice resounded through our land
Like the voice of liberty,
As when the war-trump of the wind,
Upstirs our dark blue sea. (*An Essay on Mind and Other Poems*, 127)

Similar love for human liberty and fascination with heroism and martyrdom for its cause is revealed in poems like "On a Picture of Riego's Widow" and "Riga's Last Song". Inspired by a picture of Teresa del Riego, the widow of the Spanish revolutionary Rafael del Riego, who according to the poet, reveals her revolutionary thought by refusing to exhibit her tears publicly. Ironically, her picture has been put up in an exhibition, and the poet-speaker says that an ordinary viewer wouldn't recognize the grief she has within her. Calling her Spain's daughter and recalling her husband's sacrifice for Spain, the poet associates revolutionary heroism with Riego and his widow. "Riga's Last Song" similarly commemorates another revolutionary martyr who died for the cause of Greece's liberty. It is a dramatic monologue where Riga delivers his last speech before being executed by the Turks. It is a speech full of patriotic fervour expressing hope for the future liberty of his country. As he stands before the executioner's block, he says:

I go to death-but I leave behind
The stirrings of Freedom's mighty mind;
Her voice shall arise from plain to sky,
Her steps shall tread where my ashes lie!

(*An Essay on Mind and Other Poems*, 144)

The above-mentioned poems show us what importance revolutionary thought as well as an engagement with history had for E.B. Browning in her poetry. Her free expression of her radicalism, revolutionary thought

and free association with great male poets of the past must be considered without forgetting the fact that this volume was published anonymously. Thus, her open revelation of what she believed in must have been due to the knowledge that the volume would probably not be recognized as that of a woman's work.

When she published with her own name for the first time in 1838, she was already known through the individual poems she published in magazines and journals. Her *The Seraphim and Other Poems* (1838) can be interpreted as her hesitant attempt to enter the masculinist world of Victorian era literature by donning the identity of a Christian visionary poetess. Her preface to the volume continues to participate in the discourse of poetry and the place of religious theme in poetry. Echoing P.B. Shelley's "A Defense of Poetry", she declares that "Poetry is essentially truthfulness" (xiii), and justifies the religious theme in "The Seraphim" by pointing out that every poetic endeavour is a quest for the sublime and the beautiful which in truth is "the true face of God" (xvi). "The Seraphim" is a verse drama in the style and manner of Aeschylus' tragedy. But this tragedy is a Christian one, with Christ portrayed in the figure of the tragic hero. The drama reveals to us the conflict between faith and fear a person might have through the conversation between two seraphs – Ador and Zerah. It also reveals the benevolence and the great sacrifice of God as the two seraphs witness the crucifixion of Christ. By dramatizing the crucifixion of Christ which she believed is a higher tragedy than Prometheus' E.B. Browning appears to be rejecting her earlier affinity to "Promethean spirits", the over-reachers, the questers and the heroes of liberty. From a fascination with classicism and Romantic rebellion she appears to be influenced by the Christian vision of the benevolent God, whose son was sacrificed for atoning the sins of man.

Among the number of sonnets and ballads in the volume, "The Poet's Vow", "The Romaunt of Margret" and "A Romance of the Ganges" are worth-mentioning here. "The Poet's Vow", first published in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1836, portrays the flight of a poet from human society which is filled with evil, as well as his beloved. The lonely and

reclusive life that is often believed to be the lot of a poet, is expressed here. Yet, we find that the concerned poet of the poem finds it impossible to separate himself from the world he renounced. In the first part of “The Poet’s Vow”, the poet cries out to the earth as he takes his vow:

“Hear me forswear man’s sympathies,
His pleasant yea and no –
His riot on the piteous earth
Whereon his thistles grow –
His changing love – with stars above!
His pride – with graves below! – (*The Seraphim
and Other Poems*, 88)

What is significant in the above passage is the poet/speaker’s evident distrust of the inconstancies and the pride of man he sees around him. Yet, as he grows weary of such a world and desires to abandon it, in the second part, we see him leaving behind his “fair bride” Rosalind despite her various protestations. Rosalind’s plight is shared by Margret and Luti in “The Romaunt of Margret” and “A Romance of the Ganges”. They look for emotional security from the men they know and associate it with the only place they know – home. However, in each of the ballads we see that they are abandoned, and often made to realise the inconsistencies of human relationships. Similar ballads make up the poems in her next volume *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1844). “The Romaunt of the Page” and “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship” are sentimental ballads that deal with the same themes of love and betrayal, abandonment and grief seen in “The Romaunt of Margret” and “A Romance of the Ganges” which had contributed to E.B. Browning’s fame after the publication of *The Seraphim and Other Poems*.

“The Romaunt of Page” is a ballad where a lady who follows her newly wedded Knight to battle disguised as his page. During their return from battle, in the course of a conversation, the Knight laughs at the notion of a woman following her husband to the battlefield as his servant. He says that if his wife had done the same thing, he would not have loved her as a wife, since by doing so, she would have been “unwomaned”. The

Knight declares that if it were his wife, he “Would love her as (his) serviter, / But little as (his) wife” (*Poems*, 164). After knowing her husband’s opinion, the page-wife chooses to die in the hands of the enemy rather than follow him home.

Many contemporary reviewers ofpraised the ballad for its originality and remaining true to the ballad form. However, later critics have tended to see a subversive tone in it. This subversion may be recognized in the lady-page’s rejection of the ideals of womanhood upheld by her husband-Knight. Similar rewriting of conventional notion of the passive woman can be seen in “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship” where Lady Geraldine, grand and rich, admired by many a nobleman, speaks out her affections for a poor poet. Among a gathering of aristocratic men, Lady Geraldine invites Bertram the poet, to her mansion and qualifies her invitation with these lines:

“I am seeking
More distinction than these gentlemen think
worthy
Of my claim.
“Ne’ertheless, you see, I seek it – not because I
am a
Woman,” –
...
“But because my woods in Sussex have some
purple
Shades at gloaming,
Which are worthy of a king in state, or poet in his
Youth. (Poems, 214-215)

The above lines show that Lady Geraldine is not just any lady with the conventional womanly aspirations. She has higher aspirations than the men around her believe her to have. By equating Bertram with “a king in state” and inviting him to sing in her woods, she reveals that she admires intellect and herself might have poetic aspirations. The poet however, turns out to be not so different from the other men she rejects as he reprimands her for refusing to marry any man. He questions her by what

right she rejects God's other creations (man) when she herself was made so noble and beautiful by the same God. Though he goes on to reveal his love for her and says he would have knelt down in front of her and declared it if he had thought of himself as worthy of her, he fails to see what truly lies in Lady Geraldine's heart. By the time he realises that she loves him, it was too late, and since she was not the one to forgive easily, ends up losing her company. In both "The Romaunt of the Page" and "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" we see that it is the men's notion of what a woman should be or do that results in the loss of their professed loves.

SAQ

What identity does E.B. Browning put on when she first enters the literary market with her own name? (30 words)

Illustrate your answer to the above question. (50 words)

An important poem in the 1844 volume is "A Vision of Poets". In what looks like an amplification of "The Poet's Vow", E.B. Browning shows in this poem that it is not enough to abandon society and embrace oneness with the earth in order to be a true poet. "A Vision of Poets" narrates the dream-vision of a poet who is led by an angelic lady to experience the meaning of true poetry. The lady leads him to drink from pools which represent the "World's sadness", the "World's love" and the "World's cruelty". After drinking from the third pool, he wakes up into another dream-vision where he stands in a church in front of God, and witnesses numerous poets from the past walking towards the altar with bleeding hearts. He is made to see that only through suffering and self-abnegation, it is possible to be a true poet.

For E.B. Browning's contemporary reviewers however, the most important poem in the volume was "A Drama of Exile", the first one. She uses the same model of the critically approved voice of the Christian visionary poetess which she had used in "The Seraphim". Like "The Seraphim", this too is a verse drama about the moments following the fall of Adam and Eve. As claimed by E.B. Browning herself in the preface, "A Drama of Exile" begins where Milton's *Paradise Lost* ends. Yet, this verse drama is a revision of the masculinist narrative as it provides a feminine perspective to the narrative by showing us Eve in her grief and repentance as she cries to Adam:

O Adam, Adam! By the name of Eve –
Thine Eve, thy life – which suits me little now,
Seeing that I confess myself thy death
And thine undoer, as the snake was mine, –
I do adjure thee, put me straight away,
Together with my name. Sweet, punish me!
(*Poems*, 23)

Lamenting the fact that she brought about Adam's fall along with her own, Eve is full of repentance and calls upon Adam to strike her with his anger and curses just as God had struck him with wrath and curses. Adam refuses to do so and through his acceptance of their collective sin, the poet portrays the redeeming power of love as well as God's grace. Thus, E.B. Browning's rendering of the narrative of the fall, in a way rewrites Milton's version by focussing not on "man's transgression" and "God's judgement", but by focussing on God's grace and man's (rather woman's) capability for repentance and grief. While Milton's Adam rebukes Eve when she laments the loss of Eden, E.B. Browning's Adam strengthens Eve through his love.

E.B. Browning's preoccupation with the status of women in Victorian society in general and the specific condition of the woman poet also finds expression in the sonnet pair "To George Sand: A Desire" and "To George Sand: A Recognition", written in celebration of George Sand's courage to be different from contemporary women. Her love for liberty is expressed through her disdain for the oppression of poor children

through manual labour in “The Cry of the Children”. With the positive reception of *Poems* (1844) contemporary readers and reviewers more or less missing the subversive tone in many poems in it, E.B. Browning’s reputation as a great poet of the era was firmly established. This volume was also instrumental in establishing her relationship with Robert Browning, from literary to love, from epistolary to marriage. Her next volume of poetry would not be published before 1850, when she was a married woman and a mother, and had made her home in Florence.

Many of E.B. Browning’s ballads are a reassessment of the Victorian ideals of the feminine which the ballads appear to appeal to. Though at the time they were written, neither the poet nor readers may have approached the ballads in the context of a separate feminine tradition, many of her 20th century feminist interpreters attempt to do so. In *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origin of a New Poetry*, Dorothy Mermin argues that E.B. Browning’s ballads examine “the myths and fantasies of nineteenth-century womanhood”, including “the virtues of self-repression and self-sacrifice” they seem to affirm (90-91). Other critics who recognize a subversive dimension in her ballads are Helen Cooper and Glennis Stephenson.

Check Your Progress

1. Mention the two poems in *An Essay on Mind and Other Poems* which are tributes to Lord Byron.
Hint: “Stanzas on the Death of Lord Byron” and “Stanzas Occasioned by a Passage in Mr. Emerson’s Journal”
2. Why did E.B. Browning’s political and radical poems get sidelined in the years decades following her death?
Hint: Refusal of critics to look at her poetic voice in association with serious subjects that male poets deal with, popularity of her sentimental ballads and sonnets, birth of the legend surrounding her and Robert Browning’s love-life.
3. What literary tradition did E.B. Browning attempt to follow in her poetic career?
Hint: The male literary tradition ranging from Homer to Milton, Aeschylus to Shakespeare, etc.
4. What is the similarity between the ballads “The Poet’s Vow”, “The Romaunt of Margret”, “A Romance of the Ganges” and “The Romaunt of the Page”?
Hint: They all represent abandoned or jilted women.
5. Why did contemporary reviewers miss the subversive tone in the ballads?
Hint: Due to the high degree of sentimentality and melodrama.

II.2: Later Poems (1850-1861)

Sonnets from the Portuguese (1850) was the first volume published by E.B. Browning after moving to Italy. As mentioned in the previous unit,

it is a collection of 44 sonnets written between 1845-46 and is a testimony to her changing relationship with Robert Browning. It was published in the 1850 edition of *Poems*. As some of the most read sonnets in the volume have already been discussed in the previous unit, we will not be revisiting them here.

Casa Guidi Windows written in two parts between 1848 and 1851, followed *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. In what appears to be her own liberty from constraints that compelled her to cater to her critics and reviewers, with *Casa Guidi Windows*, E.B. Browning plunges headlong into contemporary politics revisiting her earlier themes of liberty and heroism. Except for a short advertisement to the volume, this is probably the first book of poetry where the poet felt no need to explain herself, or justify her work through a preface. Part I of the poem takes us straight to the street outside Casa Guidi in Florence, at the heart of a revolutionary moment when a child is heard singing “*O bellalibertà*”. With a reference to the glories of the Italian Renaissance when art and beauty flourished, the poet celebrates the Italian revolution for unification. Recalling artists like Giotto and Michelangelo from the past, and looking at the great crowd gathered in the streets, she rejoices with them and declares her wish to go hand in hand with the child and sing in praise of liberty rather than lamenting the sorry state of Italy in bondage. The immediate historical moment that forms the subject of the poem is 12th September, 1847 when Leopold II had granted the right to “The citizens to use their civic force / To guard their civic home” (*Casa Guidi Windows*, 32). The poet marks this moment as the first light of “Italian freedom”. The hope and celebratory mood of the first part however gives way to disillusionment and doubt in Part II. Referring to her exultation of Italian history and people and her joyous hope for the Italian cause, she mournfully writes:

Alas, for songs and hearts! O Tuscany,
O Dante’s Florence, is the type too plain?
Didst thou, too, only sing of liberty,
As little children ... (*Casa Guidi
Windows*, 84)

Duke Leopold's patriotism and love for his people, which she had praised immensely in the first part are now described as one among "oaths of perjurers" (87). With hopes of Italy's liberty dashed by Leopold's giving in to Austrian powers, she says she "repent me of my fault / That ever I believed the man was true" (89). The sight that greets the poet outside her window is no longer the celebration and hope for a cause, but rebellion. The streets are still filled with people, but they are also filled with Austrian military forces. However, their celebratory songs and dances have been replaced by revolutionary songs. While she is dejected at the turn of events, she celebrates the people for their undaunting spirit and love for liberty, and for how "they boiled / And bubbled in the cauldron of the street!" (92).

While it may be considered natural for E.B. Browning to be inspired to write on a subject that she witnessed so close at hand, what is significant in this poem is that we get a glimpse into her rising frustration with England for its inaction. She says:

A cry is up in England, which doth ring
The hollow world through, that for ends of trade
And virtue, and God's better worshipping,
We henceforth should exalt the name of Peace,
And leave those rusty wars that eat the soul, - (109)

Through the above lines, she hints that England's foreign policy is dictated by its trade, a sense of English virtue, religion and considerations of peace in that order. She rejects peace which does not add up to fellowship or mercy. She says, even with her woman's heart she prefers the gunshots and battle-cry to "a Peace which sits / Beside the hearth in self-commended mood, / And takes no thought how wind and rain by fits / Are howling out of doors against the good / Of the poor wanderer" (111 -112).

Contemporary readers and critics who had taught themselves to accept E.B. Browning as one of their greatest poets and had allowed her little adventures into few masculine styles and themes failed to receive *Casa Guidi Windows* in the same vein. Her foray into a political theme was critiqued. But her celebrating the courage of the revolutionary Italians

while denouncing England's non-participation in the revolution met with much vehement criticism. The publication of this and the 1860 volume *Poems Before Congress* where she included poems like "Napoleon III in Italy" and "A Curse for a Nation" in a way turned the tide against E.B. Browning's fame. "A Curse for Nation" was misinterpreted as a curse upon England and she was dubbed as an "unpatriotic fanatic" while the poem was labelled as a "hysterical" curse upon her own nation. Her own "Preface" to *Poems Before Congress* was no argument against those vicious criticisms. While the preface contains various concepts such as freedom, nationality and patriotism put forward in order to support her stance about the political conditions in Italy, it also carries an indictment against England for failing to support Italy in its struggle. These two publications also changed the way critics looked at *Aurora Leigh* (1856) which was published between the two and which, it must be pointed out, had received the most critical attention.

