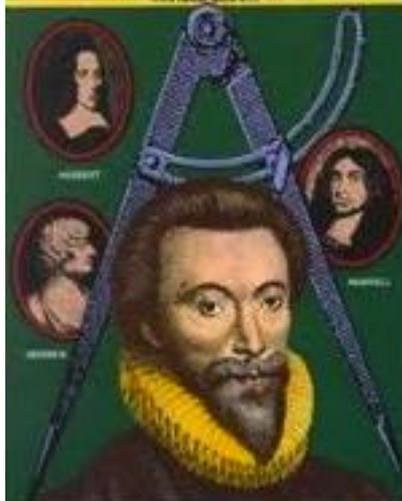




MAEL- 102

# ENGLISH POETRY UP TO THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY



**SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES**  
**UTTARAKHAND OPEN UNIVERSITY**

**MAEL- 102**

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**UP TO**  
**THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY**



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**UTTARAKHAND OPEN UNIVERSITY**

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**UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO EARLY  
ENGLISH POETRY**

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**1.1. INTRODUCTION**

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This unit will introduce you to the beginning of English poetry. It will cover the time span from the collapse of the Roman Empire to the Norman period. It will discuss a brief history of the Anglo Saxon and the Norman periods. The characteristics of the Anglo Saxon and Norman literature, in particular poetry will also be explained in this unit. You will also read about some of the earliest extant works of English poetry like Beowulf, Waldere, Widsith and Deor.

**1.2. OBJECTIVES**

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After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Trace the beginning of English Literature
- Understand and appreciate the Anglo Saxon literature
- Understand and appreciate the Anglo Norman literature

**1.3. THE ANGLO SAXON INVASION**

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The history of early English poetry can be traced back to the Anglo Saxon period. The Anglo Saxons invaders came from Germania to Britain in the latter part of the fifth century A.D and eventually established their kingdom in the British Isle. The Anglo Saxons belonged to a group of Teutonic peoples mainly consisting three related tribes namely the Angles, Saxons and the Juts. From this group the Angles came to Britain from the region of Angeln, a district located in Schelswig Holstein, Germany, the Saxons from the North German plain and the Juts from Jutland in modern Denmark. After reaching the shores of Britain, the Angles established their kingdom in the East, North and Midlands, the Saxons in the South and South West of the country and the Juts in Kent which is in the South East part of the country. As these three tribes were related, a similarity can be witnessed in their language, culture and mode of life.

Before the coming of the Anglo Saxons, Britain was inhabited by the native Brythons (now spelled Britons) and the Celt who were driven out from the eastern, central and southern portions of the country and confined to the area we today know as Wales. Besides Wales Celts were also pushed to areas such as the present day Scotland, Cornwall, Brittany and Ireland. As the native Britons had little to offer in the field of literature and it can be safely considered that the arrival of the Anglo Saxons signaled the beginning of the English language and literature. After the conquest, the area inhabited came to be known as “Angles land” which over a period of time became England. This group of Teutonic peoples spoke closely related Germanic languages which developed into a new language called “Angle-ish”, which over a period of time came to be known as English. However, the Anglo Saxon literature did not begin with books but with spoken verse and incantations. The purpose of these verses was to pass along the tribal history, folk lores, heroic tales and values to an audience who could not read. The literature of that time is written in what we today know as Old English or the Anglo Saxon English.

**1.4. ANGLO SAXON LITERATURE- AN OVERVIEW**

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A large number of Anglo Saxon manuscripts survive till date. In all there are about 400 surviving manuscripts mainly from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. These are written in both Latin and vernacular languages. Out of these 400 manuscripts, 189 are major works while the remaining ones are less recognized.

**MAJOR EXTANT WORKS OF ANGLO SAXON PERIOD:**

The following are some of the major surviving manuscripts of the Anglo Saxon poetry:

1. The *Janius manuscript*, also known as the *Caedmon manuscript*, which is an illustrated poetic anthology.
2. The *Exeter Book*, also an anthology, located in the Exeter Cathedral since it was donated to the Cathedral in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.
3. The *Vercelli Book*, a combination of poetry and prose;
4. The *Nowell Codex*, also a combination of poetry and prose.

Not all of the texts of Anglo Saxon period can be called works of literature and most of them are anonymous. The above mentioned manuscripts consist of miscellaneous forms of writings including both prose and poetic works. However, as this unit focuses on Early English Poetry, we will be focusing on Old English Poetry only.

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**1.5. ORIGIN OF ANGLO SAXON POETRY**

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The early Anglo Saxon poetry was oral and was recited on various ceremonies. The performers were usually professional gleemen who recited for hours and, in some instances, even for days. These poems were usually recited with the accompaniment of a harp. The poems followed a set pattern which made them easier to memorize. Only about 30,000 lines of Anglo Saxon poetry still survive. There are three types of Anglo Saxon poetry, one being heroic poetry, which tells of the achievements of warriors involved in great battles, the second elegiac which lament the death of one's kith and kin and the third Christian, which was written after Christianity returned to the British Isles after the conversion of these Germanic tribes into Christianity partly by Irish and partly by continental missionaries. The Anglo-Saxon conquest led to the establishment of monasteries which became centers of a literary culture. However, there are other divisions into which Anglo Saxon poetry can be classified further. This will taken up later in this section.

The Anglo Saxons left behind no poetic rule. Everything we know about the poetry of this period is based on modern analysis.

**1.5.1. CHARACTERISTICS OF ANGLO SAXON POETRY**

Now let us study some characteristics of the Anglo Saxon poetry based on modern analysis, as the Anglo-Saxons did not leave behind any rules for writing poetry and everything we know about the Anglo-Saxon poetry is based on this modern analysis.

**Oral form:** Most of the Anglo Saxon poetry is oral as the ballads and popular folk lore were circulated by word of mouth from generation to another. The Anglo Saxon scop or gleemen who were professional minstrel went about wandering from village to village or from tribe to tribe, chanting to the harp, the popular ballads and their own compositions. The poems followed a set formula of composition which made it easier for the minstrels to memorize. A formal rigid pattern of word stresses gave the lyrics a terse, sing-song effect.

**Alliteration:** Old English poetry is alliterative in nature. Alliteration is the occurrence of the same letter or sound at the beginning of adjacent or closely connected words. For instance, in the first line of *Beowulf* "Hwaet ! We Gar-Dena | in gear-dagum" (meaning "Lo! We ...of the Spear Danes in days of yore"), the stressed words *Gar-Dena* and *gear-dagum* alliterate on the consonant "G".

**Head Rhyme:** Head Rhyme means making words begin with the same sound (this may sometimes also be referred to as alliteration.)

**Caesura:** Old English poetry is also commonly marked by the German caesura or pause. In addition to setting pace for the line the caesura also grouped each line.

**Stress:** In Anglo Saxon poetry, stress is usually placed on a syllable containing a long vowel. Words such as God, King and proper nouns are often stressed. It is very rare that a stressed syllable is a preposition or pronoun. The words that are lower in hierarchy are usually unstressed and are short.

**Melancholy:** Melancholy is one of the chief characteristics of the Old English verse. Even when a poem deals with a heroic theme set in harsh atmosphere, there is always a note of melancholy.

**Simile:** A simile is a figure of speech that compares two dissimilar things by using a key word such as *like* or *as*. By comparing dissimilar things, the writer of a simile shocks the reader into appreciation of the qualities of the things being compared. The epic *Beowulf* contains many similes.

**Metaphor:** A metaphor is a figure of speech in which one thing is spoken of as though it were something else. For example in the Anglo Saxon poem, *The Wanderer*, "battle" is referred to a "storm of spheres." Through this identification of dissimilar things, a comparison is suggested or implied. In the above given simile, it shows how the Anglo Saxons viewed battle as something that was unpredictable, chaotic and violent in nature.

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**Kenning:** Another important feature of the Anglo Saxon poetry is kenning. Kenning is a figure of speech in the form of a compound (usually two words, hyphenated) that employ a figurative language in place of a more concrete single-word noun. For example, “sea” becomes “whale-road” and “body” is called “life house”; Beowulf in oe “ bee-wolf” or “bee-hunter”, is a kenning for “bear”.

### **1.5.2.SOME IMPORTANT ANGLO SAXON POETIC WORKS**

#### **(i) Pagan Poetry:**

Anglo Saxon poetry has a good body of poetic work. Some of the important poetic works are *Beowulf*, *Widsith* and *Seafearers*

**Beowulf :** Beowulf is the earliest known English epic, written in Old English. The written version is of 10th century but the origin of the poem can be traced back to the 7th century. Beowulf tells the story of the legendary pagan hero Beowulf. The story is of Scandinavian origin which tells the exploits of a pagan warrior, renowned for his courage, strength and dignity. It is essentially a warrior’s story in which the struggle of Beowulf with a monster named Grendel is given. Grendel for a long time had been raiding the banqueting hall of King Hrothgar of Jutland. Beowulf, the Prince of Sweden, sails from Sweden to help King Hrothgar. He fights Grendel and slays him and later his evil mother too. When Beowulf returns home, he is proclaimed the king of Geats. Later his kingdom is invaded by a fiery dragon whom Beowulf manages to slay. However, he receives a lethal wound in fight and succumbs to his injuries. **Beowulf** has achieved national epic status on the same level as *Illiad* and is of interest to historians, anthropologists, literary critics and literature students all over the world.

Besides *Beowulf*, there is a large body of Anglo Saxon verse. There are great poems like some fragments of *The Flight of Finnsburh*, *Waldere*, *Widsith* and *Deor*.

#### **(ii) Elegiac Poetry:**

Related to the heroic tales are a number of short poems from the Exeter Book which are described as “elegies” or “wisdom poetry”. These are lyrical and Boethian in their description of the ups and downs of life. *The Ruin* is gloomy in mood and tells of the decay of the once glorious city of Roman Britain. *The Wanderer* is a poem in which an older man talks about an attack that happened in his youth, where his close friends and kin were also killed. The memories of this slaughter remain with him all throughout his life. *The Seafarer*, another important work of the Anglo-Saxon poetry, tells the exploits of a somber old seafarer whis away from home on the sea and the only hope of redemption is the joy of heaven. Besides these, Alfred the Great, the West Saxon king, wrote a wisdom poem over the course of his reign based on the philosophy of Boethius called the *Lays of Boethius*.

#### **(iii) Christian Poetry:**

Christian poetry can further be categorised as follows:

(i) **Saints' Lives:**

The Vercelli Book and the Exeter Book contain four long narrative poems on the lives of saints known as hagiographies. In Vercelli are *Andreas* and *Elene* and in Exeter are *Guthlac* poems A & B and *Juliana*. *Andreas* is a 1722 lines long poem and it is closest of all the surviving Old English poems to *Beowulf* in style and tone. It tells the story of Saint Andrew and his journey to rescue Saint Matthew from the Mermedonians. *Elene* is the story of Saint Helena (mother of Constantine) and her discovery of the True Cross the cult of which was popular in Anglo Saxon England. *Guthlac* poems A & B are two poems about the English Saint Guthlac. *Juliana* is the study of the virgin martyr Juliana of Nicomedia.

(i) **The Anglo Saxon Chronicle:**

Besides the above mentioned poetic works, a major work of the Anglo Saxon period is the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle*, a historical record in English that summarizes important annual events of the period. The *Anglo Saxon Chronicle* contains various heroic poems. The earliest from *The Battle of Brunanburh* celebrates the victory of King Athelstan over the Scots and Norse. There are five shorter poems: capture of the Five Boroughs (942); coronation of King Edgar (973); death of King Edgar (975); death of Alfred the Great (1036); and death of King Edward the Confessor (1065)

The 325 line poem, *The Battle of Maldon* celebrates Earl Byrhnoth and his men who fell in battle against the Vikings in 991. It is considered to be one of the finest poems of the Anglo-Saxon period, but both the beginning and the end of the poem are missing and the only manuscript was also destroyed by the fire in 1731. A well known speech made by..... occurs at the end of the poem:

Thou shall be the harder, the heart the keener, courage the greater, as our strength lessens.

Here lies our leader all cut down, the valiant man in the dust;

Always may he mourn who now thinks to turn away from this warplay.

I am old, I will not go away, but I plan to lie down by the side of my lord, by the man so dearly loved.

*Battle of Maldon.*

### 1.5.3. SOME FAMOUS ANGLO SAXON POETS

The following were some of the well known Anglo Saxon poets.

**Caedmon:** Caedmon was a humble, unlearned man, who used to tend the cattle of an abbey on the Yorkshire coast. One night while he was lying down in a cowshed, he heard a voice asking him to sing. Ashamed, Caedmon refused as he could not sing. But the mysterious voice said to Caedmon that he shall sing to it. To this Caedmon asked, 'What shall I sing?' the mysterious voice replied that he should sing about the Song of Creation. Being divinely inspired, Caedmon sang and the song he sang can be considered the first

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piece of Christian literature to appear in Anglo Saxon England. Caedmon lived in the seventh century and is mentioned in Bede's *History*.

**Cynewulf:** Cynewulf was the author of four poems: *The Ascension*, *The Legend of Saint Juliana*, *Elene*. All these four poems are about the discovery of the True Cross on which Christ was crucified and the *Fates of the Apostles*. The works show Cynewulf to be a scholar, familiar with Latin, and technically a skilful poet. Among his poems *Elene* and the *Ascension* are the most praised ones.

**Bede:** Also referred to as Saint Bede or Venerable Bede, was an English monk at the two monasteries in the kingdom of Northumbria. His most famous work is *Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (*The Ecclesiastical History of English People*) I tells the story of the conversion and of the English church. This work gained him the title of "The Father of English History." Besides *Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, Bede also wrote scientific, historical and theological works, which reflect his catholic bent of mind. Bede's scientific commentaries employed allegories as a means of interpretation and his history includes accounts of miracles. Modern historians have completed many studies on Bede's works. His life and his works have been celebrated by a series of annual scholarly lectures at St. Paul's Church, Jarrow from 1958 to the present.

**Alcuin of York:** Alcuin was an English scholar, ecclesiastic, poet and teacher from York, Northumbria. He wrote many theological and dogmatic treatises as well as a few works on grammar and a number of poems. He became the friend and adviser of the Frankish emperor Charlemagne. Alcuin assisted Charlemagne in making the Frankish court a centre of learning. As a result of the efforts of Alcuin and Charlemagne, the English culture developed considerably.

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### **1.6. THE COMING OF THE NORMANS**

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The period of English history following the Norman Conquest (1066) when England was ruled by William, Duke of Normandy, and his descendants, ie William I, 1066-87; William II 1087-1100; Henry I, 1100-1135 and Stephen, 1135-54 is known as the Norman period. The word Norman means 'Northman'. They were originally 'Norsemen' from Norway, descendants of Vikings, who had conquered the province of northern France called Normandy after them. The Normans conquered England in the year 1066 and with the coming of the Normans, the English started becoming French in their way of life.

Let us now take a look at how the Normans invaded England and gradually became the masters of the island we today know as the British Isles.

#### **1.6.1. THE NORMAN CONQUEST**

As mentioned earlier, by the time the Normans (Northmen from Scandinavia) invaded England, they had become culturally French. Thus, the Norman Conquest was a French conquest as a result of which French aristocracy was established in the English soil. William, the Duke of Normandy, had family ties with Edward the Confessor, the English

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king, who promised William the throne. When Edward died in 1066, the Saxon witan - council of elders - chose Harold II as king. This angered William of Normandy. William, thereupon, led a few thousand Norman and French troops across the English Channel to claim the throne forcefully. He confronted King Harold at the **Battle of Hastings** near a seaside village in southern England. Harold's army was defeated and he was killed. The victorious Norman army thereafter marched towards London, ruthlessly crushing all resistance. On Christmas Day, at Westminster Abbey, William was coroneted the King of England. For the next five years, William consolidated his victory. He quelled the Anglo-Saxon forces, confiscated their lands, established Norman controlled governments at all levels, gradually establishing feudalism in England.

### **1.6.2. SHIFT OF LANGUAGE**

With the coming of the Normans, their dialect of French became the language of England. The Normans conducted various businesses in French and Latin. In the law courts too, French was substituted for English. Saxons dealing with the Normans had to learn French. As French displaced English, it suffered heavy losses. The Classical Old English verses died out, but were later revived in very different forms, but prose, continued as sermons, were still written in English and the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle* was still kept in monasteries. In addition to this, Latin also emerged as an important language for the Anglo-Saxons, who had tried to desperately use the language of the conquerors, failed miserably, as a result of which Latin was employed as a compromise language.

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### **1.7. THE NORMAN LITERATURE**

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The first writing of Norman literature in England is a catalogue of the King's property, i.e. the whole of the country, as William saw himself as the proprietor of the country. Although, William owned the land but he granted it to the nobles who had helped him in the conquest. Thereby, laying the foundation of Feudalism. Feudalism was a pyramid like structure, where the king was at the apex, followed by the nobility and the aristocracy and finally, the poor peasants, who worked as serfs for feudal lords and were placed at the lowest rung of the ladder. These peasants formed the lower rung of the society.

The Norman literature was quite opposed to the grim and melancholy literature of the Anglo-Saxons. The old English verse was black and white whereas the French coloured and looked at the sunnier side of life. It, however, was neither true English literature nor true French literature for the Normans who settled in England had lost touch of the French culture and language because of which the French they spoke lost its purity. Thus, a new form of language emerged which had the characteristics of both French and Old English, and it came to be known as Anglo Norman and the literature written in Anglo Norman came to be known as the Anglo Norman literature. Furthermore, Anglo Norman may also refer to a period from 1066 to 1204, when the Duchy of Normandy and English were united in the Anglo Norman realm.

Norman literature exploits a lot of ancient Greek and Roman mythical and legendary figures, ranging from Agamemnon to Ulysses and from Aeneas, to Brutus. These great

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mythical and legendary figures have been portrayed in the works of three writers of the twelfth century, namely Geoffrey of Manmouth, Wace and Laymon, who wrote in Latin, French and English, respectively. Their works were set in the remote past, beginning with a founding of the nation by Brutus, the legendary great grandson of Aeneas, and ending with the Anglo Saxon conquest of the native islanders, the Britons of the fifth and the sixth centuries.

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### **1.8. ANGLO NORMAN POETRY**

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With the coming of the Normans, the language of England shifted from Old English, which by that time had moved to becoming Middle English, to French. As English was displaced by French, a lot of changes were witnessed in all walks of life and all fields of knowledge, including literature and in particular, poetry. Now let us examine some of the changes that came about in the writing of poetry.

#### **1.8.1. CHARACTERISTICS OF ANGLO NORMAN POETRY**

These changes also formed the chief characteristics of Norman poetry.

**Rhymed verse:** With the coming of the Normans, the French stanza forms replaced the formlessness of Anglo-Saxon poetry, for instance, rhymed verse replaced the alliterative verse and head rhyme of the Anglo Saxon poetry.

**Meter:** As opposed to the Anglo Saxon poetry, which was not rhythmical in pattern, the Norman poetry had a rhythmical pattern which makes considerable use of the **octosyllabic** couplet, meaning a couplet written in eight syllables, which they owe to the French.

**Courtly sophisticated verse:** with the coming of the Normans, the heroic verse of the Anglo Saxons was replaced by new kinds of courtly sophisticated rhymes. This was a feature of Norman England but throughout Europe, the heroic note of the Anglo Saxon poetry soon faded away.

**Light spirited diction:** The language of the Normans was light, coloured and spirited as compared to the Anglo-Saxons' which was grim, heavy, melancholy and humourless.

**Use of borrowed words:** Anglo Norman poetry made use of borrowed words. Thwe words were mainly borrowed from Latin and French (Latin being the parent tongue of French)

After going through the characteristics of Norman literature, let us now take a look at some of the important Anglo Norman writers and trace their contribution in shaping the English literature.

#### **1.8.2. SOME IMPORTANT ANGLO NORMAN WORKS**

By and large, the medieval works were religious and didactic. Among the most famous is the allegorical poem, *Le Chasteau d' Amore* by Robert Grosseteste who was the

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Bishop of Lincoln. The poem is a eulogy of the Virgin and many aspects of Christian theology. This is done through an elaborate allegory of a castle and its defenders. The lively and metrically interesting *Voyage of St. Brendan*, with its rich collection of marvellous adventures, is another Anglo French poem which is of literary interest even today.

Other important writings include *Ormulum*, a translation of some of the Gospels read at Mass by the Augustine monk Orm. *Ormulum* consists of around 19,000 unrhymed but metrically rigid couplets which consist of homilies. Homilies are commentaries following the reading of scriptures. Orm gave the title *Ormulum* meaning “made by Orm” to his work. Orm also developed an idiosyncratic spelling system to guide his readers in the pronunciation of the vowels as well. He used a strict poetic meter to ensure that the reader knows which syllable needs to be stressed.

*Cursor Mundi* is an enormous poem of about thirty thousand lines written in the last quarter of the thirteenth century. It deals with important incidents from both the Old and the New Testament.

*Ancrene Riwe*, is a sophisticated work of great charm and accomplished style. It is a work about monastic rule given by a priest to three religious sisters who lived in a little house near a church. It was probably written by an Augustinian priest of Wigmore Abbey in North-West Herefordshire, *Handlyng Synne*, by Robert Mannyng, *Pricke of Conscience* by Richard Rolle, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, *Pearl*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* of anonymous authorship are some other works of this period. Another important work is a book of travel writing by a supposed fictitious writer, Sir John Mandeville. This book, which is abundant in French expressions, is appealing in many ways and seems to be a popular one. William Langland is another important writer of merit in the Old English technique. His *The Vision of Piers Plowman* not only attacked the abuses of the Christian Church in England but also calls upon the ordinary people to go on a relentless quest for the ‘Holy Truth.’