Aurora Leigh was dedicated to John Kenyon as E.B. Browning's most matured work. As it traces the life of Aurora Leigh in her struggle to be a poet by negotiating with the options available to her as a woman, the narrative has often been considered to be a *Kunstlerroman*. While some saw it as "a modern epic" (Charles Hamilton Aide), "the greatest poem of the century" (John Ruskin), and as a work that reflects on "some of the most anxious issues of our time" (*The British Quarterly Review*), there were others who had issues with the mixing of poetry and prose, the unfeminine self-consciousness of the protagonist as well as the expression of the poet's philosophical, social and political views. Positive or negative, the immediate responses to *Aurora Leigh* shows that it touched the most sensitive part of the Victorian English society. Through *Aurora Leigh*, E.B. Browning confronted questions associated with women's work, education, property rights and systemic prostitution in their complex relationship with burning social issues such as the gulf between social classes, the threat of class warfare, the reforms it precipitated, etc. Therefore, out from the identity of the Christian poet-prophetess, while some of her critics cast her in the identity of a modern-day sage, for most reviewers it was too audacious, too radical and too

unfeminine. The *Dublin University Magazine* blamed the poet for donning “the gait and garb of a man” and writing a book that should in fact be banned from women’s view. Yet, Aurora Leigh was not born out of nowhere. A close reading of many of E.B. Browning’s earlier poems would reveal that *Aurora Leigh* is the culmination of all the questions and concerns that had preoccupied her since the beginning.

As Aurora Leigh talks about her childhood, she says she “felt a mother-want about the world” (6) and a few lines later tells us “I am like, / They tell me, my dear father” (11). In this we sense E.B. Browning’s own acute awareness of the lack of a literary mother and her journey into the literary world by emulating the literary fathers. Aurora Leigh’s desire to be a prophet-poet, and gain fame echoes the poetic voices of “A Vision of Fame” (*an Essay on Mind and Other Poems*, 1826) and “A Vision of Poets” (*Poems*, 1844). In fact, describing her growth as a poet in the second book, Aurora quote’s from E.B. Browning’s “A Vision of Poets” about how fame comes to poets only after they are long dead; thus, reflecting Aurora’s desire for fame and yet unawareness of what it takes to be a true poet. Romney Leigh is a Victorian era modern version of the knight in “The Romaunt of the Page” who believed that women’s place is in the home and they had no business in the public sphere fighting battles and expressing heroism. Aurora initially refuses to marry Romney as he did not believe in the literary capabilities of a woman and marries him only later when he understands the value of her poetry or work. Love, work, fame and independence has to come together for Aurora and Romney to achieve a true union reflecting her own relationship with Robert Browning. The various passages on the greatness of poetry and the significance of poets in this world that we had seen in E.B. Browning’s previous poems and prefaces that accompanied her volumes are repeated here when the young Aurora discovers poetry.

The celebration of George Sand’s boldness, Lady Geraldine’s assertion of a choice and voice, the page-wife’s heroic defence of her knight-husband, the anguish of the jilted Luti and several other such instances from the poet’s previous works are echoed through Aurora, Romney and

Marian, the three main characters in the verse novel. She describes the poets as “the only truth tellers”, and “the only teachers who instruct mankind” (33-34). Describing herself as a wild bird in comparison to her aunt who had lived a caged life, Aurora goes on to describe the kind of education she received under her aunt’s guidance. We see Mary Wollstonecraft’s early influence on E.B. Browning in Aurora’s impassioned outburst:

By the way,
The women’s works are symbolical.
We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,
Producing what? A pair of slippers, sir,
To put on when you’re weary – or a stool
To stumble over and vex you ... “curse that
stool!”
Or else at best, a cushion, where you lean
And sleep, and dream of something we are not
But would be for your sake. Alas, alas!
(20)

Lines such as the ones above, speaking volumes about women’s education, women’s work, and women’s role in society occur throughout the verse novel. No wonder, it was too radical and unconventional for a number of contemporary reviewers. However, those were the same instances within the book which probably made it such a significant work for E.B. Browning’s feminist critics. In the 1970s when feminist critics, in their search for women writers rediscovered E.B. Browning, it was *Aurora Leigh* which received the most attention. In *Aurora Leigh*, they saw the risings of an early feminist voice. It is therefore, to understand the significance of her gender in her work and to comprehend the trajectory of her changing dynamics with her readers and critics that *Aurora Leigh* must be read.

Check Your Progress

1. What is being celebrated in *Casa Guidi Windows*? Why did the poem meet with negative criticism?

Hints: Liberty, Italy's revolutionary struggle for it, the people's undaunted spirit. Negative criticisms came due to the political nature of the poem and the indictment on England for its lack of support.

2. Which earlier works of E.B. Browning culminate in the verse novel *Aurora Leigh*?

Hints: "The Romaunt of the Page", "Lady Geraldine's Courtship", "The Cry of the Children", etc.

A cursory look at the various prefaces that accompanied E.B. Browning's early publications may help us to see where the young poet located herself vis-à-vis the long poetic tradition that came before her. As a young girl, she taught herself Greek and Hebrew, classical subjects which were confined to the curriculum of boys' education. As she walked on a somewhat forbidden territory by gaining forbidden knowledge, similarly, she treaded on forbidden grounds by following the masculine poetic tradition of Homer to Aeschylus, Milton to Pope, and Byron and Shelley. As a woman of the Victorian era, she must have been well aware of the presumptuous nature of her poetry, and this is revealed in her prefaces. Her presumptuousness would have been seen in not only her following the footsteps of her poetic "grandfathers", but also in rejecting the tradition of her poetic "grandmothers". For, she clearly refused to follow the latter's footsteps by rejecting the feminine themes which they wrote about. This self-knowledge, in a way helped her to endear herself to her

2.4 Probable Questions and Suggested Answers

1. Illustrate how E.B. Browning emulates her "literary fathers" in her poetry.

Answer [Hints]: Influence of Greek classics on E.B. Browning; Childhood preoccupation with Homeric themes and style; Inspiration derived from Milton's Christian epic, Pope's rhyme, Wordsworth's Romanticism and the figure of the Romantic hero, the Promethean quester seen in the works of Byron and Shelley. The above influences and preoccupations can be found significantly in some of her early works such as *The Battle of Marathon*, *An Essay on Mind and Other Poems*, "The Seraphim" and "A Drama of Exile". *An Essay on Mind and*

Other Poems stand out above all as an example of the poet's walking on the footsteps of her "literary fathers".

2. What is the implication of looking at E.B. Browning as a representative Victorian era "Poetess".

Answer [Hints]: By calling her a remarkable "poetess" of the times, many reviewers had placed E.B. Browning in the tradition of a number of later Romantic and early Victorian female writers who had come before her. Most female writers were at that time writing on subjects that did not really challenge or question the status quo of the times. She herself was very clear about which tradition she wanted to be cast in, as is evident from her prefaces and poems like *Aurora Leigh*. By looking at E.B. Browning as one of them, we would be ignoring her more powerful works where she deals with pertinent issues such as the women question, social and economic conditions, politics, slavery, etc.

3. What earliest concern of E.B. Browning's can be seen in her *The Battle of Marathon*? What influences do you think, contributed to the birth of those concerns in her? In which of her other works do you see that concern?

Answer [Hints]: *The Battle of Marathon* reveals E.B. Browning's earliest concern with the question of human liberty and freedom; her reading of Greek classics and the influence of the second-generation Romantics; other works where she deals with this theme are some of the poems in *An Essay on Mind and Other Poems*, "The Cry of the Children", "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point (refer to the previous unit), *Casa Guidi Windows*, *Aurora Leigh* and some of the poems in *Poems Before Congress*.

4. Which poems established her identity as a Christian visionary poet in the early part of her career? How does she deal with religious theme in those poems?

Answer [Hints]: Mainly the two poems "The Seraphim" and "A Drama of Exile". "The Seraphim" is written in the form of a Greek tragedy

casting Christ in the figure of a tragic hero. “A Drama of Exile” is a revision of the Christian narrative of the fall from Eve’s perspective. You may refer to excerpts from the preface to *The Seraphim and Other Poems* for what she says regarding her dealing with a religious theme.

5. Do you see an imprint of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in “A Drama of Exile”? Explain.

Answer [Hints]: “A Drama of Exile” is clearly derived from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. The poet herself claims in the preface to *Poems* (1844) that the drama begins where *Paradise Lost* ended. It can also be read as a revision of Milton’s portrayal of the fall by showing Adam and Eve in a different light.

6. Identify the poems in which E.B. Browning deals with the women question of her times. What are her central questions regarding the women question?

Answer [Hints]: Many of her poems address the women question. The most significant ones may be the sonnet pair in *Poems* (1844) to George Sand, “The Romaunt of the Page”, “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship” and *Aurora Leigh* where she addresses the lack of available options for a woman apart from getting a husband and staying at home, and where she shows the amount of strength or courage required to transcend those limited options and live the life one wants, whether by being a poet or a husband. She also addresses the sorry plight of women who submit themselves to that patriarchal order and depend on men for love and support through “The Romaunt of Margret”, “A Romance of the Ganges”, “The Poet’s Vow”, etc.

7. Which of her later poems do you think recast E.B. Browning in the identity of a modern-day sage from that of a Christian visionary poet?

Answer [Hints]: All the three later volumes – *Casa Guidi Windows*, *Aurora Leigh* and *Poems Before Congress*. By commenting on burning contemporary issues, she emerges as a formidable voice of the times.

Bring up excerpts from the poems and look at the reception history of these works (refer to the previous unit as well).

8. Discuss the significance of *Casa Guidi Windows* in reading E.B. Browning as a formidable political commentator of her times.

Answer [Hints]: *Casa Guidi Window* is very topical as it refers to historical events which practically unfurled in the streets of Florence outside E.B. Browning's apartment. At the time when it took place, it was the most burning issue in Europe. By commenting on such an issue and openly expressing on which side she stood, she was not only commenting on the event but also garnering support for the cause.

9. E.B. Browning's socio-political concerns were not only for England or Italy, but also for America. Which of her poems illustrate this fact?

Answer [Hints]: Mainly the two poems published in *The Liberty Bell* in Boston, where she expressed a staunch anti-slavery sentiment apart from exposing the hypocrisy of America's founding myth. These poems are "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" and "A Curse for a Nation" (refer to the previous unit).

10. Why do you think *Aurora Leigh* was so significant in the rediscovery of E.B. Browning's literary tradition?

Answer [Hints]: By dealing with questions about women's education, women's work, and options available to women regarding life and work in *Aurora Leigh*, E.B. Browning was actually dwelling on questions that mid-Victorian era feminist activists were asking. It was therefore picked up as her most significant work in the line of proto-feminists voices such as that of Mary Wollstonecraft. You may elaborate by citing lines from the verse novel.

2.5 Important Books/Essays

1. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *The Battle of the Marathon: A Poem Written in Early Youth* (1820). Reprint 1891. https://archive.org/stream/battleofmarathon1891brow/battleofmarathon1891brow_djvu.txt
2. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *An Essay on Mind and Other Poems* (1826). Reprint (as *The Earlier Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1826-1833*, edited by R.H. Shepherd). <https://archive.org/stream/earlierpoemseli00browgoog/earlierpoemseli00browgoog_djvu.txt>
3. Elizabeth Barrett Browning. *The Seraphim and Other Poems*. 1838. Digitized by Google Books.
4. Elizabeth Barrett Browning. *The Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. 1844. Digitized by Google Books.
5. Elizabeth Barrett Browning. *Casa Guidi Windows*. 1851. Digitized by Google Books.
6. Elizabeth Barrett Browning. *Aurora Leigh, and other Poems* (1856). Edited by Cora Kaplan (1978). Women's Press.
7. Elizabeth Barrett Browning. *Poems Before Congress*. 1860. Digitized by Google Books.

2.6 References and suggested Reading

Dorothy Mermin. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry*. University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Elizabeth Johnston. "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Textual Bodies and the Rhetoric of Gender in Nineteenth-Century Critical Discourse". *The Third Space: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Culture*. 4.2. 2004.

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Marjorie Stone. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Macmillan, 1995.

Rebecca Stott and Simon Avery. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*.
Routledge, 2002.

Andrew Radford and Mark Sandy (ed.). *Romantic Echoes in the
Victorian Era*. Routledge, 2008.

The Browning's Correspondence. [Available in various volumes]

Unit 3

Robert Browning: 'The Bishop Orders his Tomb'

Unit Structure :

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introducing the Poet
- 3.3 An Overview of His Works
- 3.4 Browning's 'Dramatic Monologue'
- 3.5 Reading the Poem: 'The Bishop Orders his Tomb'

- 3.6 Critical Reception
- 3.7 Summing up
- 3.8 References and Suggested Readings

3.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit introduces you to yet another preeminent figure of Victorian poetry, Robert Browning, who was also Tennyson's contemporary and the artist of the 'dramatic monologue'. Attempts have been made to familiarize you with the poet's background, some of his personal details, the period he lived in and the several literary concerns that shaped his life and career. Thus this unit has been structured to help you to

- place* the poet in his proper historical context
- identify* the nature of his literary preoccupations
- understand* the significance of the 'dramatic monologue'
- explore* the nuances of the poems, and
- articulate* your own critical response

3.2 INTRODUCING THE POET

Browning's fame as a poet is closely involved with his reputation as a philosopher of optimism. His genius is robust and vigorous. He has such

hopefulness and belief in human nature that it shrinks from no man, however clothed and cloaked in evil and however miry with failings. His investigations of evil are profoundly consistent with an indomitable optimism. One can say “All’s right with the world,” when one looks at the smiling face of things.

Browning was an erudite scholar and one of the most prolific writers of the Victorian era, but with little formal education. After the age of fourteen, Browning had no regular education, but in the library at home, he read widely and acquired the taste for out-of-the way books which was to furnish him with his vast but undisciplined erudition. “Ossian” and Byron were his first masters, but in 1826 he came across the poems of Shelley and became an avowed disciple of the “Sun-treader”. Attendance at the theatres roused his ambition to be a “maker of plays”; but first he conceived the idea of writing a poem, an opera, and a novel, each to appear under a different pseudonym. Nothing could be said of the opera and the novel, but the poem was “Pauline” which came out anonymously in 1833.

Stop to Consider:

Love for books was nurtured in Browning by his well-to-do parents. The Brownings resided near Dulwich and the gallery there was one of the favourite haunts of the young Robert Browning. His father shared with him a passion for old tales of intrigue and violence, and the two followed together the latest crime-stories in the newspapers. In the light of Browning’s subsequent predilection for criminal types and morally wrapped characters, this early shaping influence upon his imagination requires emphasis. For the austere atmosphere of worship in the religion of Evangelical dissent in which his mother instructed him he retained a reverence which long afterwards he expressed in his poetry.

Between 1841 and 1846 Browning published eight little pamphlets entitled *Bells and Pomegranates*. The first of these was “Pippa Passes” which was later on to become one of Browning’s most popular poems. *Bells* also contained dramas; *A Blot on the ‘Scutcheon’* was the cause of a bitter quarrel with Macready. After writing *A Soul’s Tragedy*

Browning abandoned his long effort to write for the stage. He had found in the dramatic monologue the medium ideally suited to his genius. Of poems in this form, *Dramatic Lyrics* contained among other things, “My Last Duchess” and “Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister”. *Dramatic Romances* and *Lyrics* included, with much else on a somewhat lower level, the lastingly popular “How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix”, “The Flight of the Duchess”, the first nine sections of “Saul”, and that masterpiece of historical and psychological insight, “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed’s Church”.

In 1844, Elizabeth Barrett published her *Poems* in one of which Browning read a commendation of himself whereupon he addressed her a letter of admiration which led at once to friendship and soon to love. On September 12, 1846, the lovers eloped and settled in Italy which was their home from 1847 till Mrs. Browning’s death in 1861. To Mrs. Browning, Italy meant mainly contemporary politics; to him, painting, music, history, landscape and the complex temperament of a fascinating people. He observed disapprovingly the elaborate ritual of Catholic worship, contrasted it with the simple piety of English dissent, and from his reading of Strauss’s *Leben Jesu* drew out the further contrast between faith and rationalism. The Brownings visited London in 1855 and *Men and Women*, a collection of poems got published. The enthusiasm of Rossetti and his circle increased the immediate sale of this new work. But this soon dropped off and though reviews were generally favorable few readers seem to have discerned the surpassing excellence of many of these poems. Carlyle had long been Browning’s admirer; Landor ranked him with Chaucer and Ruskin praised him in his *Modern Painters*.