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is one of the finest Arthurian romances of the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. It also contains three religious poems *Pearl*, *Patience* and *Purity*. All these are considered to be the works of the same poet. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* tells of the exploits of Sir Gawain, a knight of King Arthur’s Round Table. It is mainly about the duels between Sir Gawain and a supernatural knight, the “Green Knight.” In this poem Gawain demonstrates the qualities of chivalry and loyalty but his honour is called into question by a test crafted by the lady of the castle in which most of the story takes place. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* belongs to the so called **Alliterative Revival** which saw the revival of the alliterative verse pattern in Old English poetry. Alliteration had been replaced by the end rhyme in Anglo Norman poetry. Sir Gawain symbolizes the first blossoming of Arthurian chivalry.

**1.8.3.SOME FAMOUS ANGLO NORMAN WRITERS**

**Geoffrey of Manmouth:** Geoffrey of Manmouth was probably born between 1100 to 1110 in Wales as in his *Historia Regum Britanniae (History of the Kings of Britain)*, he calls himself Galfridus Monumetensis, “Geoffrey of Manmouth”, which shows his connection with Manmouth, Wales. However, much of his life was spent outside Wales, especially in Oxford, where he was a secular canon of St. George’s College and wrote his *Historia Regum Britanniae*. The history was later translated into French by Wace and thereafter into English by Layamon. Layamon’s work is in verse and it is called *Brut* after Brutus, the legendary grandson of Aeneas, and the mythical founder of Britain.

Geoffrey began his history with a British foundation myth modeled upon Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Geoffrey of Manmouth dedicates a considerable portion of his history to King Arthur, the legendary British leader of the late 5<sup>th</sup> and the early 6<sup>th</sup> centuries. Who according to the medieval histories and romances led the defense of Britain against the Saxon invaders. Geoffrey gives an excellent account of the victories won by Arthur both at home and abroad.

**Walter Map:** William Map was of Welsh origin and is mainly credited with lively Latin lyrics of the Goliardic tradition. Gallards were wandering scholars, a group of clergy who wrote satirical Latin poetry. The Goliards mainly hailed from different universities of France, Germany, Spain, Italy and England and protested the growing contradictions within the church. They expressed their feelings through song, poetry and performances. Map’s work, written in this tradition, is a collection of satirical poetry and known as *Apocalypse of Goli*. Another of his surviving work is *De Nugis Curialium (Trifles of Courtiers)* which is a collection of anecdotes and trivia.

**Wace:** He was a Norman poet who was born in Jersey and brought up in mainland Normandy. He is known for his *Roman de Brut*, a verse history of Britain, based on *Historia Regnum Britannia* by Geoffrey of Manmouth, which in turn became the basis of Layamon’s *Brut*.

**Layamon or Laghamon:** He was a poet and priest of Worcestershire in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. He was the author of *Brut*, which, as mentioned above, is an English translation of Wace’s *Roman de Brut*. It discusses the legends of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. His poem provides an inspiration for numerous later writers, including Sir Thomas Malory and Jorge Luis Borges, and had an impact on the development of Arthurian literature and medieval history writing in England.

**Marie de France:** (Mary of France) was a poetess of the late 12<sup>th</sup> century who was of French origin but during her adult life lived largely in England as she mainly wrote in the Anglo Norman dialect. She is chiefly known for *Lais of Marie de France*. Her *lais* were a collection of twelve narrative poems, mostly of a few hundred lines each. Her *Lais* focused on glorifying the concept of courtly love through the adventures of the main character and are dedicated to the “noble king” Henry. Mary’s *Lais* were quite popular in aristocratic circles. Besides her *Lais*, she also translated Aesop’s *Fables* from Middle

## **English Poetry up to the Eighteenth Century MAEL-102**

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English into Anglo Norman French. Her fables are dedicated to “Count William” who might have been William of Mandeville or William Marshall. She also wrote *Espurgatorie seint Partiz* (*Legend of the Purgatory of St. Patrik*, based upon a Latin text).

**Chretien de Troyes:** He was a 12<sup>th</sup> century French poet who served at the court of Henry II. He along with Marie de France was the inventor of medieval “romances”. His work on Arthurian subjects is regarded as one of the best of medieval romance in chivalry. His use of structure, particularly in *Yvain, the Knight of the Lion*, is considered to be a prototype of modern novel. In the words of Karl Uitti, “the inventor of modern novel”, “With [Chretien’s work] a new era opens in the history of European story-telling...this poem reinvents the genre we call narrative romance; in some important respects it also initiates the vernacular novel.” Chretien’s works were written in vernacular Old French and many of the surviving copies of his romances have been adapted into other languages. Chretien was the first writer to talk about the love affair between Queen Guinevere and Lancelot.

With this we come to the end of the first phase in the history of English literature. In this unit you saw how both the Anglo-Saxon and the Norman literatures played a formative role in the nurturing of the first body of English literature. In the next unit you will read about Chaucer, who was the first important milestone in history of English literature.

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### **1.9.GLOSSARY**

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**Viking:** A member of Scandinavian people who carried out raids of Northwestern Europe between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, often settling in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, often settling in the areas they invaded, as in Britain. They usually came in long ships and raided many coastal regions.

**Scandinavia:** Scandinavia is a historical cultural-linguistic region in Northern Europe, characterized by a common ethno-cultural heritage and related languages that include the three kingdoms of Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

**Canon:** priest or minister who is a member of certain bodies of church clergy subject to an ecclesiastical rule.

**Courtlylove** was a medieval European conception of nobly and chivalrously expressing love and admiration. Generally, courtly love was secret and between members of the nobility. It was also generally not practiced between husband and wife.

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### **1.10. LET US SUM UP**

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In this unit you saw how the various Germanic tribes came to the British Isles and made it their home. Once these Germanic tribes had settled well, they started working on the development of their art, literature and culture and thus the first English literature blossomed in the English soil. This literature was mostly a verse literature, which mostly comprised of anonymous poetry. However, there were some brilliant prose works too. With the coming of the Normans, we saw how a change in language came about and how

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Anglo Saxon was gradually replaced by Anglo Norman. This unit further took up the characteristic features of Anglo Norman literature and discussed the major Anglo Norman writers and their works at length.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Who were the native inhabitants of Britain?
2. Name the major extant works of the Anglo Saxon period.
3. Who is the author of *The Legend of Sain Juliana*?
4. What does the word Norman mean?
5. Who is the author of *Historia Regum Britannia*?
6. Who is considered to be the inventor of modern novel?
7. What are the characteristics of Anglo Saxon poetry?
8. What are lais?

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### **1.11.ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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A1. Brythons

A2. Janius Manuscript

Exeter Book

Vercelli Book

Nowell Codex

A3. Cynewulf

A4. Northman

A5. Geoffrey of Manmouth

A6. Chretien de Troyes

Q7 and Q8 are long answer questions. Please refer to the relevant portions to know the answers

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### **1.13.SUGGESTED READING**

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### **1.14.TERMINAL AND MODEL QUESTIONS**

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Q1. Write short notes on:

*Beowulf, The Battle of Maldon, Caedmon, Marie de France*

Q2. Who was Bede?

Q3. What do you know about the Norman conquest?

Q4. How did a shift in language come about in England with the coming of the Normans?

**UNIT 2      CHAUCER: PROLOGUE TO THE  
CANTERBURY TALES (1)**

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- 2.1. Introduction
- 2.2. Objectives
- 2.3. Geoffrey Chaucer:
  - 2.3.1. The Age of Chaucer: An Overview
  - 2.3.2. The Life and Works of Chaucer
  - 2.3.3. Chaucer's Influences:
    - 2.3.3.1. French Influence
    - 2.3.3.2. Italian Influence
    - 2.3.3.3. Latin Influence
- 2.4. Chaucer, the Poet: An Overview
  - 2.4.1. Chaucer's Language
  - 2.4.2. Chaucer's Style
  - 2.4.3. Chaucer's Art of Narration
  - 2.4.4. Chaucer's Humour, Satire and Irony
  - 2.4.5. Chaucer's Realism
  - 2.4.6. Chaucer's Humanism
- 2.5. Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6. Answers to Check Your Progress
- 2.7. References
- 2.8. Suggested Reading
- 2.9. Terminal and Model Questions

**2.1. INTRODUCTION**

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In the previous unit you read about some of the chief Anglo-Saxon and the Norman writers and their works. You read about some vernacular narratives of the pre-Christian era like the pre-historic folklore of Beowulf, Widsith, The Complaint of Doer and poets like Bede and Cynewulf were also discussed. In this unit you will be able introduced to Geoffrey Chaucer who is hailed as the Father of English Poetry.

**2.2. OBJECTIVES**

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This unit will function as a cornerstone to your understanding of English Literature in general and English poetry in particular as it was Chaucer who laid the foundation of English poetry. This unit will help you to understand the following:

- The life and works of Chaucer
- Chaucer's major influence
- The age of Chaucer through a character study of the various characters in *The Canterbury Tales* as Chaucer's pilgrims are widely representative of the society of the time
- The various verse forms which Chaucer makes use of in *The Canterbury Tales* like the Heroic Couplet, the 8-line stanza, and the Rhyme Royal.

**2.3. GEOFFREY CHAUCER**

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**2.3.1. THE AGE OF CHAUCER: AN OVERVIEW**

The early medieval society, prior to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, was largely divided into three estates. The nobility, who comprised of a small hereditary aristocracy, the *church*, and the commoners. By the fourteenth century, society started changing rapidly. A growing and prosperous middle class started playing an increasingly important role in every sphere diffusing class boundaries. Thus, with the emergence of the middle class the emerged and began playing.....

**2.3.2. THE LIFE AND WORKS OF CHAUCER**

Geoffrey Chaucer was the son of a prosperous wine merchant and spent his boyhood in the mercantile atmosphere of London's Vintry. Instead of apprenticing Chaucer to the family business, Chaucer's father placed him as a page in the great aristocratic households of England, like that of the countess of Ulster, who was married to Prince Lionel, the second son of Edward III. In 1359, during the Hundred Years' War, while serving in the English army in France, Chaucer was captured and held a prisoner. King Edward III paid a sixteen pound ransom for his release. Thereafter, Chaucer served as a member of King Edward's personal household (1367) and took part in several diplomatic missions to Spain (1366), France (1368) and Italy (1372). Chaucer audited and kept books on the export taxes, which were one of the Crown's main sources of revenue. He

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also served as a justice of peace and knight of the shire for the county of Kent. As a result of his enormous diplomatic engagements that kept Chaucer very busy he did find time to write a great deal of poetry.

Chaucer was a prolific writer and he wrote poetry copiously. His works range from secular to religious and moral subjects, from comic to philosophical topics, and from original plots to translations. Chaucer owes this diversity to the learning and exposure he got in his life. As Chaucer was the first poet who captured life in verse, he has rightly been called the Father of English Poetry. Chaucer was the first person to be buried in what is now known as The Poet's Corner in the Westminster Abbey.

### **2.3.3. CHAUCER'S INFLUENCES**

Chaucer wrote in English, French and Italian, as he was fluent in all the three languages. This could be the result of spending time at London Vintry, where he mixed freely with people of all sorts and was exposed to several languages. Furthermore, he had been to countries like France and Italy on various diplomatic missions and had received schooling in Latin too. Chaucer, like Shakespeare, borrowed immensely from various sources, but both the literary giants had the capacity to assimilate things, so much so, that whatever they borrowed they made it their own. This can be said for his love of languages too as he used foreign languages with as much as ease and refinement as if they were his own native tongue.

**2.3.3.1. FRENCH INFLUENCE:** Chaucer's earliest models were works by French poets like Guillaume de Machaut, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean Froissart. His book *The Book of Duchess* shows the influence of Machaut and Jean Froissart. *Roman de la Rose*, a long dream allegory was translated by Chaucer into English under the title, *The Romance of the Rose*.

**2.3.3.2 ITALIAN INFLUENCE:** Chaucer, as stated earlier, took part in various diplomatic missions abroad. In the year 1372, he was sent to Italy. Although he had gathered working knowledge of the language from the Italian merchants and bankers posted in London, but the diplomatic mission to Italy brought him into direct contact with the Italian Renaissance. During his stay in Italy, he read the works of Italian writers like Boccaccio, Petrarch and Dante, all of which gave a new dimension to his writing. For instance, Chaucer's *The House of Fame* and *The Parliament of Fowls* show the influence of Dante's *Divina Commedia*. His *Troilus and Criseyde* shows the influence of Boccaccio. Furthermore, the Knight's Tale in *The Canterbury Tales* too is based on Boccaccio's *Il Teseida*.

**2.3.3.3 LATIN INFLUENCE:** While in prison, awaiting execution for which he had been unjustly condemned, Chaucer made a prose translation of the Latin *Consolation of Philosophy* written by the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Roman statesman Boethius. The influence of Boethius can be seen in his *The Knight's Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde*.

**2.4. CHAUCER - THE POET- AN OVERVIEW**

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As students of English literature you know Chaucer as ‘the Father of English Poetry.’ But had you ever wondered why he and not Gower or Langland, his other well known contemporary poets, were conferred with this title? Chaucer was a poet *par excellence*. After the Norman Conquest Chaucer was the first major poet to use English and his *The Canterbury Tales* became the first important work to have been written in the English language. He was the first poet to teach the art of English versification. As he had been on various diplomatic missions to countries such as France and Italy, he read the literature, especially poetry of these countries and blended the French and the Italian poetic elements in his native English style, thus his works breathe a cosmopolitan spirit. Furthermore, if we compare his works with those of Gower or Langland, we find that Gower had a hard foreign streak in him and was of the opinion that English was not a language fit to be the medium of self-expression. On the other hand, Langland was a poet of the past. Chaucer, nonetheless, stands mid-way between Gower and Langland, who incorporated both the foreign and the indigenous elements in his work homogeneously. Although he borrowed some elements of the Anglo Saxon poetry like the alliterative verse pattern, yet he was a poet who was futuristic in his approach. If we carefully examine Chaucer’s life with respect to his career, we will notice that it was the vast experience he gained by coming into contact with the French and Italian men of letters that liberated him from the shackles of medievalism. Chaucer’s poetry is like a “fresh vernal air” for he did not imitate the style of the great masters slavishly. He too, like Shakespeare after him, reorganizes borrowed material and transforms everything he touches. His books like *The Book of Duchess* and *The House of Fame* show the influence of Machaut and Dante respectively but he adds his unique flavor to the books. As far as his language is concerned, he chose the East Midland dialect, which was a relatively new dialect, this is another reason why Chaucer’s “language breathes a freshness.” Let us now examine Chaucer’s language in detail.

**2.4.1. CHAUCER’S LANGUAGE**

With the coming of the fourteenth century, the Saxon speech had split up into three dialects which managed to survive only among a few rustic folks. In the last unit you saw that with the Norman Conquest, the English language suffered heavy losses as French became the language of the nobility. Furthermore, the Normans carried out their affairs in French and in the court of laws too English was replaced by French. However, in 1362, Edward III, on the request of the Londoners allowed suits to be pleaded in English instead of French and gradually by the end of the century, English as a language started to gain acceptance and a position of importance. In Chaucer’s times the English language saw the rise of four major dialects- the Northern, the Southern, the East Midland and the West Midland. Chaucer made use of the East Midland dialect, which was a combination of the Kentish and the Midland dialects. East Midland was used by the educated class of London. He felt at home with this dialect as he was born in London and moved about freely in the city courts using it with “ease, polish and regularity.”

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Modern English has evolved considerably since Chaucer's days. Owing to the Great Vowel Shift there has been a change in pronunciation. As the Great Vowel Shift took place sometime after Chaucer's death it is difficult at times for the modern reader to read and understand Chaucer's works. In Chaucer, at the end of some lines there is an extra syllable. In most cases this extra syllable is only an "e" that is mostly strongly pronounced. Before you begin with *The Canterbury Tales* you need to be familiarize yourself with the Middle English pronunciation which can be comprehended well when read aloud. The following section taken from the web link [faculty.arts.ubc.ca/sechard/346lang.htm](http://faculty.arts.ubc.ca/sechard/346lang.htm) gives some important tips on the Middle English pronunciation. Read it aloud for it will help you in reading and understanding the Prologue in a better manner. These rules are taken from Helge Kokeritz's *A Guide to Chaucer's Pronunciation*.

Short Vowel - as in German Mann or French patte

e - as in bed

i, y - as in sit

o - as in dog

u - as in put

When is a vowel short? Single vowels before single or double consonants usually are short if the same word has a short today. Exceptions are words like bread, breath, dead, heaven, where the vowel is like French père; and gone and hot, where the vowel is like law.

Long Vowels

a, aa - as in German Vater or French art

e, ee, ie - as in German sehen, French été: use this sound when the modern word has a sound like he, see

e, ee - as in there: use this sound when the modern word has -ea, as in speak, dream, and also head, bread

i, y - as in see

o, oo - as in German Sohn, French chose: use this sound when the modern word is like food, good, blood, other

o, oo - as in law: use this sound when the modern word is likemost, stone, throat

u - as in French tu

When is a vowel long? Single vowels and digraphs (a combination of two letters to represent one sound, as in sea or see) are long if the modern word has a long vowel or a diphthong. Words spelled with -oo today are always long, even if we now pronounce

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them with short vowels. There are exceptions to these notes about long vowels: these include the fact that a and o are usually short when followed by f, s, th, and r.

### Diphthongs

ai, ay, ei, ey - aim for something between the sounds in lake and like

au, aw - a bit like the sound in house

eu, ew - rather like few; while there is another, somewhat different sound also corresponding to this spelling, this sound should get you started

ou, ow, ough - as in moon: use this sound when the modern word is like house, course, or through

ou, ow, ough - rather like know: use this sound when the modern word has a similar sound, or, before -ght, a sound as in law

### A Few Notes on Consonants

The -g isn't pronounced in -gn in a word of French origin, such as regne

The -gh sound is rather like -ch in German

Initial "gi-" is pronounced like the "g" in modern English "age"; this sound can also be spelled with a "j"

Initial h- is silent in loanwords from French, like hautain

Roll your r's, if you can: initial r- was probably still trilled even in Chaucer's language, and in more northern dialects,

the r- probably has even more force, wherever it occurs

Pronounce initial consonants in words like knight (think of Monty Python: "You and all your silly English ke-nights!"); both

### **2.4.2. CHAUCER'S STYLE**

Chaucer paid great attention to style. He experimented with the verse form and tried out different rhythms and sounds and developed new linguistic structures. He discovered the seven-line stanza (ab ab bcc) which thereafter came to be known as the **Chaucerian stanza**. He made use of the heroic couplet (decasyllabic verse), which he imported from France and used in his opus *The Canterbury Tales* and *Legend of Good Women*. Chaucer's vocabulary was a "colourful spectrum of words". The English of his times had already started evolving sprinkled with new words from Latin and French. Chaucer's diction had an elegant simplicity. In the words of Dryden, Chaucer had a "continence, which is practiced by few writers, and scarcely by any of the ancients excepting Virgil

and Horace.” Emile Legouis in *The History of English Literature* points out that “There is a charm of fluent simplicity, complete correspondence of words and thoughts. Chaucer’s best verses merely note facts, external details, or characteristics of feelings.”

### **2.4.3. CHAUCER’S ART OF NARRATION**

Chaucer’s genius mainly lies in his narrative verse. He narrates fantastic stories in an interesting manner and in doing so arrests the attention and imagination of the readers. Chaucer stories are precise and economic. He usually opens his tales in a straightforward manner. His stories have a single plot and the same design follows the entire plot. Hadow says “Chaucer tends to reduce descriptive passages pure and simple to minimum, and so far to condense the actual narrative that it moves quickly and straightforwardly, while at the same time he expands any situation which affords opportunity for the display of character, adds dialogue and intensifies emotion, and shows a disposition of comment on what he is describing.”

Another feature of Chaucer’s narrative power was his fondness for digression. When least expected he can add a philosophic note to a story. For example, in the knight’s tale, Chaucer comments on human blindness and in the Wife of Bath’s tale, we have a lecture which a lady delivers to her dissolute husband. Nonetheless, in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer narrates each tale keeping in mind the personality of the narrator of the tale. In the words of Tenzink “The individual traits have essentially a symbolic meaning, and are intended as an interpretation of the whole character and manner of the men.” To conclude, Chaucer was essentially a narrative poet. His gift as a story teller in verse is unsurpassable. His plots offer vivid descriptions and are full of action and variety keeping the readers engaged and interested.

### **2.4.4. CHAUCER’S HUMOUR, SATIRE AND IRONY**

Chaucer has been called the first humourist of English literature. Humour is found in abundance in his works. Chaucer keenly observed men and manners in everyday life and had the capacity to see the funnier side of things which he incorporated in his works. Chaucer was sympathetic towards human follies and never aimed to lash out at his characters for their shortcomings. In the Prologue, the absurdities and the ridiculousness of the pilgrims is humorously exposed by Chaucer, but his laughter is subtle and marked with tolerance and sympathy. For example, the Knight is as gentle as a maid, the hat of the Wife of Bath weighs ten pounds, the Friar has relations with the bar-maids instead of the poor and the Squire’s locks seem to have been “laid in press”. It would be interesting to note that Chaucer does not even spare himself and laughs at his own expense when he calls himself an unlettered man. “My wit is short, ye may well understode.” Chaucer’s humour is usually refined, pleasant and sympathetic and does not aim to offend anybody. For example, when he says of the Prioress that she had the capability of weeping even on seeing a trapped mouse or on seeing her dog being struck by someone, it is hard to make out whether he is making fun of her for being over-sentimental or is praising her gentle nature. However, at times his humour takes the form of mild satire but there is no bitterness in it. In the words of Legouis, “He does not treat with disdain those whose

foolishness he has fathomed, nor does he turn away in disgust from the rascals whose tricks he has detected. He satirizes only those people who cannot be reformed at any cost like the Monk who is more interested in worldly pursuits than in religious activities and the summoner and the Pardoner, who are extremely corrupt. At times Chaucer's humour also takes the form of irony. For instance at places the word "worthy" is used for the most unworthy of men. At one place Chaucer tells us that the Doctor of Physic is the greatest physician because he has knowledge of astronomy, the shipman is a good fellow because "he steals wine and has no prick of conscience."