Stop to Consider:

In 1860, Browning discovered on a Florentine bookstall an “Old Yellow Book” containing a collection of records of a murder trial at Rome and the execution of the murderer in 1698. Only gradually did the poet realize that this was the material precisely suited to his interest in psychology, in the criminal mind, and in Italian social

history, and to the technique of the dramatic monologue. Meanwhile, his wife's health was declining; she was overwrought when Italian hopes languished after the Peace of Villafranca; and she died in 1861. Life in Florence was henceforth impossible for Browning and he left the city never to return; and with his son made London his home with occasional sojourns in France. *Dramatis Personae* (1864) shows a shift of interest from Italian to English themes and an alert attention to such vital issues of the day as the Darwinian hypothesis.

Browning's masterpiece *The Ring and the Book*, was published in four installments (1868-1869) and received with almost universal acclaim. In popular estimation Browning was henceforth second only to Tennyson among living poets and by many he was accorded the first place.

Balaustion's Adventure (1871) is his first extended incursion into the field of classical mythology which he was now for some years to cultivate diligently. To 1872 belongs *Fifine at the Fair* which involved fascinating study in erotic psychology. The fascination which crime and the mentality of criminals had for Browning, led him to write *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* (1873). It concerns an actual contemporary French trial involving a contested will and a suspected suicide. Another psychological study of villainy is *The Inn Album* (1875) founded upon the case of a card-sharper in *The Greville Memoirs*.

Browning's enthusiasm for life, his vitality, his insistence on strenuous endeavor did much to stem the tide of moral pessimism which infected so much of the European literature of the century. Browning's was a philosophy of imperfection. As he wrote in "Abt Vogler":

"the evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound...
on the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven the perfect round."

It was the striving toward perfection rather than the attainment that mattered most to him; the onward going rather than the goal itself. Browning's determined optimism found expression in poem after poem. In "Abt Vogler", Browning reiterates that "all we have willed or hoped or dreamt of good shall exist". Browning did not share with Tennyson the contemporary doubts and crisis. While Tennyson wrote "The woods decay, the woods decay and fall" (Tithonus), Browning chose to write

on the incorrigible Pied Piper of Hamilton. His robust “Prospice” contrasts sharply with Tennyson’s quiet acceptance of death in “Crossing the Bar”.

Stop to Consider:

There were many misconceptions about Browning’s robust and hearty confidence. Some opinions which has put into the mouths of his characters for dramatic purposes have often been misconstrued as his own. Even eminent scholars like Welleck and Warren have pronounced: “The oracular sayings of Victorian poets such as Browning which have struck many readers as revelatory often turn out to be mere portable versions of primeval truths.” Statements like:

God’s in his heaven,
All’s right with the world!

may appear very inadequate today. Browning did not merely glorify men, women, love and adventurous energy but he also explored the psyche of many twisted and damaged soul that dwelt beyond the usual Victorian horizon but the essence of the charge against him remains.

Browning’s vivid hope and trust in man is bound up with a strong and strenuous faith in God. As Arthur Symons says, “Browning’s Christianity is wider than our creeds, and it is all the more vitally Christian in that it never sinks into pietism.” Browning is never didactic, but his faith is the root of his art, and transforms and transfigures it. As a dramatic poet he is so impartial and can express all creeds with such ease that it is possible to prove him (as Shakespeare has been proved) a believer in everything and a disbeliever in anything.

In 1889, Browning chanced to come across the pages of Edward FitzGerald’s newly published *Letters* wherein he wrote in a passage: “Mrs. Browning’s death is rather a relief to me, I must say: no more *Aurora Leighs*, thank God!” This was supposedly addressed to a private correspondent and should not have been published; but agitated and enraged, Browning wrote the scathing verses *To Edward FitzGerald who Thanked God My Wife was Dead*. The painful episode is of biographical importance because it shows the passionate tenderness with which he cherished the memories of his dead wife and also because this

bitter episode hastened his end. Browning wrote prolifically but all his works are not of the same standard. His last collection of poems *Asolando: Fancies and Facts* was published just before his death in 1889 and was a collection of love lyrics, versified anecdotes and philosophical pronouncements. To a twenty-first century mind, many of his pronouncements of love, religion, and faith have become obsolete. However, his exuberant vitality can still be very attractive.

3.3 AN OVERVIEW OF HIS WORKS

In this section, I shall briefly give you an idea some of the works from Browning's literary oeuvre.

***Pippa Passes*:** *Pippa Passes* was published in 1841 as the first of a series of eight pamphlets under the general title *Bells and Pomegranates*. The poet's father bore the printing cost for the entire series. *Pippa Passes* is a product of Browning's first visit to Italy in 1838. The poem is set in Asolo, near Venice, where the poet was collecting materials for *Sordello* (1840). Pippa is a silk-winder who spends her holiday wandering through the small Italian town of Alonzo, singing songs and thinking of the local people whom she considers the most blessed. But in reality, the lives of these people are totally different from the innocent imaginings of Pippa.

The other pamphlets in the series of eight include *King Victor and King Charles* (1842), *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), *The Return of the Druses* (1843), *Colombe's Birthday* (1844) *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845), *Luria* and *A Soul's Tragedy* (1846)

***Sordello*:** Written in 1840, *Sordello* was received with severe criticism on account of the charges of obscurity of style and allusion. The poem provides a comprehensive view of the poet's mind and art in his early phase. The historical setting of *Sordello* is the strife between two rival factions, the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, in northern Italy in the thirteenth century. The protagonist is Sordello, a troubadour, praised by Dante but otherwise obscure. Arthur Symonds' characterization of the poem as a 'psychological epic' is apt, for the focus is the developing

conflict within the hero between egoism and sympathy, art and society, contemplation and action – that finally proves fatal to him.

Men and Women: This collection of poems was published in 1855. Browning himself felt that the contents showed him writing “lyrics with more music and painting than before, so as to get the people ear and see” and the volume was the first of his works to achieve some measure of popular success. Apart from “Love Among the Ruins”, the enigmatic “Childe Roland to The Dark Tower Came” and “A Toccata of Galuppi’s”, it included several mature examples of the dramatic monologue: *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *Bishop Blougram’s Apology*, *Andrea Del Sarto*, “Saul” and “Cleon”.

Andrea Del Sarto contrasts markedly with the exuberance of *Fra Lippo Lippi* (prescribed for the course) in that it is a classic study of moral and aesthetic failure. In this poem, Browning links up Andrea’s artistic failures to flaws in character.

Dramatis Personae: This is a collection of poems by Browning, published in 1864 and the first collection to appear after the death of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in 1861. Some of the most celebrated poems included in this volume are *Abt Vogler*, “Prospice”, “Rabbi Ben Ezra” and longer poems like “A Death in the Desert”, “Mr. Sludge”, “The Medium” “Caliban upon Setebos” etc.

“Caliban Upon Setebos” has been the most widely admired poem of *Dramatis Personae* (1864). Though occasioned by the intellectual convulsion resulting from the publication of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*, Browning’s Caliban has little to do Darwinian Theory. Rather, Browning’s subject is man’s inveterate tendency to create God in his own image. Several commentators have argued that Browning’s satiric target in this poem is orthodox Calvinism, which regarded man as corrupt and God as supreme whose will and justice are inscrutable.

In “Rabbi Ben Ezra”, the conflict between soul and flesh is condemned. This poem is an imaginative exercise, an attempt to express an ideal by a dramatic representation of a man, who has reached extreme old age without finding it necessary to despair. It is, as Stopford Brooke says, “a poem which only Browning could have written....” When the Rabbi in the quest of old age considers what his life has been and how God has

wrought it for eternity, Browning repeatedly affirms the nobility and superiority of man:

“Rejoice, we are allied
To that which doth provide
And not partake, effect and not receive”

The poem is not didactic but there is a sustained glow in which ethical passion and its splendour blend superbly.

The Ring and the Book: The Ring and the Book, an epic-length poem in twelve books and Browning’s acknowledged masterpiece was published in four instalments, 1868-69. Despite its enormous length (22,000 lines), this work was a notable success. It is based on an infamous triple murder that took place in Rome in 1698— a case that roused much excitement in its times, but, a century and a half later, was merely relegated to a chapter in the history of Roman judiciary. It was, as Carlyle is said to have told Browning, “an old Bailey story that might have been told in ten lines, and only wants forgetting”. Browning daringly chose to tell his “Roman murder story” ten times over from as many distinct points of view. The risk of boredom through repetition was minimized by having each character emphasize, suppress, and distort various elements of the case according to his own interests and motives.

Among the Victorian poets, Browning was one who wrote prolifically. It is difficult to discuss all of his poems within this limited space. Therefore, in this section I have given a very brief account of his works which could further arouse your interest in reading his other poems.

3.4 BROWNING’S ‘DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE’

Before explaining what a dramatic monologue is, let us have a look at the following lines:

“That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Fra Pandolf’s hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will’t please you sit and look at her?”

Some of you must be familiar with these lines from Browning’s *My Last Duchess*. These lines immediately tell us that a particular character is speaking out his feelings in front of an audience. A dramatic monologue is a type of lyric poem, in which a character in fiction or in history delivers a speech explaining his or her feelings, actions, or motives. The monologue is usually directed toward an audience who is present and listening but whose voice we do not hear, with the speaker’s words influenced by a critical situation. In the above lines, it is the Duke of Ferrara, speaking to an emissary about his dead Duchess whose painting is now hung on the wall.

SAQ:

Critics have noted that any lyric poem is always “overheard”. Does the ‘listener’ (or the reader) in the dramatic monologue “overhear” or “hear” the poem? (70 words)

.....
.....
.....

Influences on the dramatic monologue are both general and specific. In a general way, the dramatic tradition as a whole may have influenced the style of the monologue. Indeed, the style of the dramatic monologue, which attempts to evoke an entire story through representing part of it, may be called an endeavour to turn into poetry some features of drama.

Victorian poetry saw the high flowering of dramatic monologues with names like those of Tennyson’s, Arnold’s and Browning’s associated with the genre. Of the trio, it is Browning who is usually credited with perfecting the form. When discussing the poetic form of the dramatic monologue, it is rare for it not to be associated with Robert Browning. Browning has been regarded as the master of the dramatic monologue. Some critics are skeptical of his invention of the form, for dramatic monologue is evidenced in poetry preceding Browning; it is believed that his extensive and varied use of the dramatic monologue has significantly contributed to the form and has had an enormous impact on

modern poetry. As Preminger and Brogan argue, “The dramatic monologues of Robert Browning represent the most significant use of the form in post-Romantic poetry”.

Browning always wanted to be a successful dramatist. He found in the dramatic monologue, a poem in which a single speaker speaks to an imaginary listener, his true medium. Browning is like Shakespeare in the absolute centering of his interest in humanity and in his understanding of the fallibility of mankind. In the regular dramas, the inquiry into motive is sacrificed to interest in the plot. What men aspire to be and are not is a proper subject for discussion; but the plot demands action. Consequently he found his medium in the dramatic monologue, where a subject’s case could be presented from the inside. The characters of his dramatic monologues are often men and women caught at moments of anxiety and obsession. They are troubled with psychological and moral problems and hence their lasting appeal. Browning was more fascinated with negative characters (for instance, the brutal and egocentric Duke in *My Last Duchess*) because he felt that good characters gave few problems. Apart from *My Last Duchess*, other poems which can be cited as benchmarks in ‘dramatic monologue’ are *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *Caliban upon Setebos*, *Porphyria’s Lover* as well as the other poems in *Men and Women*.

Stop to Consider:

The Persona/Speaker and the Listener in Browning’s ‘Dramatic Monologues’

The personae/speakers in Browning’s poems are mainly known historical figures. Significantly, most of them are connoisseurs, artists, musicians, thinkers, or even manipulators. But even when the soliloquizers are not known historical figures, he establishes a physical context through carefully selected details, references, or objects. Each of the speaking voices is given an individual articulation, a turn of phrase, an emphasis, a pause, a reiteration, or an idiolect which serves to give them a particular trait. The distinguishing characteristic of Browning’s dramatic monologues is that they make new demands on the reader. The dramatic monologues of Browning are characterized by certain identifiable traits which, according to

Landow, are that, “The reader takes the part of the silent listener; the speaker uses a case-making argumentative tone; the reader completes the dramatic scene from within, by means of inference and imagination”. Critics have interpreted the third requirement, the reader’s interpretation and conclusion, as a suspension of the reader/listener between sympathy and judgment. The reader has a choice regarding the intent of the speaker, but he/she must remain removed until the speaker is done making his argument. Glenn Everett believes the role of the listener is one of discovery which engages the imagination, but the listener must remain detached and abstain from passing judgment until the work is known as a whole. Wagner and Lawlor urge that the role of the listener is passive; he/she “cannot help but hear”. The position of the listener is exactly “a passive receptor of a verbal *tour de force* that leaves him no opportunity for response”. On the other hand the typical Browning speaker is an “eloquent rhetorician” whose “dramatic situation itself is obviously only created by the presence of the other” (Wagner-Lawlor), the other is identified as the silent listener. The speaker characteristically uses strongly rhetorical language which distinguishes the dramatic monologue from the soliloquy. Both *Fra Lippo Lippi* and *A Grammarian’s Funeral* are dramatic monologues. The agenda of each speaker is quite different, as is the tone. Application of the three principles that characterize Browning’s dramatic monologues, as pointed out by Landow, could help the modern reader understand the unique intent of each poem more fully.

Check Your Progress:

1. Comment on Browning’s use of poetic persona in “Fra Lippo Lippi”. How effectively does Browning make use of historical detail to construct the persona? Use passages from the text to support your answer.
2. Discuss Browning’s use of the dramatic monologue in the poems prescribed for you. In what way does Browning posit a Victorian concern for ‘realism’ in his dramatic monologues?

3.5 READING THE POEMS

Reading 'The Bishop Orders his Tomb'

Published in his collection *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845), Browning's 'The Bishop Orders his Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church' is a dramatic monologue that presents a character study of a churchman of the Roman Catholic Church. His dramatic monologues are unequivocal explorations of the human soul, magnificent in their wide variety as he puts different types of life under analysis. Browning uses historical as well as imaginary figures, usually caught in a dramatic moment, to offer scrutiny of the culture, religion, and society of that time. While the bishop in the present poem is not a known historical figure, Browning creates a physical context by situating the poem at Saint Praxed which is a real church in Rome.

The ironic tone of the poem is established in the opening line itself: "Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!" (line1). The speaker, on his death bed, quotes the Ecclesiastes to suggest the futility of a material world. But in his monologue thereafter the spiritualism embedded in the ancient scripture is overtaken by his own essentially materialistic outlook as also his self-absorption in desiring to have a memorial built for him. That the speaker is a leader of a religious institution whose attachment to material possessions is expected to be minimal reflects ironically the moral corruption, greed and hunger for power that had supposedly seeped into the Church and its revered members in the post-Renaissance period as symbolised by the bishop.

Browning draws a character sketch of the bishop as a man whose only purpose in life, and in the afterlife, seems to be driven not by feelings of chastity and spirituality that a man of religion is expected to

pursue but rather by jealousy and materiality. As the bishop lay dying, he summons a group of listeners to his side, intent on passing onto them instructions regarding the construction of his tomb. He has difficulty in recollecting the exact relationship that he bears with his listeners and talks in unconscious, confused ramblings: “Nephews—sons mine ... ah God, I know not!” (line 3). He remembers a relationship that he once had with a woman (and whom he later refers to her as their mother). Evidently, notwithstanding the vow of celibacy that the bishop must have taken, he has fathered sons by her. His recalling the jealousy that his predecessor Gandolf felt because of his beautiful mistress is a reminder of his worldly and sensuous desires, and also ironically comments upon the decline in the spirituality that his vocation stipulates. The bishop’s rivalry with Gandolf did not end there for he is insistent that his tomb must be better than his rival’s since the latter had upstaged him in the choice of a most desired spot for burial. Even in death, thus, the dominant emotions in the bishop seem to be envy and greed. The language used by the bishop is steeped in violence and vulgar imagery:

And so, about this tomb of mine. I fought
With tooth and nail to save my niche, ye know:
--Old Gandolf cozened me, despite my care;
Shrewd was that snatch from out the corner South
He graced his carrion with, God curse the same! (Lines

15-19)

Browning’s penchant to employ dramatic irony in exposing the hypocrisy in religious matters is clearly seen in the feud that seems to run between the two men. By holding a position of responsibility in the church, the bishop should be naturally more inclined towards spirituality but is instead portrayed as consumed by petty jealousy and squabbling over a material tomb, thus forgetting the values of Christian piety.