To conclude, Chaucer's humour has a wide range. It ranges from refined humour to mild and , at times, poignant satire. However, we should bear in mind that Chaucer was not a zealous reformer of society. He was just a neutral onlooker who painted things and people as they appeared to him. His intention was not to preach or ridicule people. He was tolerant of the human foibles, a realist who knew that "to err is human" and it is this very trait that gives his humour a human touch. Legouis, thus, said of Chaucer, "Amongst writers of genius, (Chaucer is) the one who strikes us soonest as a friend."

#### **2.4.5. CHAUCER'S REALISM**

Earlier you read that Chaucer was greatly inspired by the French and the Italian literary giants like Machaut and Dante. However, this influence was mostly predominant in his earlier works. As time passed, Chaucer shed off the French and Italian influences that had fantasies and dreams at their root, and moved towards portraying a realistic picture of his age. Chaucer was an astute observer of life who could draw characters from real life with ease and for this reason he was also called the poet of men. Many critics have called him a social chronicler of England because his poetry faithfully mirrors the fourteenth century English society. His *Canterbury Tales* is one of the best works that depicts realism. In Chaucer's days, pilgrimages used to be taken frequently and Chaucer realistically gives an account of one such pilgrimages in which the pilgrims, on the way to the shrine of Thomas a' Beckett, tell each other stories to beguile the tedium of the journey. Chaucer gives a life-like account of these characters and interestingly enough, makes them tell stories, and through their demeanour, dressing style, behaviour and their stories reveals their character. For example, Chaucer says of the Prioress,

At mete was she wely taught withalle:

She lette no morsel from hir lippes falle.

Ne wette hir fingers in hir sauce depe.

Wel koude she carie a morsel, and wel kepe.

That no drope ne fille upon hir breast.

The description above of the Prioress gives us a picture of a fastidious woman, immaculately clean and very particular, even of the smallest of things. There is an impression of realism in his other characters as well. We come across some of the best specimens in Chaucer, for example, "there were no better priests than the Parson, no such

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Pardoner, no such Man of Law. The Wife of Bath was an excellent cloth-maker. The Friar was the best beggar.” Chaucer is a master artist and paints a picture-gallery of people with precision. “The jingling of the bells on the Monk’s palfrey, the affected lips of the Friar, and the Pardoner’s voice ‘as small as hath a goot’ are realistic, indeed. William Hazlitt, the eighteenth century essayist and critic says of Chaucer, “There is no artificial, pompous display but a strict parsimony of the poet’s material like the rude simplicity of the age in which he lived.” To conclude, Chaucer was one of the greatest realists of all times for he “saw what is and painted it as he saw it.”

### **2.4.6. CHAUCER’S HUMANISM**

The Humanists establish the human being value and consider all human beings equal. Chaucer can be considered as a humanist as he professed mankind’s equality. Chaucer’s Humanism is closely related to his Realism. As Chaucer was a Realist, he was aware of the human weaknesses and was therefore tolerant towards people who erred. The humanistic spirit is all-pervasive in the *Prologue*. Chaucer deals with all the characters in a humane manner. As mentioned earlier, Chaucer was a social chronicler and portrayed society as he saw it. He never intended to reform it in any way. Chaucer’s characters are human in all ways and he never intended to condemn them in any way. For instance the Monk, who is supposed to have renounced the world and lead a spiritual life, is oblivious to the rule of St. Maure and St. Benet. He has a bloated appearance and is self-indulgent, the Franklin is busy in his sensual pursuits and the Friar is a saucy fellow. However, Chaucer gives a sympathetic and humanistic account of the characters for they are real life characters. As these characters are just like the readers, they do not produce any repulsion in the reader. To conclude, Chaucer was a large-hearted and tolerant poet and that makes his humanism quite delectable.

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### **2.5. LET US SUM UP**

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In this unit you

- were introduced to the age of Chaucer and read about the life, important influences and the major works by Geoffrey Chaucer.
- read in detail about Chaucer as a poet-his language, style and art of narration.
- traced some important elements of Chaucer’s writing like humour, satire and irony.
- Examined Chaucer as a realist and humanist.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. In what way was Chaucer’s early life helpful in shaping him as a poet?
2. Under what title was the book *Roman de la Rose* translated by Chaucer into English?
3. Name the three major literary influences that are evident in Chaucer’s writings.

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4. Who said about Chaucer, “There is no artificial, pompous display but a strict parsimony of the poet’s material like the rude simplicity of the age in which he lived.”?

5. Write a note on Chaucer’s use of humour, satire and irony.

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### **2.6. ANSWERS TO SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS**

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A2. The Romance of the Rose

A3. French, Italian and Latin influences

A4. William Hazlitt

To know the answers to question nos. 1& 5, please refer to the relevant sections

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### **2.9. TERMINAL AND MODEL QUESTIONS**

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Q1. Discuss Chaucer as a poet in your own words.

Q2. Write a note on the following:

Chaucer’s Realism

(b) Chaucer’s Humanism

**UNIT 3 CHAUCER: PROLOGUE TO THE  
CANTERBURY TALES (2)**

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- 3.1. Introduction
- 3.2. Objectives
- 3.3. *The Canterbury Tales*: Background
  - 3.3.3. *The Canterbury Tales* as a Frame Story
  - 3.3.4. The Style used in *The Canterbury Tales*
  - 3.3.5. The Setting of *The Canterbury Tales*
- 3.4. Characterization
  - 3.4.3. Characters in *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*
- 3.5. Conclusion of *The Prologue*
- 3.6. Summary to *The Prologue*
- 3.7. Glossary
- 3.8. Let Us Sum Up
- 3.9. Answers to Self Assessment Questions
- 3.10. References
- 3.11. Suggested Reading
- 3.12. Terminal and Model Questions

**3.1. INTRODUCTION**

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In the previous unit you were introduced to Chaucer and *The Canterbury Tales*. You were given an overview of the age of Chaucer, a biographical account of Chaucer, his influences and important works. You also saw how Chaucer used themes like realism and humanism in his works especially, The Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*. This unit is a continuation of the previous unit. This unit will focus on some other features of The Prologue like *The Canterbury Tales* as a Frame Story, the style adopted by Chaucer and the setting of *The Canterbury Tales*. You will acquaint yourself with various characters in The Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* and appreciate Chaucer's skill in the art of characterization.

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**3.2. OBJECTIVES**

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The aim of this unit is to

- Introduce *The Canterbury Tales* as a Frame Story, which is an important device in the story-telling technique.
- To acquaint you with the style adopted by Chaucer in The Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*.
- To illustrate The Prologue as a picture gallery of the fourteenth century English society.
- To showcase Chaucer's skill in the art of characterization.

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**3.3. THE CANTERBURY TALES: BACKGROUND**

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*The Canterbury Tales* is a cycle of verse and prose tales by Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Prologue* begins with a beautiful description of spring, a season when everything awakes to life after a long winter's slumber. It is also the season when pilgrims undertake a pilgrimage to the holy shrine of St. Thomas a' Beckett who became a martyr in the Canterbury cathedral in 1170. In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, pilgrims from various strata of the English society meet at the Tabard inn, Southwark, in order to set out on a pilgrimage to Canterbury to pay their homage at the shrine of the martyr St. Thomas a' Beckett. The pilgrims, widely representative of the society of the time, are described in the *Prologue*. They are 31 in number and are joined during their journey by two more, a Canon and his Yeoman. After supper the host of the inn proposes to accompany the pilgrims on the pilgrimage and to break the tedium and monotony of the journey, suggests that each pilgrims tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two more on the return journey. He further suggests that he will judge the tales and the prize to the winner will be a supper at the Tabard, paid for by the rest of the pilgrims. Thus, the Prologue ends. The remainder of *The Canterbury Tales* consists of tales and link passages preserving the setting. The cycle, however is not completed: there are only 23 tales, two

of which (the Cook's and the Squire's) are unfinished. Moreover seven link passages are missing.

### **3.3.1. THE CANTERBURY TALES AS A FRAME-STORY**

*The Canterbury Tales* is a frame-story i.e. a story that includes, or frames, another story or stories. In *The Canterbury Tales* pilgrimage is the frame which has twenty-four individual stories. However, Chaucer did not invent the frame-story device. It has a long history. The earliest known frame-stories can be traced back to ancient India. Some famous examples being the Sanskrit epics like *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, Vishnu Sharma's *Panchtantra*, the fable collections *Hitopshada* and *Vikram and the Vampire*. From India, the frame story gradually reached the West, giving rise to such classical frame tale collection as *The Thousand and One Nights* (*Arabian Nights*); Boccaccio, an Italian contemporary of Chaucer, used it in the *Decameron*, published in about 1350., John Gower, another of Chaucer's contemporaries used the frame-story device in his *Confessio Amantis*. However, Chaucer excels both Boccaccio and Gower in the use of the frame-story device. Whereas, in Gower, a single speaker relates all the stories, with other characters being more or less passive listeners, in Chaucer all the pilgrims are active participants as not only do they listen to the stories of the other characters but also tell a tale to ensure that they are not mere passive listeners. In Boccaccio, there are ten speakers-three young gentlemen and seven young ladies-all belonging to the same sophisticated social elite. However, Chaucer's pilgrims come from a wide spectrum of ranks and professions giving Chaucer a chance to present a more rounded and complete picture of the society and times he lived in.

### **3.3.2. STYLE USED IN THE CANTERBURY TALES**

The Prologue to the Canterbury tales is in 10-syllable couplets and is 858 lines long. Most of the tales are, like the Prologue, in rhymed (heroic) couplets but two are in prose (Chaucer's own Tale of Melibeus and the Parson's; four (the Lawyer's, the prioress's, the Clerk's, the second nun's are in a 7-line stanza known as rhyme-royal; and the monk's tale is in 8-line stanza. Chaucer wrote in the East Midland dialect of English that was spoken in London. He found this dialect not at all rich in words, and completely lacking in important literature from which he could learn. In a sense he had to create the English language we know today and establish its literary traditions. It is rightly said of him that he found the East Midland as a dialect and left it as a language.

### **3.3.3. THE SETTING OF THE CANTERBURY TALES**

The setting of a literary work is the environment within which the action occurs. The writer uses images and details to describe the geographical location, the historical period, the seasons of the year, architectural location, the characters' clothes, their professions or social circumstance and the local customs to create the sense of a particular time and place.

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In his *The Prologue to The Canterbury Tales* Chaucer presents a picture of the medieval society. He does so by bringing together people from three main segments of the medieval society. His pilgrims are drawn from the class structure of feudalism (a knight, a squire, a reeve, for example), the powerful church of the time (a nun, a pardoner, a friar) and people from a new fast emerging prosperous middle class ( a merchant, an innkeeper).Chaucer's characters, like the ideal Knight who has taken part in the major expeditions and battles of the crusades, the Friar, with vanities and vices of the then ecclesiastical class, the corrupt Pardoner, peddling his paper indulgences and phony relics, are characters that present the picture of the society of Chaucer's times.

In *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* Chaucer's pilgrims are from various strata of the fourteenth century English society and they gives him a chance of painting the entire English society of the time. The various segments of society represented by Chaucer are as follows:

1. **The Warring Class-** It is represented by the Knight with his son, the Squire and the Yeoman.
2. **Representatives of liberal professions-** A Doctor of Physic, a Man of Law, a Clerk of Oxford and the Poet himself.
3. **Agrarian Class-** It is represented by a Ploughman, a Miller, a Reeve and a Franklin.
4. **Trading Class-** Represented by a Merchant and a shipman.
5. **Art and Craft-** Represented by a Wife of Bath, a Haberdasher a Carpenter, a Webbe or weaver, a Dyer and a Tapicer.
6. **Secular Clergy-** Represented by the good Parson the Summoner of an ecclesiastical Court and a Canon.
7. **The Victuallers-** Represented by Maunciple, a Cook and the Host of the Tabard Inn.
8. **The Monastic Order-** Represented by rich Benedictine Monk, a Prioress with her Chaplin Nun, a Mendicant Friar and a Pardoner.

Chaucer makes poetry not merely an expression of his personal feelings but uses poetry as a vehicle for the study of man and manners and in doing so he presents a realistic chronicle of his age. Chaucer speaks through these diverse characters, his poetry reveals the prejudices, habits, mental and physical traits, routine of a particular trade of these classes, thus building up a realistic pictures of his age. Chaucer's approach is more objective. He is more of an observer and a chronicler of his age.

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### **3.4. CHARACTERIZATION**

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Characterization refers to the personality of a fictional character as well as to the methods used by the writer to create that personality. Characterization is the act of introducing and developing characters in such a way as to make them real or believable. A writer may

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reveal the personality of a character through direct characterization-by simply telling the reader what the character is like, or through indirect characterization –the writer presents the actions , words and thoughts of a character as clues to the personality of that character. A writer may also reveal the personality of a character with the help of other characters by expressing their thoughts about him or her.

There are two kinds of characters-

**Round Character-** a character who is complex, just like a real person and develops as the story progresses.

**Flat Character-** a character who has few distinguishing characteristics and is usually the same throughout the story.

In developing a character, a writer provides information about the following:

1. Physical appearance
2. Background-where the character comes from
3. Personality-habits, qualities, likes dislikes etc. of a character.
4. Actions
5. Motivation- why does the character acts or reacts in certain ways?
6. Conflict- does the character have an internal or external conflict? How is the conflict resolved?
7. Change-does the character changes in the course of the story? I f a character changes he is a dynamic (round) character and if not than he is a static (flat) character.

In *The Canterbury Tale* the salient features of various characters are brought out by their facial features, the clothes they wear, the food they eat, the things they say, the work they do and are an insight into their social rank and their moral and spiritual values. In *The Prologue to The Canterbury Tales* Chaucer creates characters that are not only individuals with unique personalities but have character traits that are universal. Chaucer takes great care to reveal the minute details of his characters. Chaucer tells us of the power of the Squire, the Yeoman “in coote and hood of grene” , the Prioress’s rosary “of small coral”, its hanging brooch “of goldful scheme” bringing into relief her dress, the face of the Summoner is “ a fyrred Cherubyan” the beard of the Miller is “as any sowe or fox was reed”, his nostrils were black and his mouth “as wyde as was a great forneys”, the Clerk was “ful thredbare”, the Reeve was dressed in a “long surcote of Pers”. All these minute details give these characters a realistic touch. They are not mere characters etched on paper but are people of flesh and blood ready to spring out from the paper. They are not only representations of the class they come from but are also individuals with their particular traits and idiosyncrasies and have an identity of their own.

Chaucer gives realistic portraiture of his characters. His exactness of description, correctness of emblem, honest revelations increases the impact of truth he wants to convey. Chaucer's characters parade before us in order that we may recognize one from the other. The identity of each character is both individual as well as universal. In their totality they make up the entire society. The various characters converse with each other and find faults with each other's tales and in doing so they help in revealing each other's characters. Chaucer's realistic description leaves it to the readers to either like them or repel them. His tale is a depiction of men in their real and true colours neither exalted nor demeaned but a truthful spectacle of life as Legouis says, "Chaucer sees what is and paints it as he sees it. He effaces himself in order to look at it better".

### **3.4.1. CHARACTERS IN THE PROLOGUE TO THE CANTERBURY TALES**

As mentioned earlier, the pilgrims are bound into a picture of the society of Chaucer's time. The royalty, the nobles and the 'dregs' of the people apart, Chaucer's poetic brush painted the entire English nation. There is a conglomeration of thirty-one pilgrims pursuing different trades. The warring class is represented by the **Knight** and his son, the **Squire**, and the **Yeoman** bearing the Squire's arms. Representatives of liberal profession are a **Doctor of Physic**, a **Man of Law**, a **Clerk of Oxford** and the **Poet** himself. The land is represented by a **Ploughman**, a **Miller**, a **Reeve** and a **Franklin**. A **Merchant** and a **Shipman** stand for trade. Arts and crafts have for their representatives a **Wife of Bath**, a **Haberdasher**, a **Carpenter**, a **Webb** or **Weaver**, a **Dyer** and a **Tapicer**. The victuallers are denoted by a **Manciple**, a **Cook** and the **Host of the Tabard**. The secular clergy have the good **Parson**, the **Summoner** of an ecclesiastical court and a **Canon mad after alchemy**. The monastic orders bring a rich **Benedictine Monk**, a **Prioress** with her **Chaplain Nun**, a **mendicant Friar** and a 'doubtfully accredited **Pardoner**'.

Chaucer presents the moral characteristics of the pilgrims with great simplicity and command. His pilgrims do not merely represent their profession but there is a different kind of classification too. The **Squire** stands for youth. The **Ploughman** represents wholesome charity of the humble. The **Wife of Bath** typifies the gist of satire against women. She is the most vigorous of Chaucer's characters. Her monologue magnifies her to immense proportions such that she no longer can be confined to the frame to which the poet may have set her. The **Host of the Tabard** is another such character who guides the pilgrims in a jovial mood. The stories told by the pilgrims can also be used to reveal all the traits of the characters. The tales of **The Wife of the Bath**, **The Pardoner**, **The Yeoman** and **The Canon** exemplify grand objectivity.

*The Prologue* is especially famous for its portraits of the characters of the pilgrims. They are a lively bunch of individuals though at times Chaucer is satirical of them but they are always presented with a generous sympathy for the springs of vitality in each individual, whether he is righteous or sinful. They are an important source of information for social historians of medieval life. The personalities of the pilgrims remain important throughout the series of the Tales and they mainly tell stories that are congruous with their characters. Chaucer presents each of his pilgrims with minute details about their dress,

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physical features, habits, peculiar manner and idiosyncrasies of character. Chaucer's great art lies in his striking the delicate balance between the individual and the type.

The first character that Chaucer introduces in *The Prologue* is the **Knight**. He is a chivalrous character, having loving faithfulness, liberality and courtesy. He stands for heroism and manliness that a good knight would always show on the battlefield and in life. He has fought many a battles, both at home and abroad. He fought against the Moors and Saracenes in the Mediterranean and North Africa. He also headed the table of honour of the Teutonic knights because of his campaigns against heathen tribes in Prussia, Lithuania and Russia.

Next comes his young son, the **Squire** who stands for the type of a merry happy go-lucky youth interested in singing and playing upon the flute. He is a young courtly lover who is aspiring Knighthood. He is brave like his father, the knight. He is a handsome young lad with curly locks and is wearing an embroidered short coat with wide sleeves. Besides being a brave young man, he is an accomplished singer, dancer, painter, writer and composer. Chaucer describes him as a young lad who looked 'as fresh as the month of May.'

The Knight's **Yeoman**, comes in a green dress, his horn and the talisman image of St. Christopher (patron saint of foresters and travellers) is a proof that he was a game-keeper by profession and is well-versed in archery. He was also good in woodcraft. His bow, arrow, armguard, sword, shield and dagger hint that he may have participated in many battles including the one at Crecy in which the French were routed out by the English. Like other characters of Chaucer he too is both an individual and a type. He has been given an individual character by his cropped head and his brown visage, his sword, buckler and a dagger.

The **Prioress** (nun) comes next. She is known as Madam Eglantine. She led a life of spiritual contentment and said her prayers in a charming nasal tone. She gives excessive importance to cleanliness. She appears to be dignified in all her dealings and is known by all for her courtly manners and a warm heart. She is so sensitive is pained seeing a trapped mouse and weeps whenever any of her pet dogs die. There is an undercurrent of irony when Chaucer describes her elegant manners and her sentimental nature. She wore an elegant cloak, a coral trinket on her arm, a set of beads on which hung a brooch of shining gold on which was engraved the alphabet 'A' and then the Latin phrase *Amor Vincit Omnia*. (Love Conquers All) She is accompanied by another nun and three priests.

Among the pilgrims there is a Monk too. The Monk stands in stark contrast to his vocation. He is a fashionable man who is not interested in religion. He considers the reading of the Holy Scriptures as a waste of time. He has nothing to do with the monastic rules laid down by St. Augustine and St. Benedict. The monks are supposed to lead an austere life but this monk is fond of hunting and kept grey hounds and several good breed horses in his stable. His garments are lined with the finest fur and his hood was fastened with an ornamental golden pin, his boots are made of soft leather, all this shows that he leads a luxurious life. His head was bald, and his rolling eyes glowing like the

“fire under a cauldron.” However, as mentioned earlier, Chaucer maintains a neutral view regarding the Monk and seems neither to approve nor disapprove of his ways.

The **Friar**, like the Monk is wanton and a merry maker. He is a representative of the corrupt friars who thrived during Chaucer’s times. The friars are of mendicant order who at the beginning of their chosen mode of life have to make a vow of poverty and are supposed to make a living by begging. However, with the passage of time the friars gradually made begging a flourishing business. They could collect ecclesiastical taxes and hear confessions through which they made a lot of money. Chaucer’s Friar, Hubert was a typical 14<sup>th</sup> century corrupt friar who is not at all interested in leading a spiritual and a philanthropic life. He was only interested in making money and was of the opinion that gifts to a poor order of friars were a sufficient proof of repentance for a sinner. Although like all the characters of Chaucer, the friar was a representative of his class, but Chaucer gives him an individuality by describing him as having a neck as white as lily but with a built like a wrestler and that he was a good singer and could play a fiddle.

His nekke whit was as the flour-de-lys;  
Therto he was as as a champioun...  
To make his Englissh sweete upon his tongue;  
And in his harping, whan that he hadde songe,  
His eyen twinkled in his heed aright...

The **Merchant** represents the rich tradesmen class. In the fourteenth century, there were two groups of merchants: The Merchant Adventurers who imported English cloth into foreign cities and the Merchants of Staples, who lived at home and exported English wool abroad. Chaucer’s merchant was in debt but his appearance did not suggest his financial state. He was quite fashionable who wore conservative clothes, neatly clasped boots and sported a stylish forked beard. The Merchant was secretly involved in usury and illegal dealings in foreign exchange, which were two major economic crimes. He came to the inn sitting on a horse with a beaver hat and boots fastened neatly with rich clasps.

The next in line is the **Oxford Clerk** who is an erudite scholar. The Clerk is not interested in worldly glory but in the advancement of knowledge and learning. He comes with volumes of Aristotle and has hollow-cheeks, grave looks and threadbare cloak. His rich friends and benefactors supported him financially and he in return prays for their well-being. He speaks only as much is needed and his words are full of wisdom. In Chaucer’s words, “gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche.”