The major part of the bishop's monologue centres around his obsessive desire to have a memorial in his name and his planning for the same. It is not enough for him to have a tomb inside the church but he also wants it to be a well-decorated one with the finest of materials used in its construction as a settling of scores with Gandolf for being deprived of his preferred burial spot:

And I shall fill my slab of basalt there,
.....
Peach-blossom marble all, the rare, the ripe
As fresh-poured red wine of a mighty pulse.
--Old Gandolf with his paltry onion-stone,
Put me where I may look at him! (Lines 25 -32)

He aims to go one better than his rival as the choice of a fine-grained black igneous rock ("basalt") over the low-quality marble ("onion-stone") used on Gandolf's tomb indicates. Moreover, it seems that the bishop had been planning his tomb for quite some time. In an opportune moment when his church caught fire, he had apparently stolen some precious stones ("lapis lazuli") and kept them carefully hidden in a vineyard to be used later in the building of his tomb. The manner of his description of the precious stone also betrays his violent and erotic tendency and a lack of true Christian faith:

Some lump, ah God, of lapis lazuli
Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape,
Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast... (Lines 42-44)

The materiality of the stone is strangely raised by the bishop to the level of the spiritual as he believes that having the stone on his dead body would make him feel godly:

So, let the blue lump poise between my knees,
Like God the Father's globe on both His hands...(Lines
47-48)

Thus, the bishop confuses between the material and the spiritual in the most blasphemous manner.

Browning was intrigued by the period of the late Renaissance in Italy with its paganizing of the Christian civilization. By situating the event described in the poem in that period, he seeks to portray the Renaissance exuberance for art as is seen in the bishop's wish to have his bas-relief decorated with figures drawn from mythology, including a rather erotic sculpture of the mythical figure of Pan in the process of disrobing a nymph. The desire to have a decorated tomb can be interpreted as an effort by the bishop to use art to immortalise oneself in an age of artistic achievement. The poem also suggests that language can play a crucial role in elevating or denigrating a person's status. The bishop is not satisfied that he would have a more elaborate tomb than his rival Gandolf; he strives to make sure that their epitaphs which would memorialise them should also indicate the difference in their stature. The bishop urges his sons to use the highly rated Ciceronian Latin ("Latin pure, discreet") on his tomb as opposed to the much lesser valued Latin of Ulpian found on his rival's tomb:

...That's if ye carve my epitaph aright,
Choice Latin, picked phrase, Tully's every word,
No gaudy ware like Gandolf's second line—

Tully, my masters? Ulpian serves his need! (Lines 76-79)

The poem was praised by John Ruskin as evoking the Renaissance spirit, “its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin.”

In the tradition of dramatic monologues the listeners of the Bishop’s speech remain silent throughout but from the reaction of the bishop towards them, it seems that they were not too enthused about the former’s scheme of a magnificent tomb. He feels that they may be plotting to rob him of his possession, including the much-fancied “Frascati villa”. The bishop tries to coax them, first by bribe and later by threat, to go about the task of building the tomb in earnest. The temptations that he offers to them are not befitting a man of high moral standing and include among others “mistresses with great marbly limbs” (line 75). He also threatens them to give his prized villa to the Pope if they do not fulfil his dying wish. This clearly brings out the mindset of the bishop for whom even the office of the Pope is corruptible. Although the bishop is a religious figure, his monologue often seems rambling and full of confusion. He not only hesitates to explain the philosophical import of life and death but also commits a mix-up between Jesus and Saint Praxed. In the end, the bishop suspects that his sons may not build his tomb in the manner that he desires. His blessing at the end sounds hollow and dismissive as he goes back to the rivalry with his dead predecessor and imagines to be still envied by Gandolf.

The poem is written in blank verse and Browning employing dramatic irony to reveal psychological, historical and religious insights into the period of the late Renaissance Italy is clearly in evidence. The speaker of the monologue uses a tone that is not only shocking and unpredictable but also unspiritual. In his preference for all the earthly

possessions even in the moments leading up to his impending death, the bishop reveals a deep-seated desire to be anchored in the material world rather than seeking salvation in Heaven. It is indeed ironic that the bishop, whose time and effort should have gone on meditations about salvation and the afterlife, spent most of his time preparing to have a memorial that he hoped would serve as a reminder of his earthly existence. The crisis depicted in the poem, perhaps unconsciously a confessional moment for the bishop, forces out the truth about him for his listeners as well as the readers.

3.6 Summing Up

In this unit you have been given, by and large, an idea of the poet that Browning is; an account of his works; the techniques that were incorporated in his poems and the concerns that shaped them. There is a blending of thought and feeling that goes into the making of his poems. There is no doubt that, like the novelist Dickens, who wrote prolifically, Browning is also one of the most prolific writers of the Victorian age. Browning is today, perhaps, honoured more as a pioneer in the difficult art — the art of psychological portraiture in verse. His main achievement as a poet is the unprecedented range of his work. In the midst of the storms of doubt and disbelief, of mockery and denial in religion, he stood unshaken by the controversies. The impression that we get from the works of Browning is that of a poet with a robust personality. The poet in him is made up of many men. He is a dramatist, humorist, lyricist, painter, musician, philosopher and scholar, each in full measure, and he includes and dominates them all.

3.7 References and Suggested Reading

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Unit 4

Robert Browning

Supplementary Unit

Unit Structure :

4.1 Objectives

4.2 Reading Robert Browning's Dramatic Monologues

4.3 Important Poems

4.4 Critical Reception

4.5 Important Questions and Suggested Answers

4.6 A Note on "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "A Grammarian's Funeral"

4.7 References and Suggested Reading

4.1 Objectives:

After going through this unit you will be able to

- Learn about Browning's dramatic monologue
- Gain an idea of the critical reception of the poet
- Answer questions based on the text

4.2 Reading Robert Browning's Dramatic Monologues

Along with Lord Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning is justifiably said to be a representative voice of the Victorian period. If Tennyson's reputation rests chiefly on his meditative lyrical poetry, Browning earns his place of fame by virtue of his magnificent dramatic monologues. Of course, he had a significant output as a poet of Nature and Love as well. In fact, there is a school of thought which considers

him to be a greater poet than Tennyson. Having started his career by writing for the stage, and having not found the critical or popular reception that he would have wanted, Browning soon veered into the domain of poetry. But the nature of drama remained crucial in his poems, and for the better part of his rather long career, he attempted to explore the dramatic potential in the lives of his protagonists through his dramatic monologues. For students, these poems will hold special appeal for their psychological probing of characters, the fusion of history with imagination and the stylistic use of the blank verse.

Students would do well to focus their attention not so much on his dramas but rather on his dramatic monologues. The latter allowed him to present a galaxy of characters who speak in largely self-revelatory soliloquies. These poems could be studied as fascinating soul studies, as “history of the soul”, in which Browning explore the human soul through his wide range of characters, putting before the readers their moral scruples and problems.

Stylistically, one will find many similarities of Browning’s poetry with that of the soliloquies of Shakespeare, or even the poetry of John Donne, as far as the use of colloquial language and employment of often shocking and unpredictable tones are concerned. Tennyson’s poetry, on the other hand, is characterised by a more polished poetic texture. His dramatic monologues like ‘Ulysses’ or ‘Tithonus’ build up an atmosphere of sorrow or a mood of gloom, while the dramatic monologues of Browning usually project a personality in a dramatic moment of his life even as his self-revelatory speech unfolds psychological insights about him. Both the poets use blank verse for their dramatic lyrics. But the characteristics of their blank verse also differ significantly. Tennyson’s blank verse is in carefully orchestrated, regular pentameter whereas Browning aims to create colloquial energy by writing in irregular meter. It must be conceded, however, that, at times, Browning’s style can be a little obscure. Some of his allusions are often far-fetched for a common reader. Besides, although Browning’s poems can be intellectually stimulating, they are not always the most entertaining.

The historical aspect of his dramatic monologues may provide fascinating perspectives for discerning readers. Although his dramatic monologues endeavour to capture the essence of a period of history, they are not always historically accurate. He uses historical characters as he uses an imaginary one. Nevertheless, students should also observe that Browning, having spent much of his life in Italy, used Renaissance settings in many of his poems and thereby explored differences and continuities between Renaissance and Modern worlds.

4.3 Important poems

After his sojourn for the theatre, Browning turned to poetry with *Pippa Passes* (1841), which was his first major successful work. Subsequently, he produced major works like *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845), *Men and Women* (1855) and *Dramatis Personae* (1864) with which he fully established himself as the most important poetic voice of the Victorian Period. Some of the important poems included in these volumes that students should read to get acquainted with Browning's themes and style are:

- Porphyria's Lover
- Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister
- My Last Duchess
- The Pied Piper of Hamelin
- How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix
- The Bishop Orders his Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church
- The Lost Leader
- Love Among the Ruins
- Child Roland to the Dark Tower Came
- Fra Lippo Lippi
- Andrea Del Sarto
- The Last Ride Together
- A Grammarian's Funeral
- Rabbi Ben Ezra

- Abt Vogler

In the period 1868-69, Browning produced a long poem, a 'verse novel' actually, called *The Ring and the Book* which was once considered his masterpiece.

4.4 Critical Reception

During his lifetime, Browning experienced to a greater extent than any of his contemporaries, the vicissitudes of a poet's lot. A long period of depreciation, in which his poetry was a byword for difficulty and obscurity, was followed by a sudden access of fame. From the time of the publication of *The Ring and the Book* in 1868-69 until his death in 1889, his position beside Tennyson as one of the two master poets of the Victorian era was secure. Criticism was succeeded by panegyric reaching its height in the adulation of the Browning Society and its offshoots in England and America. In particular, Browning has suffered along with Tennyson, from the general reaction inimical to Victorianism and its entire works which characterized the opening decades of the twentieth century. The charge that Browning was closer to being a prose-writer than a poet was related to the charge of laziness. To many of his readers it seemed that he had not taken the pains, as Tennyson had, to acquire that noble beauty, and elevation of spirit which seemed necessary for the finest poetry. George Eliot, for instance, thought that Browning had 'a footing between the level of prose and the topmost heights of poetry'. Although Browning wrote numerous dramatic monologues, his contemporaries have often criticized his work as being too emotional. Browning's limitations are many. In spite of all his intellectual efforts and imaginative prowess, Browning did not produce one memorable character which lives on outside his pages like those of Chaucer, Shakespeare or Dickens. F.L. Lucas says that most of Browning's characters are very much himself. He could not take an objective view of any character. Such was the intensity of his personal

interest that it pervades not only the dramatis personae but the world in which they live. John Foster’s comment however refutes this argument of Lucas, “...we never think of Mr. Browning while we read his poems; we are not identified with him, but to the persons into whom he has flung his genius...we are upon the scene ourselves—we hear, feel, and see—we are face to face with the actors—we are a party to the tears that are shed, to the feelings and passions that are undergone”. The tag of being a difficult poet, with which Browning has been branded springs from the obscurity of his language. Browning’s syntax and idiom suits his purpose but often creates problems for his readers. He composed at a hectic pace and was indifferent about revising his works. He sometimes omitted necessary parts of speech, left clauses and sentences unfinished. There was in him a curious strain of the Renaissance learning and medieval pedantry and his utterances were at times deliberately crabbed. In an attempt to defend Browning against the charges of obscurity Algernon Charles Swinburne insists that to accuse Browning of obscurity is “as accurate as to call Lynceus purblind or complain of the sluggish action of the telegraphic wire”. He is something too much the ‘reverse’ of obscure: he is too brilliant and subtle for the ready reader of a ready writer to follow with any certainty the track of an intelligence which moves with incessant rapidity. According to Swinburne, it is hopeless to enjoy the charm or to apprehend the gist of his writings except when a mind is thoroughly alert, an attention awake at all points, a spirit open and ready to be kindled by the contact of the writer’s. But his enduring appeal lies in his lyric intensity, his grasp of characters and his power of transmuting soul-states into vivid energetic poetry.

SAQ:
Examine the reasons for Browning’s alleged ‘obscurity’. Would you regard this as a ‘Victorian’ or an ‘anti-Victorian’ (or ‘modern’) quality? How does this affect our responses to Browning’s poetry? (60 + 30 + 60 words)
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In a letter to R.W. Dixon, dated October 12, 1881, Hopkins labels Browning as a poet with many frigidities. As he says, “Browning is not really a poet...he has all the gifts but the one needful and the pearls without the string...I suppose him to resemble Ben Jonson, only that Ben Jonson has more real poetry”. Oscar Wilde, on the other hand, places Browning next to

Shakespeare in terms of a creator of characters. His caliber, as per Wilde’s contention, is at par with Shakespeare: “He is the most Shakespearian since Shakespeare... [and] will be remembered not as a poet, but, as the most supreme writer of fiction that we ever had. ” While Santayana in his “Poetry of Barbarism” refers to Browning’s poetry as that which rests upon primitive feelings, primal happiness and beyond the reach of philosophy, G.K. Chesterton’s analysis goes so far as to suggest that Browning’s optimism is that of an ultimate and unshakable order, that which is founded upon the absolute sight, and sound, and smell, and handling of things. He is something far more convincing, far more comforting, far more religiously significant than an optimist: he is a happy man. It is out of the concern for everyday experience, the pressing need for detail so disliked by Santayana that the essential insights of Browning’s poems emerge.

4.5 Probable questions and suggested answers

1. Would you agree that religion, greed and competition are the major themes of ‘The Bishop Orders his Tomb’?

Religion plays a major role in the poem—Browning’s views on religion and disillusionment with the Church—subversion of conventional religious beliefs—bishop’s idea of the afterlife—material possessions—greed corrupting faith—rivalry with Gandolf—bishop’s egotism—greed for power—the futility of such rivalry—no actual winners

2. Describe some of the allusions used by Browning in the poem?

Biblical allusions—Saint Praxed—Ecclesiastes—Sermon on the Mount—Moses—mythological allusions—nymphs—Pan—literary allusions—Cicero—Ulpian

3. Write a note on Browning’s use of irony in the poem?

The bishop’s vocation—his real motivation—fixated with material possessions—breaking the vow of celibacy—nurturing petty rivalry—blasphemous tones in language—stealing precious stones from Church—his idea of the afterlife—lacking true Christian piety—the hypocrisy of materialism in religion

4. What kinds of meter and poetic forms does Browning use in the poem? Does that contribute to making his language rough and unpoetic?

Dramatic monologue—features—one speaker with silent listeners—blank verse—iambic pentameter—irregularity—imitation of a dying human voice—attention to detail

5. Write a critical note on the speaker in ‘The Bishop Orders his Tomb’.

Man of religious authority—obsessed with material comforts—
hypocritical in action—consumed by petty jealousy—blasphemous
in attitude—unspiritual tones in his speech—confused ramblings—a
symbol of corruption in religious places

4.6 A Note on “Fra Lippo Lippi” and “A Grammarian’s Funeral”

Browning in *Fra Lippo Lippi* immediately introduces his readers to the speaker, the painter-monk, whose monologue constitutes the poem. In keeping with the situation, the unsaintly friar is introduced, caught by the civic guard in the dead of night in his neighbourhood, quite able and ready to pour forth his ideas and adventures:

“You need not clap your torches to my face.

Zooks, what’s to blame? You think you see a monk!

What, ‘t is past mid-night, and you go the rounds,

And here you catch me at an alley’s end

Where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar?” (lines 1-5)

In *Fra Lippo Lippi*, Browning has given a lively portrait of a man to whom life in its fullness is the only source of joy. In the course of the poem, he emerges to be an embodiment of the true Renaissance spirit, metamorphosed by ironic fate into a monk. In the present poem, which constitutes his monologue, Lippi luminously indicates the true end and aim of art and the

false asceticism of so-called “religious” art, in the characteristic comments and confessions of an innovator in the traditions of religious painting. The following lines from the poem will serve to substantiate how Lippi is keen to

follow his own style of art:

“I’m my own master, paint now as I please

You keep your mistr...manners, and I’ll stick to mine!”