**The Sergent of the Law** is next in line. He is one of the King’s legal servants. He is an expert in his field and nobody can spot faults in the legal documents prepared by him. He had been at Parvys, that is, the porch of St. Paul’s cathedral, where lawyers met their clients for consultation and had earned money and wealth as a result of his learning and

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fame. He had been appointed a judge by a letter of patents. Although he is quite a busy man, yet he always pretends to look busier than he actually is.

**The Franklin** is a pleasure seeker and can be considered to be the son of Epicure. He ate the best quality food and changed his food and kept fat partridges in coops and fish in private ponds. He changed his food items according to the seasons of the year. He was akin to St. Julian in hospitality. He is not just a type but has been individualised by Chaucer for he has a sanguine complexion and a beard as white as a daisy. He hung his dagger at his girdle and a pouch of taffeta “white as morning milk”.

**A Haberdasher, a Carpenter, a Weaver, a Dyer and an Upholsterer** come next. They are dressed in the livery of their fraternity. Chaucer says that over the years they have gathered considerable knowledge about their respective professions and are fit to be aldermen.

After these men comes the **Cook** who could “boille the chiknes with the marybones And poudre- merchant tart and galingale.’ He was not a likeable character for he had a sore on his shin and was accused by the Host of selling stale, unhygienic and contaminated food.

Besides these men, there is a **Shipman**, who was a typical sailor. He comes from Dartmouth. “He rood upon a rouncy, as he kouthe, In a gowne of faldyng to the knee.” His ship is called ‘The Maudelayne’. He is a seasoned sailor and has participated in many skirmishes at sea. He has voyaged freely from Spain in the south to Sweden in the North.

**The Doctor of Physic** has good knowledge of medieval medicine. In the days of Chaucer medicine was based on astrology and the Doctor of Physic examined his patients as per the favourable astronomical hours for treatment and even makes amulets for his patients. He is not a religious man and seldom reads the Bible. Chaucer states ironically that the Doctor has a special love for gold ‘For gold in Physic is cordial, / Therefore he loved gold in special.’

**The Wife of Bath**, a cloth maker, is next on line. She is based on the character of La Vieille in the *Roman de la Rose*. She comes neatly dressed, “Ywympled wel, and on hir heed an hat.” Astrologically she was born when Taurus was in the ascendant and Mars and Venus in conjugation in the sign of the zodiac as a result of which she has an enormous sexual appetite. She is lecherous and had been married five times in her lifetime. She is overbearing and always wants to be the first person to make offerings in church on Sundays to determine her importance in the community. She has undertaken pilgrimages to various holy lands like Jerusalem, Rome, Cologne and the like. However, she takes on these pilgrimages for pleasure and not for spiritual purpose. Chaucer describes her as being deaf in one ear and “gat- tothed.”

The good old **Parson** is truly a man of religion. Although he is poor in materialistic wealth, he is rich in spirituality. He is a symbol of goodness; a true friend of his parishioners helping them in times of need. As a parson, he was in charge of collecting tithes (ten percent tax levied by the Church on every parishioner) but he never reprimands

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the poor for not being able to pay the tax and make up the deficit out of his own meagre resources. He is genuinely concerned about the welfare of his parish and visits all the places regularly on foot, in all kinds of weather, and enquires of the parishioners' problems trying to solve them to the best of his ability. He is a benign, hard-working and patient man and believes in earning a ticket to heaven by serving his people and working for the parish rather than making pilgrimages. He wanted to lead his parishioners by example and is of the opinion 'That if gold ruste, what shal i ren do?' In other words, if the priest becomes corrupt, it is natural for laymen to become so. In short, he was a holy in thought and work and devoted to his pastoral responsibilities.

**The Ploughman** is the next person whocomes to the inn. He comes wearing unfashionable garments, riding on his mare. He is the brother of the Parson, who like him is an idealized figure. He is a small tenant farmer, the holder of Lammas lands (village lands let out from year to year) who stood for dignity of labour for he happily carried out chores like picking up mounds of dung, threshing grain and making ditches. He pays tithes honestly and is a true devotee of God and believes in helping his fellow brothers.

**The Miller** who comes next is a strong and sturdy man. He has won many prizes in many wrestling competitions. He is short-shouldered, his face is fat with "berd as any sowe or fox was reed", his nose is flat with a hairy wart its top, his nostrils are "blake and wide" and his mouth is as large as a great furnace. A miller in the Middle Ages was a powerful man as all the peasants under the lord of the manor had to take their grain to the miller of the estate on which they lived. The Miller is a lewd fellow indulging in all sort of wrongdoings like overcharging and stealing corn and taking toll thrice. However, he is a skilled bagpiper.

**The Manciple** is another of Chaucer's shrewd characters. He is a servant purchasing provisions for colleges and Inns of Court. He is crafty and always makes a good bargain on all his purchases.

There is also a **Reeve** or a farm-bailiff who is another of Chaucer's crafty characters. He too, like the Manciple indulges in deceitful dealings. In medieval times Reeve was a natural rival to the Miller for both competed with each other in cheating the peasants. Chaucer's Reeve and Miller are also sworn enemies and for this reason the Reeve rides furthest from the Miller. The Reeve is an overseer who is supposed to inspect everything on the estate regularly. However, he is dishonest and as the lord of the manor was usually away, the Reeve became all powerful and exploited the poor farmers. He is an expert in keeping accounts and no one could catch him in arrears. He became rich at his lord's expenses. He often pleases his lord by lending him the lord's own possessions and obliging him. He is described as Chaucer as "a sclender coleric man. His berd was shaven as ny as ever he kan; His heer was by his erys ful round yshorn;"

**The Summoner** is an obnoxious looking wanton man with a fiery red diseased face covered with pimples. He has used all the known medicines to clear his face but to no avail. His appearance scared the children and they would run away on seeing him. Chaucer says that the summoner should not be eating garlic, onion and leeks and should

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not drink red wine, however, he loves all the things that are harmful to him. He would shout like a madman whenever drunk and in a drunken state would also speak some Latin which “he had picked up like a parrot.” The Summoner is unscrupulous and believes in making money by extracting wealth from sinners. He encourages people not to fear excommunication for he assures them that money could set everything right. He gladly excuses a man for keeping a concubine for twelve months, if he is paid a quart of wine. Chaucer says that for a quart of wine, he would gladly lend his mistress to his friend for twelve months. He is sexually immoral and acts as the counsel of other sexually immoral people holding them at his mercy.

There is also a **Pardoner** who comes singing ‘Come hither, love to me!’ in his goat voice. He is beardless and his yellow hair fall in thin strips over his shoulder. In the Middle Ages, there were a lot of unauthorised travelling pardoners who went about selling indulgences in exchange of money and duping people. These Pardoners sold indulgences but often did not insist on confession or repentance, which are important practices in Christianity. Chaucer’s Pardoner is one such cheat whose wallet is full of pardons which he claims he has brought straight from Rome. He exhibits these relics and earns a lot of money. He carries with him as relics a pillow cover which he declares to be a part of Our Lady’s Veil, a piece of cloth which he claimed to be a part of St. Peter’s boat, a Latin Cross and some pigs’ bones. He carried these fake relics wherever he goes and cheats poor parishioners and easily earns more money in one day than what the Parson earned in two months. However, he is good at the art of storytelling and is a good singer as well. “Wel koude he rede a lessoun or a storie, But alderbest he song an offertorie;”

Legouis rightly says, “Of all writers of genius, Chaucer is the one with whom it is easiest to have a sense to comradeship.” Chaucer’s genius, like Shakespeare’s is to depict the various types of humorous characters which he does remarkably. Sometimes the character is not revealed by his outward appearance but through their thoughts. The geniality of the Knight is revealed by his soothing words to other pilgrims. The railing of the Miller and the Reeve reflects their character and the quarrels of the Friar and the Summoner bring them out in their true colours. Chaucer’s characters are full of life. They shout and swear, and laugh and weep, interrupt the story teller, pass compliments, and in general behave themselves as we might expect them to in the dramatic circumstance of the narrative.” Chaucer’s art of characterisation is much like a novelist’s and a dramatist’s and he anticipates both Fielding and Shakespeare- masters of character portrayal – in his opus *The Canterbury Tales*.

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### **3.5. CONCLUSION OF THE PROLOGUE**

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After discussing the various pilgrims, Chaucer takes us back to the Tabard Inn where the pilgrims have assembled and are getting ready for supper which was to be presided over by the Host, Harry Bailly who is a gracious host. After a sumptuous meal, the Host suggests that the pilgrims, in order to beguile the tedium of the journey, tell each other two stories on the way to the Canterbury shrine and two on their way back. He further adds that as he too would be accompanying them he would judge the best story and the best storyteller would be treated with a free supper, paid for by the other pilgrims on their

return. Ever body agrees to the Host's proposal. The next morning, the Host wakes all the pilgrims and they set out on their pilgrimage. Lots are drawn to decide as to who would narrate the first two stories and it fell upon the knight to begin and the knight gladly began his tale.

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### **3.6.SUMMARY OF THE PROLOGUE**

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The Prologue is a general introduction to *The Canterbury Tales*. It is in 10-syllable couplets and is 858 lines long. It begins with a passage which associates the stirrings of Spring in nature with the impulse among people to go on pilgrimages. Chaucer then describes how he put up at the Tabard Inn in Southwark and found there a mixed company of men and women preparing for a pilgrimage to the shrine of St Thomas a' Becket at Canterbury. The pilgrims are then described; most of them in individual pen-portraits, but a few merchants and clergy are merely mentioned as a group. Chaucer then describes that how the Host of the Inn welcomes them, and proposes a company to them. He suggests that each pilgrim shall tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. The Host himself is to be judge of the best tales, and the prize to the winner will be a supper at the Tabard, paid for by the rest of the pilgrims. Everyone agrees to it and it is decided that the Knight shall begin. The Prologue is especially famous for its portraits of the characters of the pilgrims. The personalities of the pilgrims remain important throughout the series of the tales and they mainly tell stories that are congruous with the characters.

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### **3.7.GLOSSARY**

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**characterisation:** Characterisation is the act of creating and developing a character. A writer uses *direct characterisation* when he or she states a character's traits explicitly. *Indirect characterisation* occurs when the writer reveals character by some other means. When using indirect characterisation, the writer depends on the reader to infer a character's trait from the clues provided.

**couplet:** A couplet is a pair of rhyming lines written in the same meter.

Example: And if I give thee honour due,

Mirth, admit me of the crew

To live with her, and live with thee,

In unreproved pleasure free.

John Milton, *L' Allegro*

**fable:** A fable is a brief story, usually with animal characters, that teaches a lesson, or moral. For example, Aesop's Fables

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**foil:** A foil is a character that provides a contrast to another character, thus intensifying the impact of the other character. For example, Banquo and Duncan act as foils for the ambitious and tyrannical Macbeth.

**heroic couplet:** A heroic couplet is a rhymed pair of iambic pentameter lines. During the Neoclassical period, the popular heroic couplet was also often a closed couplet, with its meaning and grammar complete within two lines.