Lippi in the course of his monologue, also mouths the castigations of the Prior who belittles his art for ‘painting body’ and not ‘soul’:

“ ‘.....It’s art’s decline, my son!

You are not of the true painters, great and old;
Brother Angelico's the man, you'll find
Brother Lorenzo stands his single peer:
Fag on at flesh, you'll never make the third!' ” (lines 233-237).

(56)

In response to the above criticism, this is how Lippi defends himself:

“I'm not the third, then: bless us, they must know!” (line 240).

In the entire course of the monologue Lippi is found attempting to justify his theory of art as well as his philosophy of life, both of which are diametrically opposed to the stance of the order within which he is supposed to operate. The structure of the poem is built around the manner in which he conducts his vindication. He begins his main line of defense by revealing the straitened

circumstances that had led to his becoming a convert as a boy:

“I was a baby when my mother died

And father died and left me in the street

I starved there, God knows how a year or two

.....

The wind doubled me up and down I went

.....

By the straight cut to the convent” (lines 81-89).

He also justifies his conduct indirectly by covertly attacking the hypocrisy of the monastic way of life. Let us consider the depiction of his introduction into the monastic way of life:

“So, boy, you're minded—quoth the good fat father,

Wiping his own mouth—'twas refection of time—

To quit this very miserable world?...” (lines 93-95)

Therefore, Lippi defends himself passionately; for after all:

“You should not take a fellow eight years old

And make him swear never to kiss the girls” (lines 224-225).

Fra Lippo Lippi is infused with biting wit and stinging irony; for, it is first and foremost the monologue of a bohemian who could not be contained by the ascetic order. A large measure of irony is brought into

play in the poem to reveal the hollowness and hypocrisy of the monastic way of life. To reinforce this irony implicated in the gap between appearance and reality, Browning makes use of a key structural element in the poem, that is, the recurrent references to the Prior's niece.

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The first reference to the niece occurs when the monks exclaim over the life-like quality of Lippi's work. One of them says, "That woman's like the Prior's niece who comes/ To care about his asthma: it's the life!" (lines 170-171). However, their praise is checked when Lippi's work is depreciated by the so-called learned. The Prior sums up the objections: the business of the artist is not to depict reality; rather he is to "give us no more body than shows soul" (line 188) and orders Lippi to erase his work and begin all over again. Just as the Prior completes his theologically grounded denunciation of Lippi's art: "Rub all out, try at it a second time" (line 194), his attention is caught by the life-like portrait of the niece. The diction and punctuation of the passage that describes his reaction to this part of the painting calls attention to several significant changes of tone, which, we may assume, are appropriately dramatized by Lippi. The decisive assurance of "Rub all out..." is interrupted by a startled tone of wonder, brought on by

Lippi's skill, which then changes into an attitude of reflectiveness as the Prior thinks of what the niece represents in his life: "Oh that white smallish

(58) female with the breasts,/ she is just my niece...Herodias, I would say..." (lines 195-196). The 'dash' here is of crucial significance and heightens the irony of the situation and signals an emotional turn. The Prior abruptly awakens from the private reverie induced by Lippi's artistic genius; and realizing the extent to which he has forgotten himself, exclaims with white-hot

anger: "Who went and dance and got men's heads cut off!/ Have it all out" (lines 197-198).

The significance of reference to the Prior's niece is not fully revealed until the final mention of the niece is made as Lippi describes his picture:

"... I scuttle off

To some safe bench behind, not letting go

The palm of her, the little lily thing

That spoke the good word for me in the nick

Like the Prior's niece—Saint Lucy I would say" (lines 383-387).

The irony here is double-fold. On one hand, since Saint Lucy is the patron saint of those who are afflicted in the eye, while Lippi's point is that where beauty in art is concerned, the Prior is blind. On the other hand, the reference to the niece has a hint of an illicit relationship, this time in Lippi's description of the atmosphere as he hurries away with the "little lily thing". The Prior's

niece stands for both sensual and earthly beauty combined with illicit love. While she is a symbol of blindness on the part of the Prior (and of his whole order) to appreciate the place of beauty in art, she is also symbolic of the hypocrisy and pretensions of the monastic order of life.

Fra Lippo Lippi is one of Browning's most successful dramatic monologues, and the central character is perhaps the most Chaucerian of his creations. William B. Toole in his essay "Wit and Symbol: The Prior's Niece and the Structure of *Fra Lippo Lippi*" urges that Lippi's immense vitality, his enormous delight in and appreciation of himself and the sensual life reminds

one of the Wife of Bath. This sensual exuberance is responsible for the predicament in which the painter-monk finds himself when the poem starts. But the facet of his character that to a great extent is crucially implicated in the shaping of his monologue is the suppleness of his wit and crafty intellect reflective of his hard-won understanding of human nature, which also enables

him to disentangle himself from an embarrassing situation without slighting in any way his philosophy of life:

(59)

"If you get simple beauty and nought else

You get about the best thing God invents
...and you'll find the soul you have missed

Within yourself, when you return him thanks" (lines 216-220).

His monologue becomes an apologia as well as a song for himself.

Like *Fra Lippo Lippi*, the introductory lines of *A Grammarian's Funeral* immediately present the reader with the dramatic situation in the poem.

This concerns the burial march of the dead grammarian undertaken by his students from a plain in the darkness to the place of entombment upon a mountain peak, partly covered with the thickness of clouds and at times catching a

glimpse of the first rays of the rising sun. The physical setting, the intended object of the march, and the relation between the speaker and the dead person is swiftly presented in lines 1-28:

"Let us begin and carry up this corpse,
Singing together.

Leave we the common crofts, the vulgar thorpes

Each in its tether" (lines 1-4)

The tone of the speaker/persona here is less argumentative than in *Fra Lippo Lippi* because it is at one level a panegyric laid out by the grammarian's student. The listener is invited into the poem at the very beginning: "Let us begin and carry up this corpse,/Singing together" (1-2). From here the speaker has the attention of the listener and will continue to speak of his teacher. The middle part of the poem (lines 29—132) contains the encomium sung for the grammarian, unified by a narrative of the dead man's life, described as a physical deterioration but a spiritual ascent. Thus the framing narrative of the burial march parallels the narrative about the grammarian's life, in that both are ascents:

"He was a man born with thy face and throat,
Lyric Apollo!

.....

Left play for work, and grappled with the world

.....

Straight got by heart that book to its last page:

Learned, we found him.” (lines 33-52)

Beneath the apparent eulogy (which here assumes the character of a monologue) of the grammarian by his disciple, lies a subtle element of irony that leads one to think whether the grammarian wasted his whole life in dry scholarship or that his pursuit of knowledge and perfection made his life really admirable:

“Straight got by heart that book to its last page:

Learned, we found him.” (lines 51—52)

The readers’ judgment of the grammarian depends to a large extent upon their understanding of the role played by the disciple whose monologue constitutes the poem. His words are at times fraught with ambivalence of tone and assessment, as in the following:

“Oh, such a life as he resolved to live,

When he has learned it

When he had gathered all books had to give!

Sooner he spurned it” (lines 65—68)

Although Browning shows sympathy for the dead grammarian, the poet at the same time severely censures a wasted life. G. Robert Stange admits that Browning is praising a Renaissance humanist for devoting his whole to the fulfillment of a noble purpose, namely the absolute mastery of ancient literature as a key to wise living and for the faith that what cannot be achieved

here will be achieved hereafter. But Richard D.

The dramatic situation is again the main focus of the closing portion of the poem; lines 133 and following describe the arrival at the place of burial. The students judge the mountain peak to be the proper burial place for the grammarian; its elevation, rarefied atmosphere, and morning brightness symbolize for them the moral distinction of the grammarian’s life:

“Here—here’s his place, where meteors shoot, clouds form,

Lightenings are loosened

.....

Lofty designs must close in like effects

Loftily lying” (lines 141—146)

It is at the same time, interesting to observe that that the setting with which they associate their master could be easily understood to symbolize his failure to appreciate life in its totality (for the peak of the mountain is a place for ‘sepulture’ and subject to clouds and storms). In the following line, which is an apparent eulogy for the grammarian by his students, the reader could see an ironic statement:

“This man decided not to Live but Know—” (line 139)

The above line acts as a pointer to the idea that the grammarian, in choosing a scholarly life, failed to ‘Live’ life.

It is important to understand that the poem is a dramatic monologue and not a mock encomium, although it contains one. Therefore, another point of interest for the reader seems to be the dramatic subject, that is, the students who speak about him. Our judgment of the dead scholar is significant only insofar as it verifies or invalidates theirs. The teacher’s death has aroused in them a spirit of inquiry into the meaning of their profession and destiny.

The poem has an ironical point to present, which has to do with the discrepancy between the students’ extravagant pretensions to nobility and their self-revealed vulgarity—aesthetic, intellectual and moral. They seem to arrogate the poetic gifts they attribute to the grammarian. At a closer look, however, it could be seen that the students are deficient in intellectual

virtues and incapable of objective judgment. This failing takes many forms, several of which may be illustrated from the following lines:

“Well, here’s the platform, here’s the proper place;

Hail to your purlieus

All ye highfliers of the feathered race,

Swallows and feathered race.” (lines 133-136).

The banality of “here’s the platform” is juxtaposed in the following line with the exalted apostrophe, “Hail to your purlieus”, which depicts their penchant for hollow verbosity. Moreover, “highfliers of the feathered race” could symbolically refer to the coterie of intellectuals, distinguished from the rest of the community, which also depicts their

priggishness. Their attitude to life is apparent from the very beginning of the poem. The common life or the life of the common people is according to them, “the level’s and the night’s”; it is culturally and spiritually low (line 23). They leave the “unlettered plain, its herd and crop” (line 13). The mountain stands in contrast; it is “cited to the top,/ Crowded with Culture!”(lines 15-16).

In an attempt to exalt themselves through their encomium of the dead grammarian, the students repeatedly betray the ignoble truth about him and themselves by a bathetic image. For all their aspirations of a morally “superior” life, the students reveal that they believe that the life of the scholar is devoted to achieve a greater reward from that of the worldly man. In their comments upon the grammarian’s life and works, the disciples have actually revealed their garbled and shrunken attitude to life and reality.

studies in the field of Victorian psychology, then newly emerging?
Comment on the dramatic realism of Browning’s characters.

4.7 References and Suggested Reading

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Unit 5

Alfred, Lord Tennyson : Ulysses, Section I, II (from *In Memoriam*)

Unit Structure :

- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Introducing the Poet
- 5.3 An Overview of his Works
- 5.4 Context of the Poem
 - 5.4.1 Literary Context
 - 5.4.2 Historical Context
 - 5.4.3 Reading the Poem
- 5.5. Analyzing the Poem line by line
- 5.6 Summing up
- 5.7 Glossary
- 5.8 References and Suggested Readings

5.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit has been designed to facilitate a critical and insightful reading of the Victorian poet, Alfred Lord Tennyson, with special emphasis on his poem *In Memoriam*. It is expected that this unit will provide you with answers to the variegated and multifarious issues raised within the ambit of the poem so that you are now in a better position to take a critical stance of your own. This unit will help you

- *connect* the life of the poet with the work
- *situate* *Ulysses* within its socio-historical context
- *discover* the themes and motifs that the text presents
- *describe and explain* the meanings emerging from a proper reading of the poem

5.2 INTRODUCING THE POET

Considered to be one of the most representative figures of the Victorian age, Tennyson, was born in 1809 to a vicar of the Church of England. While still an undergraduate at Cambridge, he published a group of little verse studies in word-melody and word-picture in 1830. Two years later a second volume appeared, in which such poems as *The Lady of Shalott* and *The Lotos Eaters* showed his control over both the medieval and classical; *The Palace of Art* showed his desire to be no mere singer but a teacher. With *The Miller's Daughter* and *The May Queen* began a series of idylls of English life—short narratives, richly pictured and melodiously tuned, with touches of sentimentality and unreality, perhaps to win over an audience.

In 1836 Tennyson went to live in London where he came into contact with Carlyle and was stirred by his spirit of social protest. The latter's spiritual view of the universe, too, afforded him a support for his own religious faith, which was sorely tried by doubt. For ten years he brooded and worked away at his lodgings, publishing nothing. At the end of this period, in 1842, he emerged with two volumes, which were to take England by storm. In these he touched every province of poetry, from the lyrical simplicity of *Break, Break, Break* to the epic narrative *Morte d' Arthur*. In one of the poems, *Locksley Hall*, he uttered the protest of young men of his generation who felt keenly the pressure of their situation—of good, though not noble, birth—seething under the inequalities of rank and class distinctions; and the protest against an industrial civilization that made gold its supreme test of success. Five years later appeared *The Princess*, his contribution to a raging contemporary issue—the higher education of women. One sees here the conflict between his pure poetic interest in melody and picture and his desire to present a contemporary question in fanciful guise. However, the brilliance of such incidental poems as *Tears, Idle Tears* or the “Splendour Falls on Castle Walls” remains.

In 1850, Tennyson published *In Memoriam*, a hundred and thirty-one lyrics written over seventeen years in memory of Arthur Henry Hallam, a college-mate and beloved friend who died in 1833. The beginning

touches upon the early phases of sorrow, moods of stunned and bewildered grief. Gradually the personal grief merges itself with an anxious speculation concerning the mystery of death and the hope of immortality. Through states of doubt, despair and anguished questioning, the poem slowly mounts to a region of firm though saddened faith, and ends in a full hymnal music breathing hope and fortitude of heart. To an age shaken with radical ideas relating to man's origin and place in the universe (though Darwin had not yet given his thesis to the world) the poem helped tremendously to break down the opposition between science and religious faith.

In 1850 Wordsworth, who had been poet-laureate after Southey, died and Tennyson took the laurel. A government pension allowed him to marry and settle in the Isle of Wight from this time until his death 42 years later. He stood as spokesman of his people in times of sorrow or rejoicing. In such poems as *The Charge of the Light Brigade* or *Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington* he ministered to national pride, stoked the fires of imperialism and brought poetry closer to national life than it had ever been since Shakespeare. Later in *The Idylls of the King*, he uses the Arthurian legends to suggest modern moral and social problems and to emphasize on those evils, which he felt were the peculiar dangers of his own age.

Tennyson's later work consisted largely of the series of dramas, for the most part based on English history—*Queen Mary* (1875), *Harold* (1876), and *Becket* (1884). In "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After" (1886) his earlier mood of protest gave way to an arraignment of society for its sordid materialism, its vice, cruelty and inefficiency. And then in a number of later poems he recreated the classic beauty of "Demeter", in the allegory of noble striving toward the light in *Merlin and the Gleam*, in the instinctive and spontaneous trust of *Crossing the Bar*. Though this last named is not his final poem, it could very well be taken as his final statement, his farewell word spoken with solemn gladness as he himself crosses the bar of death.

5.3 AN OVERVIEW OF HIS WORKS

In any discussion of Victorian poetry, perhaps, the first name that comes to one's mind is that of Alfred Tennyson. Apart from *In Memoriam*, which is his magnum opus, Tennyson has a number of poems to his credit. In this section I shall discuss a few of these.

The Lotos Eaters: Published in 1832 and revised for the 1842 *Poems*. Its subject comes from Book IX of *The Odyssey*, where the sailors returning home after the fall of Troy land on a strange island inhabited by people who eat only the fruit of the lotos plant. Some of the sailors taste it and are filled with a languorous content that makes them reluctant to continue their journey.

While the subject in this poem is based on an episode in *The Odyssey* where Odysseus describes his weary mariners' brief stay with the Lotos Eaters, it is only in the opening stanzas and the sixth stanza of the choric song that the Homeric elements are contained. The five introductory Spenserian stanzas were written during the 1830 journey with Hallam through the Pyrenees and reflect that scenery and draw upon Spenser's description in *The Faerie Queene*.

Ulysses: Ulysses was written after Hallam's death and Tennyson maintains that there is more of him in this poem than in *In Memoriam*, for it was written under the sense of loss and all that had gone by, but also that life must still be fought out to the end. Published in 1842, the sources of "Ulysses" are Book IX of *The Odyssey* and Canto XXVI of Dante's *Inferno*. In the poem, Ulysses in his old age looks back on his past travels and sets forth for the last one, summoning the values of endurance, determination and hope to his aid.

Tithonus: Tennyson's *Tithonus* was published by Thackeray in 1860 in Cornwall magazine. Its original form was the poem 'Tithon', which Tennyson wrote in 1833 as a companion piece to *Ulysses* but did not publish then. As per the Greek myth, Tithonus was loved by Aurora (Eos), goddess of the dawn, who asked her father Zeus to grant him eternal life. Zeus agreed, but Aurora forgot to ask for eternal youth.

Therefore, Tithonus grew older and older without dying. In pity for his plight, the gods turned him into a grasshopper.

The Princess: Published in 1847, *The Princess* consists of a Prologue, conclusion, and seven parts. The poem tells the story of a Prince, whose betrothed, Princess Ida, daughter of King Gama, prefers to live alone with her friends and to establish a centre of learning devoted to feminists. The poem manifests the growing Victorian concern for geology, astronomy, mathematics, evolutionary theory, feminism, domesticity and other aspects of the social hierarchy.

At the end of each section—interpolated in the third edition of 1850—are such enduring songs as ‘Sweet and Low’ and “The Splendour Falls on Castle Walls”.

Maud: A Monodrama: *Maud* was composed at Farringford on the Isle of Wight in about a year (July 1855), however, the divisions in it were made only at the eleventh edition in 1865. *Maud* was inspired from the earlier lyric “Oh! That `twere Possible”, which was written in 1833-4 after the death of Arthur Hallam. The original title was *Maud* or *The Madness*, but in 1875 Tennyson retitled it *Maud: A Monodrama*.

The narrator recounts the melancholy history of his life: his father’s death and the ruin of his family, his love for Maud and the duel in which he killed her brother, his separation from his home, his descent into insanity and his recovery through his patriotic commitment in the Crimean War. Some critics like Gladstone accused Tennyson of his seeming support of the Crimean War as panacea for disaffected youth. However, the poem is remarkable for the way in which Tennyson employs a variety of meters to convey the hero’s different moods.

Idylls of the King: This is one of Tennyson’s most ambitious works that was to receive wide acclamation followed by bitter criticism. Written over a period of forty years, one could see the obvious reasons behind the poem’s problems of coherence. In 1859, he published four ‘Idylls’: “Enid”, “Elaine”, “Vivien” and “Guinevere”. In 1869 he published “The Coming of Arthur”, “Pelleas and Ettare”, “The Holy Grail” and “The Passing of Arthur” which was based on the earlier “*Morte d’ Arthur*”. The central concern behind the whole work was to show the rise and fall

of a society and to suggest symbolically and allegorically pertinence to the age in which he lived.

Other reflections which upset his belief in the benevolent ordering of the universe were the amount of pain in the world and the blind profusion of nature: “An omnipotent Creator who could make such a painful world is to me sometimes as hard to believe as a blind matter behind everything. The lavish profusion too in the natural world appalls me, from the growth of the tropical forests to the capacity of men to multiply, the torrent of babies”. There is nothing unusual in being troubled by the amount of pain in the world; to Tennyson it remained real, and his scientific reading did nothing to mitigate the impression. Why the profusion of the natural world should have appalled him is less clear. To many it has seemed to be a striking evidence of the power and benevolence of the Creator. The answer to this could perhaps be found in section 55 of *In Memoriam*:

“Are God and Nature then at strife?
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems
So careless of the single life” (section 55; 5-8)

The profusion of nature is only an effort to keep the type in being, and implies an attitude of carelessness about the individual. On all this, the influence of Lyell was profound who in his *Principles of Geology* asserted that man has made little difference to the physical world of nature. He argues that the effects of man on his environment are perhaps greater than but similar to the other species of animals. Though the appearance of man in the universe was extraordinary, it was not really very significant to the universal scheme of things. It is this, far more than any other consideration of man’s origin that made cosmic optimism difficult for Tennyson:

“It is difficult to hope
That nothing walks with aimless feet;
That not one life shall be destroyed
Or cast as rubbish to the void” (section 54; 5-7)

But nature gives little support for the belief: “so careful of the type she seems, so careless of the single life”. On a closer examination one could find that Nature is not even careful of the type: “She cries, “a thousand types are gone:/I care for nothing, all shall go....” The testimony of the rocks shows that multitudes of whole species have gone, have been created apparently only to disappear.

But there is another aspect of nature that has been considered in *In Memoriam*. For instance let us have a look at the following extract from the poem wherein man is hailed as the herald of a higher race:

...at the last arose the man

.....

So if he type this work of time
Like glories move his course and show
That life is not as idle ore
(section 118; 12-20)

Side by side where God and Nature are seen operating in opposite poles, we find passages where the process of nature is given an optimistic interpretation.

<p>SAQ: Would you view Tennyson’s conception of the human as being based on biblical faith or on the scientific discourses? (80 words)</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>

So far as the poem is concerned, Tennyson’s idea of progress suggests something that has to do with the reconciliation of God and Nature; it is to him that “one far off divine event,/ to which the whole creation moves” . Tennyson seems to be suggesting ‘man’ as a step in the process of development of the crowning race which will be different from what ‘man’ is today. But this interpretation too is fraught with obscurity. Neither is it clear what the one far-off divine event could be, nor is it plain how Tennyson in his mood of evolutionary optimism supposed that it would come about. Those who seek in the doctrines of science a

support for a religious faith are apt to find it, but at the cost of considerable confusion of thought.

Check Your Progress:

1. Can it be said that Tennyson's poetry is in some ways a clash between Genesis and Geology? Give a well considered response.
2. Evaluate Tennyson's meditations on 'life' and 'death' with special reference to the sections prescribed for you.

In section fifty-two of *In Memoriam* the poet says that he feels intuitively that all suffering must have its just reward: "good will be the final goal of ill." He tries to believe this, yet his intellect will not let him hold such a notion with certainty. "We know not anything" he says. Man on earth knows nothing of the afterlife, nothing of God, nothing of some greater scheme. He does not even know if any of these things exist. In this poem Tennyson tries to reconcile his faith with his doubt, his religious belief with the material world. If he can prove that life has purpose and that pain and suffering have some meaning in the afterworld, then he can prove that his friend, Arthur Henry Hallam, did not live and die in vain. Again, Tennyson's thinking here seems profoundly influenced by the burgeoning evolutionary theories of his time. The scientific evidence gathered in the nineteenth century—particularly Charles Lyell's discovery that some of the Earth's rocks were formed hundreds and millions of years ago trivialized man's existence. This new knowledge proclaimed that most people, worms, moths and everything else live futile lives. A single man, or even the whole race of man, cannot hold much importance over enormous tracts of time.

In this particular poem, however, Tennyson does not reach a definite conclusion. He defers the problem. That life contains meaning is but a "dream," as he says, and "dream" here has two meanings: first, hope; and second, a subconscious thought. His intuition tells him that life possesses purpose, but still he requires more concrete knowledge. The image of the infant crying evokes utter helplessness and inexperience. Since the poet cannot communicate with the dead or God, he has "no

language but a cry,” or just an unheard plea for answers. This poem concludes with a religious image, of an infant reaching for light, which we take as the poet grasping, not only for knowledge, but for salvation as well. These images of the last stanza stand in marked contrast to those of the earlier lines, which drew from just earthly material — moths burning and worms split in half. The line “That nothing walks with aimless feet,” for example, elicits the drawing of man walking through evolution, from ape to *Homo sapiens*. The combination of these images foreshadows Tennyson’s eventual solution: that man evolves spiritually as well as physically and so will one day be united with God.

SAQ:

Does the Victorian poet posit a redeemable future? Or does a ‘golden past’ condemn the present, for such a poet? (60 +60)

.....
.....
.....

5.4 Context of the Poem:

5.4.1 Literary Context:

The title of the poem is the speaker named, Ulysses. Tennyson recreates the figure of Ulysses by drawing on the ancient hero of Homer’s *Odyssey* (Ulysses is the Latinised name of Odysseus) and the medieval hero of Dante’s *Inferno*. Homer’s Ulysses, as described in *Odyssey*, learns from a prophecy that he will take a final sea voyage after killing the suitors of his wife Penelope. The details of this sea voyage are described by Dante in Canto XXVI of the *Inferno*. After spending years on the sea, taking up voyages and struggles, Ulysses finds himself restless in Ithaca and is driven by “the longing I had to gain experience of the world.” Dante’s Ulysses is a tragic figure. He dies while sailing on his voyage too far in an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Tennyson combines these two accounts by having Ulysses make his speech shortly after returning to Ithaca. He resumes his administrative responsibilities but is not contented with this life as a king. And so, he yearns to embark on his final voyage. This character called Ulysses appears in works by several other writers including Euripides, Horace, William Shakespeare

and Alexander Pope. One of the modern adaptations of this character is James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a modernist novel that explores the Odyssean "wanderings" of a man. This novel chronicles the appointments and encounters of the itinerant Leopold Bloom who is the counterpart of Odysseus.

5.4.2 Historical Context:

This poem was written in 1833 and was revised for publication in the year 1842. It concerns the poet's own personal emotional journey, for it was composed in the first few weeks after the death of his dear friend, Henry Hallam in 1833. Like *In Memoriam*, this poem is also an elegy for his deeply cherished friend. Ulysses, who symbolizes the grieving poet in some ways proclaims his resolution to push onward in spite of the awareness that "death closes all" (line 51). Tennyson himself stated that the poem expresses his own "need of going forward and braving the struggle of life" after the loss of his beloved friend. The poem is a record of his intense grief that foregrounds its subject.

5.4.3 Reading the poem

The poem *Ulysses* is written in the form of a dramatic monologue spoken by Ulysses, a character who also appears in Homer's Greek epic *Odyssey* and Dante's Italian epic *Inferno*. In *Odyssey*, Odysseus struggles to return home, but in Tennyson's *Ulysses*, an aged Ulysses is frustrated with domestic life and yearns to set sail again and continue exploring the world. Dante seems to condemn Ulysses' recklessness as an explorer who meets a tragic end. But in Tennyson's poem, there is nobility and heroism in Ulysses' boundless curiosity and undaunted spirit. This poem is not a mere reproduction from mythical sources but is recreated in many ways to give vent to a typical Victorian attitude to life and work.

Stop to Consider

Dramatic monologue: It is a poem in the form of a speech or

narrative by an imagined person, in which the speaker inadvertently reveals aspects of their character while describing a particular situation or series of events. These poems are dramatic in the sense that they have a theatrical quality i.e. the poem is meant to be read to an audience. To say that the poem is a monologue means that these are the words of one speaker with no dialogue coming from any other character. Some of the common characteristics of a dramatic monologue are as follows:

- A speaker is a single person who is not a poet.
- The views of the speaker may contradict with those of the poet.
- The speech of this character makes up the whole of the verse, in a specific situation at a crucial moment.
- This character addresses and interacts with one or more people, but we know of the others' presence and what they say or do only from clues in the poetic dialogues of the speaker.
- The primary focus of the poet is to tell the readers and audience a story having a moral in a way that boosts the curiosity towards it, the speaker's temperament and character.
- The subject of the monologue is self-revelation.
- The rhyme scheme is not so important in a dramatic monologue.

The poem opens with a declaration by the speaker, Ulysses that there is little point in his staying home "by this still hearth" with his old wife, doling out rewards and punishments for the unnamed masses who live in his kingdom. He is not happy as a king delivering orders on the general masses and living a family life. He proclaims that he "cannot rest from travel" but feels compelled to live a life of adventure and thrill.

"For always roaming with a hungry heart

Much have I seen and known; cities of men

And manners, climates, councils, governments,

Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;

And drunk delight of battle with my peers,

Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.

I am a part of all that I have met;”

Ulysses possesses a strong lust to wander, longing with a hungry heart for a life of adventure and excitement. He has enjoyed all his experiences as a sailor who travels the seas, and he considers himself an epitome of courage for everyone who wanders and roams around the earth. His travels have exposed him to different types of people and ways of living. They have also exposed him to the “delight of battle” while fighting the Trojan War with his men. He declares that his travels and encounters have shaped who he is: “I am a part of all that I have met,” he asserts. And it is only when he is traveling that the “margin” of the globe that he has not yet traversed, shrink and fade. This lust to wander, to discover the unexplored, to know the unknown – all these were the very dominant Victorian tendencies that finds expression in this poem.

Ulysses is not contented with his life as a king. He believes that to remain stationary is to rust rather than to shine. For him, life is not just the simple act of breathing. There is so much to explore in life and so he longs to encounter new voyages. His spirit yearns constantly for new experiences that will broaden his horizons. He wishes “to follow knowledge like a sinking star” and forever grow in wisdom and in learning. These lines describe his undying urge to move, to sail –

“And this gray spirit yearning in desire

To follow knowledge like a sinking star,

Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.”

Ulysses then introduces his son Telemachus, “This is my son, mine own Telemachus, to whom I leave the sceptre and the isle.” He will act as his successor while the great hero resumes his travels. He speaks highly but also patronizingly of his son’s capabilities as a ruler, praising his prudence, dedication, and devotion to the gods. His son, Telemachus will do his work of governing the island while he begins his travel to the seas. He categorically differentiates their work by saying- “He works his work, I mine.”

In the final stanza, Ulysses addresses the mariners with whom he has worked, travelled, and weathered life’s storms over many years. He

declares that although he and they are old, they still have the potential to do something noble and honourable before “the long day wanes.” He encourages them to make use of their old age because “’tis not too late to seek a newer world.” He declares that his goal is to sail onward “beyond the sunset” until his death. Perhaps, he suggests, they may even reach the “Happy Isles,” or the paradise of perpetual summer described in Greek mythology where great heroes like the warrior Achilles were believed to have been taken after their deaths. Although he and his mariners are not as strong as they were in youth, they are “strong in will” and are sustained by their resolve to push onward relentlessly: “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

The poem is written in a blank verse. It is written in the form of a dramatic monologue: the entire poem is spoken by a single character, whose identity is revealed by his own words. The lines are in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter, which serves to impart a fluid and natural quality to Ulysses’ speech. Many of the lines are enjambed, which means that a thought does not end with the line-break; the sentences often end in the middle, rather than the end of the lines. The use of enjambment is appropriate in a poem about pushing forward “beyond the utmost bound of human thought.” Finally, the poem is divided into four paragraph-like sections, each of which comprises a distinct thematic unit of the poem.

Stop to Consider

Blank verse is poetry written with regular metrical but unrhymed lines, almost always in iambic pentameter. It has been described as probably the most common and influential form that English poetry has taken since the 16th century. The first known use of blank verse in the English language was by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey in his translation of the *Aeneid*

(Published posthumously, 1554–1557). The major achievements in English blank verse were made by William Shakespeare and John Milton. Milton’s *Paradise Lost* became widely popular for its form and is widely imitated by the 18th century poets such as James Thomson (*The Seasons*) and William Cowper (*The Task*). Romantic English poets such as William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and

John Keats also used blank verse as a major form. Shortly afterwards, Alfred, Lord Tennyson became particularly devoted to blank verse, using it in his long narrative poem *The Princess*, as well as for one of his most famous poems, *Ulysses*.

The poem *Ulysses* has in theory iambic pentameter as its base metre where the first syllable is unstressed, the second stressed, so giving emphasis to the latter. However, a purely iambic pentameter poem may turn monotonous. Tennyson too, has altered the stress from time to time, by mixing up the beat so to speak, combining with grammar and punctuation to produce a more challenging and interesting poem. The poem frequently deviates from the meter, however, and especially makes use of **spondees** (a foot with two stresses in a row, stressed-stressed) to add emphasis or to slow the poem down. Line 5, for instance, could be scanned this way:

That hoard, | and sleep, | and feed, | and know | not me.

The three stressed syllables in "know not me" create climactic emphasis at the end of the line, reinforcing for the reader how alienated Ulysses feels from his people. Line 43 similarly ends with a spondee in "I mine" that indicates to the reader how Ulysses feels alienated from his son. The meter also breaks to create a sense of slowness that replicates Ulysses' sense of old age. Line 66, for instance, describes how Ulysses has grown weaker with age, and almost every syllable could be read as stressed:

We are | not now | that strength | which in | old days

The spondees ("not now," "old days") slow the line down just as age has slowed Ulysses down, sapping the strength he had "in old days." But then, the meter becomes regular iambic pentameter again so that the last line scans regularly:

To strive, | to seek, | to find, | and not | to yield.

The regular meter, not slowed down with additional stresses, reads with more speed and energy, reflecting the kind of determination that Ulysses is describing in this line. Generally, the poem uses the meter—the regular pattern and deviations from the pattern—to reflect the mood and sentiments of the speaker.

SAQ

What is the metre used in the poem, *Ulysses*?

What are the different poetic devices used in the poem, *Ulysses*?

Discuss the poem *Ulysses* as a dramatic monologue.

5.5 Analyzing the poem Line by Line

The poem is a dramatic monologue where the speaker Ulysses is reflecting on his present situation as a king of Ithaca. He has spent years

in the sea exploring its beauty and adventure. Though he had returned to his kingdom after many years, his heart still yearns for the same adventure and excitement. The poem presents the indomitable courage and adventurous zeal of old Ulysses.

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

Lines 1-5

The opening lines vividly introduces the speaker Ulysses, the king of Ithaca, as being idle, one who is not happy with his present situation. He finds no joy in being a king. It “little profits” him. He does not find meaning in serving his people, he merely feels “idle.” The poem is written in the form of a dramatic monologue, where the speaker is living with his elderly wife. He is delivering his kingly responsibilities for a “savage race” that sleeps and eats but does not know him well. He doles out punishments and rewards on his people but this is not what his heart yearns for.

Lines 6-10

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: All times I have enjoy'd
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone, on shore, and when
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades

In these lines, the speaker confesses that he cannot stop himself from travelling. He wants to live life to the fullest by restoring his life of travel and adventure. He had greatly enjoyed and suffered as an adventurer, both at sea and on the shore. These lines also make use of colons and semi colons in order to enforce meaningful pauses.

Lines 11-21

Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades
For ever and forever when I move.

In these lines, the speaker recalls his past life in the sea where he has “become a name”. He has seen the world and has been honoured everywhere. He has witnessed a great variety of cultures and governments across the globe. He has countered many adventures, even fought in the battle of Troy. He has successfully completed many adventurous voyages, gaining a range of experiences from different lands. These voyages have never ceased to inspire him, rather has induced a greater hunger for undertaking a voyage to discover new regions and experiences. An abstract image of a metaphorical arch is introduced through which the future untravelled world appears, to be experienced only when he is moving. This reflects the Victorian quest for exploration.

Lines 22 - 32

How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!
As tho' to breathe were life! Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me

Little remains: but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

Through these lines, Ulysses here expresses his disgust to be stuck at home, to live a life of void and stagnation. For him, life is not just simple breathing. It is a chance to try new things from out of that eternal silence (death). He imagines himself in the same vile position for three years or three days when he is away from travel and adventure. He keeps craving for travel and knowledge, right round the earth and beyond all human thought. These lines give us a glimpse of how intensely he wishes “to follow knowledge like a sinking star” and forever grow in wisdom and in learning. Once again the reference to bring new things and know more about the world. This Victorian spirit of knowing new and exploring new is what these lines may also suggest.

Lines 33-43

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle,—
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,

When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

In these lines, Ulysses introduces his son, Telemachus in an act of abdication. He affirms that his son is conscientious and well suited as a ruler of Ithaca. However, his activities are very simple and limited. He says that Telemachus is centred in the sphere of ‘common duties’, that includes maintenance in offices of tenderness and invoking to household gods. However, it creates an irony where Ulysses separates his and his son’s works. Somehow, it indirectly points to the different yearnings and capabilities that they both possess.

Lines 44-53

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:

There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,

Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—

That ever with a frolic welcome took

The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed

Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;

Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;

Death closes all: but something ere the end,

Some work of noble note, may yet be done,

Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.

In these lines, Ulysses recalls the port where the golden memories of his voyaging journeys are still living. It seems that the broad seas, his fellow mariners are asking for a new journey to start. It seems that he is welcomed by his fellow mariners to take up new voyages though they all have grown old. Though the mariners who were the evidence of the days in thunder and in the sunshine have turned old, they have still preserved the essence of courage and adventure. And that even old age has its honour and toil to strive. He wishes to do “some work of noble note,” before he dies. There is a direct mention of death, a point when everything comes to an end. So, the best period is the period of life, living it to the fullest and keep striving till the end.

Lines 54-61

The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'T is not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.

In these lines, we can visualize the invitation from nature to Ulysses. The way nature continues with its unbound beauty and keep the cycle of life moving, he too invites his mariner friends to take up new voyages, seeking a newer world. He pledges to keep travelling, seeking adventure and knowledge until he dies. His indomitable spirit yearns for a life of adventure. Though he is old, he does not seek comfort and ease. He desires to sail beyond the sunset till his death. This urge to explore the beyond can be interpreted as an imperial venture of owning “new found lands and countries.”

Lines 62-70

It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

In these lines, we find an allusion to Greek mythical hero, Achilles (greatest of Greek warriors, killer of Hector at Troy and lead figure in Homer's *Iliad*) whose contribution was very valuable in the Trojan war. And, Ulysses is urging to his fellow mariners to win or to get a place in Happy Isles (Islands of the Blessed in Greek mythology, Elysium, abode of the gods for heroes and patriots, located beyond the western horizon). However, here 'Happy Isles' may be a reference to heaven. At last, he makes it very clear that they are weak made by time (being old) and fate, but their willpower is still preserved. He values this indomitable spirit that is ever ready to strive, to explore, to seek but never to yield.

Stop to Consider

The Victorian Period (1837-1901):

The period derives its name from Queen Victoria who reigned England from 1837-1901. The literary trends that is most marked in this age has already begun some years earlier, often dated from 1832. Some of its notable events were the Oxford Movement, the rise of democracy, the expansion of the British Empire and the progress of science and industry. The Oxford Movement, so called from its origin at Oxford, was a movement for reviving the same faith in the church that it commanded in the Middle Ages. In this way, it sought to combat the sceptical tendencies of the age that science had induced through its inventions and discoveries. The democratic process which began with the Reform Act of 1832, was carried yet further in this age by a series of progressive legislations that included the extension of the franchise to the labouring class, removal of many of the remaining disabilities of the Roman Catholics, the admission of the Jews to the membership in the Parliament, universal adult male suffrage, voting by secret ballot and increased opportunities for education. The British empire too expanded to many countries during this period. A number of inventions and discoveries took place, such as Darwin's theory of evolution, the railway, the automobile and aeroplane, the telegraph and the wireless and the application of machinery to industry. All these developments had a great impact on the age and how it shaped the changing tendencies. The industrial revolution created a huge gap between the masses, exploiting the weaker class, including women and

children. But the most dominant influence was Darwin's theory of evolution that shook people's faith in religion. The scientific advancement that was brought in with the publication of two important works - Charles Lyell's "Principles of Geology" in 1830 and Charles Darwin's "The Origin of Species" in 1859. These two publications shook the very roots of Christianity. The Victorian Age was thus marked with a spirit of inquiry and criticism, by scepticism and religious uncertainties, by spiritual struggle and unrest. These are the features that are reflected in the literature of this age as well. All these events had highly influenced the minds of the writers and critics of the age.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Ulysses represent the Victorian spirit of passion for knowledge?

Hint: Yes. He gives up his kingly duties and responsibilities for the sake of adventure and knowledge.

2. What is the main idea of the poem Ulysses?

Hint: Importance of adventure, experience and seeking knowledge

3. 'Ulysses is not happy to perform his duties as a king.' Why?

Hint: Man of courage and adventure, his strong yearning for travelling and exploring new places and adventure.

4. What does he think of the people of his kingdom?

Hint: The people of his kingdom are savage and they only eat and sleep, they do not know him well.

5. Who was Ulysses?

Hint: Legendary Greek hero Odysseus, appeared in *Iliad* by Homer and he is the main protagonist of the *Odyssey*, ruler of Ithaca.

5.6 Summing Up:

In the previous sections, attempts have been made to familiarise you with one of the greatest Victorian poets, Alfred Lord Tennyson. Through these sections, we have tried to outline before you the spirit and the artistic sensibilities of the age in general and in particular reference to the poet. We have presented the different aspects of the poem along with the details of the intricacies used by the poet. But there may be some other aspects and ways in which you can read the poem, alluding to some newer ways of reading and receiving a text. We have tried to explore and analyse the poem in its context along with detailed explanations. This will help you to understand the text in itself and in relation to its age, tendencies, influences and adaptations, if any. A brief overview of the Victorian period is also added to aid you in contextualising the poem.

The Victorian period is marked by two major poets: Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning, who are often compared and contrasted. The age also had a few sceptics that include Fitzgerald, Matthew Arnold, Clough and James Thompson, the Pre-Raphaelites consisting chiefly of D.G. Rossetti, William Morris and Swinburne and the women poets, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti.

Tennyson wrote several volumes of verse. Some of his popular poems include: *The Lotus-Eaters*, *Ulysses*; *Break, Break, Break*; *Locksley Hall*; *The Lady of Shalott*; *The Princes*; *In Memoriam* and *Maud*. They comprise lyrics, odes, dramatic monologues, elegy and verse tales. He wrote almost till the end of his life. His writings have greatly influenced later poets and critics such as T. S. Eliot and others.

5.7 Glossary :

Allusion:An allusion is a reference, typically brief, to a person, place, thing, event, or other literary work with which the reader is presumably familiar. As a literary device, allusion allows a writer to compress a great deal of meaning and significance into a word or phrase. However, allusions are only effective to the extent that they are recognized and understood by the reader, and that they are properly inferred and

interpreted by the reader. If an allusion is obscure or misunderstood, it can lose effectiveness by confusing the reader.

Blank verse: Blank verse is poetry written with regular metrical but unrhymed lines, almost always in iambic pentameter. It has been described as probably the most common and influential form that English poetry has taken since the 16th century.

Spondee: A spondee (Latin: spondeus) is a metrical foot consisting of two long syllables, as determined by syllable weight in classical meters, or two stressed syllables in modern meters. A spondee typically does not provide the basis for a metrical line in poetry. Instead, spondees are found as irregular feet in meter based on another type of foot.

Inferno: Inferno (Italian for "Hell") is the first part of Italian writer Dante Alighieri's 14th-century epic poem *Divine Comedy*. It describes Dante's journey through Hell, guided by the ancient Roman poet Virgil.

Odyssey: It is an epic poem in 24 books traditionally attributed to the ancient Greek poet Homer. The poem is the story of Odysseus, king of Ithaca, who wanders for ten years trying to get home after the Trojan War. He then spent a further ten years to return home in the face of hostility from Poseidon, god of the earth and sea. The quest of king Odysseus to get back to his island and eject the suitors is built on the power of his love for home and family.

5.8 References and Suggested Reading:

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Unit 6

Alfred, Lord Tennyson : *Ulysses*, Section I, II (from In Memoriam)

SUPPLEMENTARY READING

Unit Structure :

6.1 Objectives

6.2 The Victorian Period

6.3 Alfred Lord Tennyson as a Victorian Poet

6.4 Victorian Compromise

6.5 Victorian Imperialism

6.6 “Ulysses” as a Reflection of the Victorian Spirit

6.7 “Ulysses” as a Dramatic Monologue

6.8 Probable Questions and Suggested Answers

6.9 Summing Up

6.10 Glossary

6.11 References and Suggested Reading

6.1 The Victorian Period (1837-1901):

The period derives its name from Queen Victoria who reigned England from 1837-1901. The literary trends that is most marked in this age has already begun some years earlier, often dated from 1832. Some of its notable events were the Oxford Movement, the rise of democracy, the expansion of the British Empire and the progress of science and industry. The Oxford Movement, so called from its origin at Oxford, was a movement for reviving the same faith in the church that it commanded in the Middle Ages. In this way, it sought to combat the sceptical tendencies of the age that science had induced through its

inventions and discoveries. The democratic process which began with the Reform Act of 1832, was carried yet further in this age by a series of progressive legislations that included the extension of the franchise to the labouring class, removal of many of the remaining disabilities of the Roman Catholics, the admission of the Jews to the membership in the Parliament, universal adult male suffrage, voting by secret ballot and increased opportunities for education. The British empire too expanded to many countries during this period. A number of inventions and discoveries took place, such as Darwin's theory of evolution, the railway, the automobile and aeroplane, the telegraph and the wireless and the application of machinery to industry. All these developments had a great impact on the age and how it shaped the changing tendencies. The industrial revolution created a huge gap between the masses, exploiting the weaker class, including women and children. But the most dominant influence was Darwin's theory of evolution that shook people's faith in religion. The scientific advancement that was brought in with the publication of two important works - Charles Lyell's "Principles of Geology" in 1830 and Charles Darwin's "The Origin of Species" in 1859. These two publications shook the very roots of Christianity. The Victorian Age was thus marked with a spirit of inquiry and criticism, by scepticism and religious uncertainties, by spiritual struggle and unrest. These are the features that are reflected in the literature of this age as well. All these events had highly influenced the minds of the writers and critics of the age.

6.2 Victorian Period—Early and Late

The Period is often divided into two parts: the early Victorian Period (ending around 1870) and the late Victorian Period.

Stop to Consider

Writers in the the early period

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892), Robert Browning (1812-1889), Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), Emily Bronte (1818-1848), Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), George Eliot (1819-1880), Anthony Trollope (1815-1882), Charles Dickens (1812-1870).

Stop to consider

Writers in the late Victorian Period

George Meredith (1828-1909), Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), Oscar Wilde (1856-1900), Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), A.E. Housman (1859-1936), Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894)

While Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning represented pillars in Victorian poetry, Charles Dickens and George Eliot contributed to the development of the English novel. Perhaps the most quintessentially Victorian poetic works of the period is: Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850), which mourns the loss of his friend. While Henry James describes Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872) as "organized, moulded, balanced composition, gratifying the reader with the sense of design and construction."

6.3 Alfred Lord Tennyson as a Victorian poet:

Alfred Lord Tennyson is by far the most representative poet of the Victorian era. His works interpret the complex tendencies of the age. His works derive its material from the changing social, political and religious sphere of the age. His poem, "The Princess" deals with the question of the proper sphere of women in society, "Locksley Hall" gives expression to the young hopes and aspirations of the liberalism of the early Victorian age, while in "Sixty Years After", the doubts and distrust felt by the conservatism of late Victorian Age find dramatic utterance. The most acclaimed work, *In Memoriam* was written to mourn the death of his dear friend but it also endeavours to reconcile the conflicting claims of science and religion. Whereas his poem, "Maud" is an expression of the "revolt of a cultured mind against the hypocrisy and corruptions of a society degraded by the worship of Mammon".

He was often categorised as one of the most popular poets of the Victorian age and was often called the poet of Victorian compromise. While other writers and thinkers like Carlyle, John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, Charles Dickens and Thackeray made idealistic and realistic reactions against the commercialism and loss of faith in the Victorian era, Tennyson in his poetry tried to strike a compromise between the differing loyalties of the age between science and faith, religion and industrial civilisation. His short lyrical poems, such as "Break, Break,

Break”, “Tears Idle Tears”, “Crossing the Bar”, “The Lotos-Eaters”, “Ulysses” are remarkable for lucidity of verse and melody. He is a minute observer of nature and his descriptions of Nature have an uncanny accuracy and vividness. His poetic diction is characterised by wonderful richness, avoidance of the common-place and frequent use of repetition, alliteration and assonance. He is a unique poet in the sense that he materializes Greek mythological stories not to repeat the legendary story of the Greeks but to recreate these stories to reflect the tendencies of the Victorian age- its people, their manners, morals, and beliefs. Most of his poems reflect the vital problem of the industrial and moral life of the age. There were different conflicts that have created restlessness in society. In the poem, “Ulysses”, we find Ulysses as a restless person. He prefers passing his time in action and adventure. Ulysses is the most apt example of the adventurous spirit of the age, who consistently yearns to see the unseen and to know the unknown. He has an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and adventure. There is a strong affinity between Ulysses and the dominant Victorian spirit that embraces a strong inclination towards exploration and new knowledge.

6.4 Victorian Compromise

The age was an age of transition and gradual shift from one dominant thought to another. There were a series of conflicts perpetuating during this period. The struggle from the realm of belief to doubt, religion to science, agriculture to industry created a sense of restlessness, doubt and uncertainty. All these tremulations, however led to a situation of compromise that later on came to be popularly known as Victorian compromise.

The particular situation, which saw prosperity and progress on the one hand and poverty, ugliness and injustice on the other, which opposed ethical conformism to corruption, moralism and philanthropy to money and capitalistic greediness, and which separated private life from public behaviour, is usually referred to as the “Victorian Compromise”. However, it also aroused a sense of reformation that aimed to improve living conditions at various levels, including hospitals, schools and prisons.

The word Victorian also has come to be used to describe a set of moral and sexual values. The Victorians were great moraliser, probably because they faced numerous problems on such a scale that they felt obliged to advocate certain values which offered solution or escape. As a rule, the values they promoted reflected not the world as they saw it, the harsh

social reality around them, but the world as they would have liked it to be. The common tendency was to veil certain vices of the period by overlooking them.

The Victorian compromise and Victorian moralism were a complex and contradictory thought. It was an age of progress, stability, great social reforms but it was also characterised by poverty, injustice and social unrest. The Victorians promoted a code of values that reflected the world as they wanted it to be, not as it really was, based on personal duty, hard work, respectability and charity. The idea of respectability distinguished the middle class from the lower class. The very concept of respectability was a mixture of both morality and hypocrisy, sovereignty and conformity to social standards. It implied the possession of good manners, the ownership of comfortable houses with servants and a carriage, regular attendance at church, and charity activity. Philanthropy was a wide phenomenon: the rich middle class exploited the poor ruthlessly. These exploitations led to the formation of various union bodies and laws to govern the rights of the poor working class. The husband in the house was the authority and the key role of woman was to educate their children and manage the household. Sexuality was generally repressed in its public and private forms. It was customary to reject words with sexual connotation from everyday vocabulary. There was seemingly a veiled code of conduct to repress the physical desires.

Stop to Consider:

The Victorian Period: Key Points

- The word Victorian has come to be used to describe a set of moral and sexual values.
- There was a consistent struggle between religion and science during the period.
- It was the age of progress, stability, great social reforms but it was also characterised by poverty, injustice and social unrest.
- There is a duality or double standard, between the concerns for the individual (the exploitation and corruption both at home and abroad) and national success.
- This is also the period of novel that represented the complexity of the period and the profound changes that characterised it.
- The term “Victorian” connotes a prudish refusal to admit the existence of sex, hypocritically combined with constant discussions of sex, thinly veiled as a series of warnings.

- The main organizing principles of Victorian society were gender and class. Gender was considered to be biologically based and to be determinative of almost every aspect of an individual's potential and character.
- The period was characterised by economic and cultural division. It encompassed income, occupation, education, family structure, sexual behaviour, politics, and leisure activities.
- Important political events during this period included the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, the expansions of the franchise and working-class political activism.
- There was dramatic expansion of the British empire between 1820 and 1870 that led to their shifting its orientation eastward.
- The period also saw women's rights activism which resulted in the Married Women's Property Acts and the growth of education and employment options for women.
- The British decadent writers were much influenced by the Oxford professor Walter Pater and his essays published during 1867–68.
- "Art for art's sake" is the usual English rendering of a French slogan, from the early 19th century with Walter Pater and his followers in the Aesthetic Movement, which was self-consciously in rebellion against Victorian moralism.

6.5 Victorian Imperialism:

Though Tennyson has taken the traditional classical texts of Homer and Dante as its source, the subject, however, is modified in a very significant manner. Ulysses in Dante is inspired by the urge to seek new experience that draws Tennyson to Dante. At the same time, he is propelled by the character of Odysseus who bears indomitable courage and persistent yearning for knowledge. Ulysses, living in Ithaca for a considerable period also does not have basis in Homer. The reference to Ithacans as "savage race" is very interesting as well something that may induce questions of domination and colonisation. The savage race is considered as inferior, they need to be civilized. This is the very typical attitude of the Victorian imperialism. The poem can also be read as an example of Tennyson's celebration of Victorian imperialism. The

reference to the new world again can refer to the world beyond. The poem may represent the poet's quest to explore the region of the imagination or the unexplored. These tendencies marked the Victorian period with its never ending crave for exploration and power. That in itself is the impending instance of Victorian imperialism.

6.6 “Ulysses” as a reflection of the Victorian spirit:

The spirit for learning and exploring new things, subjects and lands was very dominant during this period. This strong craving becomes the theme of the poem. Though it is believed that Tennyson composed Ulysses soon after the death of his dear friend, Arthur Hallam, he successfully changes the personal loss into impersonal spirit, by choosing a suitable classical character. The Victorian period is well-known for its enrichment of knowledge, expansion of empire and growth of economy. The mythical speaker, Ulysses adequately reflects this spirit of the age.

“How dull it is to pause, to make an end,

To rust unfurnished, not to shine in use!”

The poem, “Ulysses”, therefore, represents Victorian desire and aspiration for adventure. The conflict in the age created restlessness in the society. Ulysses is always in a state of restlessness. The conflict of being a king and an adventurer simultaneously is an important issue here. Ulysses prefers passing his days in action, excitement, adventure, not in quiet, peaceful and unexciting manner as a king. Victorian age was an age of new invention and discovery. The conflict between religion and science had greatly persuaded the people to seek new knowledge. The desire to see the unseen, to know the unknown, the unquenchable thirst for knowledge were very prominent features of the Victorian age. The character Ulysses has presented us the active spirit of adventure, thirst for knowledge and experience.

6.7 “Ulysses” as a Dramatic Monologue

This poem, “Ulysses” is one of the finest dramatic monologues of the nineteenth century. The speaker, Ulysses speaks before the readers about his mental state after he returns to his kingdom of Ithaca. He is not happy with his life as a king, and so expresses his discontent. He desires

to set sail for new voyages of adventure and excitement. He wants to attain knowledge which would forever develop his wisdom and understanding. He speaks to an unidentified audience about his son's capabilities and also about his own dissatisfaction as a king. He speaks about his strong yearning for an adventurous life. Though he has grown old, he still preserves an indomitable spirit and unquenchable courage to sail onward "beyond the sunset" until his death. The entire poem is an exposition and revelation of the speaker's mind about his discontent, his yearning for adventure, his call to the mariners and his final decision to leave his kingdom Ithaca by the speaker himself.

6.8 Probable questions and Suggested Answers

1. "It little profits that an idle king,/By this still hearth, among these barren crags,/Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole/Unequal laws unto a savage race,/That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me." – Explain.

Hint: Ulysses, the Greek hero and the king of Ithaca has returned from the battle of Troy to find that he cannot reconcile himself to dull and domestic life, matched as is with his aged wife Penelope and forced to live among primitive people to whom he meets out unequal laws to govern. These men perform life's functions perfunctorily and do not share his idealism or aspiration.

2. "I cannot rest from travel: I will drink/Life to the lees;" – Who is the speaker? Explain.

Hint: Ulysses. He yearns for adventure and experience that leads to knowledge, feels claustrophobic at Ithaca, He proposes to travel further and experience life to the maximum.

3. "I have enjoy'd/Greatly, have suffer'd greatly" – What is Ulysses referring to?

Hint: Ulysses is referring to the adventures he has had during his extensive sojourn when he both enjoyed and suffered alone and in the company of his fellow mariners on shores and seas.

4. "Much have I seen and known; cities of men/And manners, climates, councils, governments, /Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;" – Explain.

Hint: Ulysses is expounding on his rich and varied experiences of travels he has encountered, new races, manners, climates, councils and governments.

5. “And drunk delight of battle with my peers,/Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy” – Explain.

Hint: Reference to the great Trojan War which they had fought and won, the delight of the great victory with his peers, bells were ringing to commemorate their victory over the Trojans.

6. “I am a part of all that I have met;” – Explain.

Hint: His rich and varied experience is an inseparable part of his own being.

7. “Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'/Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades” – Explain.

Hint: Reference to the elusive world of knowledge seen beyond the arch of experience, but its margin recedes the more one pushes forward to reach it, to explore unexplored regions.

8. Discuss Tennyson as a Victorian poet with a special reference to the Victorian

Compromise.

: Hint- See the part Tennyson as a Victorian poet.

9. Give a critical appreciation of the poem *In Memoriam* Section 1.

Hint- See the part *In Memoriam* Section 1

10. Discuss Tennyson as a poet of Nature? Give reasons for your answer.

: Hint- see part Tennyson as a poet of Nature

11. What influence did the background of the 19th century have on the poetry of

Tennyson?

: Hint- See part Tennyson as a Victorian poet and Victorian period

12. Tennyson’s poetry is all beauty and melody. How far is this true?

: Hint- Very compact, poems with compressed metaphors, symbolic significance, strong images created to give vent to his intense grief, describing nature in various forms, cite few examples.

13. Discuss *In Memoriam* as an expression of Tennyson's grief.

: Hint- Elegy mourning the death of his friend, trying to find ways of solace and consolation

14. How does Tennyson characterize nature in the poem, *In Memoriam*?

: Hint- See part Tennyson as a poet of Nature

15. Give a critical appreciation of the poem *In Memoriam* Section 2.

: Hint- See part *In Memoriam* Section 2.

6.9 Summing Up

In this unit, we have discussed the Victorian period. It will give you a perspective on Alfred Tennyson. Tennyson was alive to the historical atmosphere of the period, and his poetry negotiated key issues of the time. We have also provided hints for writing answers to questions that may be asked of Tennyson and his poems. You must have familiarized also with various aspects of the poem under discussion.

6.10 Glossary :

Allusion: An allusion is a reference, typically brief, to a person, place, thing, event, or other literary work with which the reader is presumably familiar. As a literary device, allusion allows a writer to compress a great deal of meaning and significance into a word or phrase. However, allusions are only effective to the extent that they are recognized and understood by the reader, and that they are properly inferred and interpreted by the reader. If an allusion is obscure or misunderstood, it can lose effectiveness by confusing the reader.

Blank verse: Blank verse is poetry written with regular metrical but unrhymed lines, almost always in iambic pentameter. It has been described as probably the most common and influential form that English poetry has taken since the 16th century. The first known use of blank verse in the English language was by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey in his translation of the *Aeneid* (Published posthumously, 1554–1557). The major achievements in English blank verse were made by William Shakespeare and John Milton. Milton's *Paradise Lost* became

widely popular for its form and is widely imitated by the 18th century poets such as James Thomson (“The Seasons”) and William Cowper (“The Task”). Romantic English poets such as William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats also used blank verse as a major form. Shortly afterwards, Alfred, Lord Tennyson became particularly devoted to blank verse, using it in his long narrative poem *The Princess*, as well as for one of his most famous poems, “Ulysses”.

Cantos: Canto is a major division of an epic or other long narrative poem. It is an Italian term, derived from the Latin *cantus* (“song”), it probably originally indicated a portion of a poem that could be sung or chanted by a minstrel at one sitting. The use of the canto was described in the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as “a convenient division when poetry was more usually sung by the minstrel to his own accompaniment than read”. There is no specific format, construction or style for a canto and it is not limited to any one type of poetry. The typical length of a canto varies greatly from one poem to another. The average canto in the *Divine Comedy* is 142 lines long. Some famous poems that employ the canto division are Dante's *Divine Comedy* (with 100 cantos), Byron's *Don Juan* (17 cantos, the last of which is unfinished) and Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* (116 cantos).

Elegy: In English literature, an elegy is a poem of serious reflection, usually a lament for the dead. However, it is sometimes used to denominate texts of a pessimistic tone, sometimes as a marker for textual monumentalizing, and sometimes strictly as a sign of lament for the dead. The elegy began as an ancient Greek metrical form and is traditionally written in response to the death of a person or group. Though similar in function, the elegy is distinct from the epitaph, ode and eulogy: the epitaph is very brief; the ode solely exalts; and the eulogy is most often written in formal prose. The elements of a traditional elegy mirrors three stages of loss. First, there is a lament, where the speaker expresses grief and sorrow, then praise and admiration of the idealized dead, and finally consolation and solace. These three stages can be seen in W. H. Auden’s classic “In Memory of W. B. Yeats”. Other well-known elegies include “Fugue of Death” by Paul Celan, written for victims of the Holocaust, and “O Captain! My Captain!” by Walt Whitman, written for President Abraham Lincoln.

Epilogue: An epilogue is an extra chapter at the end of a literary work. Epilogues are quite popular literary additions that allow the writer to add on a bit of information after the bulk of the story has ended. This might be in regards to the future of the characters, a follow-up about a secondary character or plotline, or it might even entail a change in

perception that gives the reader a lingering alternative look out of the story.

Inferno: Inferno (Italian for "Hell") is the first part of Italian writer Dante Alighieri's 14th-century epic poem *Divine Comedy*. It describes Dante's journey through Hell, guided by the ancient Roman poet Virgil.

Odyssey: It is an epic poem in 24 books traditionally attributed to the ancient Greek poet Homer. The poem is the story of Odysseus, king of Ithaca, who wanders for ten years trying to get home after the Trojan War. He then spent a further ten years to return home in the face of hostility from Poseidon, God of the earth and sea. The quest of king Odysseus to get back to his island and eject the suitors is built on the power of his love for home and family.

Pastoral elegy : The pastoral elegy is a poem about both death and idyllic rural life. Often, the pastoral elegy features shepherds. The genre is actually a subgroup of pastoral poetry, as the elegy takes the pastoral elements and relates them to expressing grief at a loss. This form of poetry has several key features, including the invocation of the Muse, expression of the shepherd's, or poet's, grief, praise of the deceased, a tirade against death, a detailing of the effects of this specific death upon nature, and eventually, the poet's simultaneous acceptance of death's inevitability and hope for immortality. Additional features sometimes found within pastoral elegies include a procession of mourners, satirical digressions about different topics stemming from the death, and symbolism through flowers, refrains, and rhetorical questions. The pastoral elegy is typically incredibly moving and in its most classic form, it concerns itself with simple, country figures. In ordinary pastoral poems, the shepherd is the poem's main character. In pastoral elegies, the deceased is often recast as a shepherd, despite what his role may have been in life. Further, after being recast as a shepherd, the deceased is often surrounded by classical mythology figures, such as nymphs, fauns, etc. Pastoral elegy is one of the forms of poems in Elizabethan poetry. By alluding to pastoral elegies, *In Memoriam* in some sense aligns itself with this genre but at the same time it is also different in its form in some ways.

Prologue: A prologue is a separate introductory section that comes before the main body of a poem, novel, or play. It is used to establish context or to provide necessary details and gives some sense as to what may follow. The definition of prologue is opposite to that of the epilogue, a separate section of the text that provides a conclusion and answer questions. The word "prologue" comes from the Greek term "prologos" which means "before word". The prologue is often used to establish the context and provide background details to the story and the

characters involved in it, which is to come. Some of the best-known prologues are found in William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, the General Prologue in *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer.

Spondee: A spondee (Latin: spondeus) is a metrical foot consisting of two long syllables, as determined by syllable weight in classical meters, or two stressed syllables in modern meters. A spondee typically does not provide the basis for a metrical line in poetry. Instead, spondees are found as irregular feet in meter based on another type of foot.

Soliloquy/ Dramatic Monologue

A soliloquy is a type of monologue in which a character directly addresses an audience or speaks his thoughts aloud while alone or while the other actors keep silent. Dramatic monologue is a poem in the form of a speech or narrative by an imagined person, in which the speaker inadvertently reveals aspects of their character while describing a particular situation or series of events. These poems are dramatic in the sense that they have a theatrical quality. The present poem, *Ulysses* is one fine example of dramatic monologue.

Soliloquies and monologues have one thing in common: they each involve a solitary speaker. The difference between the two doesn't have to do with who's talking but with who's listening. In a play, a character delivering a soliloquy talks to him/herself — thinking out loud, as it were — so that the audience better understands what is happening to the character internally. The most well-known soliloquy in the English language appears in Act III, Scene 1 of *Hamlet*:

“To be, or not to be, — that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,

And by opposing end them?”

6.11 References and Suggested Reading

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