Example: True ease in writing comes with art, not chance,

As those move easiest who have learned to dance.

Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*

**mock epic:** A mock epic is a poem about a trivial matter written in a style of a serious epic. For example, The Nun's Priest's Tale in *The Canterbury Tales*

**narration:** Narration is writing that tells a story. The act of telling a story is also called narration. The narrative, or story, is told by a story teller called narrator. Narration is one of the major forms of discourses and appears in many guises. Biographies, autobiographies, journals, reports, novels, anecdotes, fables, plays and many more are all narratives.

**rhyme royal:** It consists of seven lines usually in iambic pentameter. The rhyme scheme is a-b-a-b-b-c. This allows for a great deal of variety, especially when the form is used for longer narrative poems and along with the couplet, it was the standard narrative meter in the late Middle Ages. Chaucer was the first to use the rhyme royal in his poems like *Troilus and Creseide*, *Parliament of Fowls* and *Canterbury Tales*.

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### **3.8. SUMMARY**

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In this unit

- you were made familiar with the concept of Frame Story and saw in what ways can *The Canterbury Tales* be called a Frame Story.
- you read about the style used by Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*.
- you saw the setting of *The Canterbury Tales*; both in terms of the Geographical location and historical context.
- you saw how Chaucer brings together people from all segments of medieval society and paints a picture gallery of the society in which he lived in.
- you were introduced to *The Canterbury Tales* as a cycle of verse and prose tales.

- you were given an idea about the different kinds of literary characters and we drew a character sketch of the different characters in *The Canterbury Tales*.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

- Q1. Where is Canterbury?
- Q2. What is Canterbury famous for?
- Q3. What is a frame story? Can you give two examples of frame story?
- Q4. What entertainment on the journey does the Host propose?
- Q5. What does he propose for the winner?
- Q6. Which pilgrim is described as having:
- (a) 'a special love for gold'
  - (b) 'gap-teeth'
- Q7. Which figure of speech does Chaucer use to describe the Squire?
- Q8. Which technique does the Nun's Priest use to tell her story?
- Q9. How many lines are there in The Prologue?
- Q10. Who was the first poet to be buried in what is now known as the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey?

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**3.9. ANSWERS TO THE SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS**

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A1. Canterbury is a town in the county of Kent, which is approximately 70 miles southeast of London.

A2. Canterbury is famous for the holy shrine of the martyr St. Thomas a' Beckett.

A3. A frame story is a story that frames or includes another story or stories.

Two examples of frame story are Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

A4. The Host proposes to the pilgrims that he too would accompany the pilgrims on their pilgrimage and to beguile the tedium of the journey each pilgrim will have to tell two stories on the way to the holy shrine and two on the way back. He also suggested that he will be the judge of the competition.

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A5. The Host told the pilgrims that the prize to the winner will be a supper in the Tabard Inn, paid for by the rest of the pilgrims.

A6. (a) The Doctor of Physic is described as having ‘a special love for gold.’

(b) the Wife of Bath is described as ‘gap teeth.’

A7. Chaucer makes use of simile to describe the Squire. He says that the Squire is as fresh as the month of May.

A8. The Nun’s Priest’s tale is in the mock heroic style.

A9. There are 858 lines in The Prologue.

A10. Chaucer was the first poet to be buried in what is now known as the Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey.

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### **3.10. REFERENCES**

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### **3.11. SUGGESTED READING**

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Burgess, Anthony. *English Literature a Survey for Students*, London, UK. : Longman Group Limited. Print.

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Gillie, Christopher. *Longman Companion to English Literature*, London, UK.: Longman Group Limited. Print.

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### **3.12. TERMINAL QUESTIONS**

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Q1. Make a list of all the characters in The Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* and then:

- (a) Write a few lines for each character on the basis of the above-mentioned points.
- (b) What type of Characters do you come across in The Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*? Are the characters round or just stereotypes? Why?
- (c) How does Chaucer reveal the personalities of his characters in The Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*?

Q2. When Chaucer writes of the Parson, "That if gold rust, what will iron do?" We can infer that the Parson realizes he should be a role model for his parishioners. What can we infer about the Summoner from the information in lines-665-669?

Q3. What does Chaucer say that people long to do when spring comes?

Q4. Which pilgrim is described as :

"modest as a maid"

"a very festive fellow"

"all sentiment and tender heart"

Q5. Chaucer pokes gentle fun at some of the pilgrims. What is his opinion of the Nun's singing voice and of her French?

Q6. How does Chaucer mainly characterize

1. The Doctor

2. The Host

Q7. Now that you know something about each of Chaucer's pilgrims, write a tale you think one of them might tell. Choose a pilgrim and study his or her sketch carefully. Think and write a tale he or she might tell. You may modernize the tale, but make sure that the message of the tale fits in the character of the pilgrim.

**UNIT 4 SPENSER: THE FAERIE QUEENE**

**BOOK1 (PART 1)**

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- 3.1. Introduction
- 3.2. Objectives
- 3.3. Edmund Spenser
  - 3.3.1. Life and Works
  - 3.3.2. Poetic Style
- 3.4. Spenser's contribution in the Field of English Poetry
  - 3.4.1. Spenserian Stanza
  - 3.4.2. Spenserian Sonnet
- 3.5. What is an allegory?
- 3.6. *The Faerie Queene* as an allegory
- 3.7. *The Faerie Queene* as an epic
- 3.8. Let Us Sum Up
- 3.9. Answers to Check Your Progress
- 3.10. References
- 3.11. Suggested Reading
- 3.12. Terminal and Model Questions

**4.1 INTRODUCTION**

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This unit shall briefly discuss the life of Edmund Spenser. It will also trace the development of Spenser as a poet, focusing on his major works. You will also read about Spenser's contribution in the field of literature like Spenserian sonnet and Spenserian stanza. You will also be introduced to Spenser's opus *The Faerie Queene* in this unit.

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**4.2 OBJECTIVES**

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In this unit you will be

- Acquainted with the life and major works of Edmund Spenser
- Get a glimpse of his poetic style
- Trace Spenser's contribution in English poetry
- Understand *The Faerie Queene* as an allegory

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**4.3 EDMUND SPENSER**

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**4.3.1 LIFE AND WORKS**

Spenser's birth date is undocumented, but a pair of autobiographical sonnets in the "Amoretti" sequence suggest the year was 1554. His family was originally from Burnley, Lancashire, but we know from Prothalamion that London was his birthplace. Spenser's origins were humble. His father was a cloth maker. Spenser received his early education at Merchant Taylor's grammar school where he acquired rudimentary knowledge of Hebrew, Greek and music. After matriculating from Merchant Taylor's, Spenser joined Pembroke College, Cambridge in 1569 as a 'sizar' or a poor scholar. Spenser had to undertake many odd jobs at college in return for the education. In Cambridge, Spenser picked up languages such as French, Italian and English and also read Greek and Latin classics, pagan mythologies, divinities, ancient and contemporary philosophies at length. During Spenser's first year at Cambridge, his earliest poems were published.

Three years after leaving Cambridge, in 1579, Spenser issued his first volume of poetry, the *Shepherd's Calendar*. In the book Spenser deliberately used archaic language, partly to pay homage to Chaucer and partly to achieve a rustic effect. With the publication of *The Shepherd's Calendar* it was felt at once that the poet for whom the age had been waiting had come. *The Shepherd's Calendar* was published at Gabriel Harvey's instance, and was dedicated to Sir Philip Sidney, a good friend of Spenser. It was around that time that he married his first wife, Maccabaeus Chylde, who was the mother of his two children.

Spenser was appointed secretary to the lord-deputy of Ireland in 1580, thereafter he spent most of his life in Ireland, acquiring Kilcoman Castle, an Irish estate, where he did much

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of his writing. Sir Walter Raleigh, a fellow colonist often visited Spenser at Kilcoman Castle. He was very much impressed seeing Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* and convinced him to take the first three books to Queen Elizabeth. The queen was highly impressed seeing the book and he was awarded a handsome pension of fifty pounds a year for life. *The Faerie Queen*, which is an unfinished epic poem in twelve books, established Spenser's reputation as a writer. Like the *Shepherd's Calendar*, *The Faerie Queen* also makes use of archaic language and combines two literary forms, the romance and the epic, into an allegory about "the twelve moral virtues."

Spenser was a prolific experimenter of the verse form. His *Shepherd's Calendar* makes use of thirteen different meters. He also adapted the Italian *canzone* forms for *Epithalamion* and *Prothalamion*. In *The Faerie Queene* he makes use of the nine-line stanza which is named the Spenserian stanza after him. Spenser can be called the pioneer of English versification and many later English poets learned the art of versification from him. It is for this reason Charles Lamb called Spenser the "poet's poet." Spenser's influence may be seen in Shelley's *Revolt of Isalm*, Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Keats's *Eve of St. Agnes* and Tennyson's *The Lotus Eaters*.

Besides his well-known works *Shepherd's Calendar* and *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser published a volume of poems called *Complaints*, which was published in 1591. It is a miscellaneous collection of poems written at different periods. The volume contained *The Ruins of Time*; *The Tears of the Muses*; *Virgil's Gnat*; *Mother Hubbard's Tale*; *The Ruins of Rome*; *Muiopotmos*; *Visions of the World's Vanity*; *Bellay's Visions*; *Petrarch's Visions*; a pastoral called *Colin Clout Comes Home Again*; his sonnet cycle, *Amoretti*; two wedding poems *Epithalamion* and *Prothalamion*. *Epithalamion* is one of the most admired poems in the English language. It was written by Spenser for his wedding to his young bride, Elizabeth Boyle, whom he courted and married after his first wife's death in 1594. The 24 stanzas of the poem correspond to the diurnal and sidereal hours. The song begins before dawn and progresses through the wedding ceremony and into the consummation night of the newlywed couple. Throughout *Epithalamion*, the speaker marks time by referencing the physical movements of the wedding party, the positions of the sun and other celestial bodies, and the light and darkness that fill the day. Although firmly within the classical tradition, *Epithalamion* takes its setting and several of its images from Ireland, where Edmund Spenser's wedding to Elizabeth Boyle actually took place and his sonnet cycle, *Amoretti* which also traces the courtship of the poet and his beloved. *A View of the Present State of Ireland* is Spenser's anonymously published apology for the repressive English regime. Another well-known work of Spenser is *Astrophel*, which is a pastoral lament that he wrote for Philip Sidney.

In 1598 there was an uprising in Munster, Ireland where Spenser lived. The rebels burned down the house in which Spenser lived. The poet had to flee his house along with his wife but unfortunately their new-born baby is said to have died in the flames. Finally Spenser had to return to London. He died on January 13, 1599 and is buried in what is now known as the Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey.

### **4.3.2 POETIC STYLE OF EDMUND SPENSER**

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Edmund Spenser is often remembered as the 'Poet's Poet'. In fact Spenser's gravestone in Westminster Abbey has a quote rightly labelling him as 'The Prince of Poets of All Time...'. In Spenser's poems, we find a fine balance of rhythm and rhyme. Spenser was a connoisseur of art and a lover of physical beauty and celebrated it in his works. Thus, he captured the beauty in nature, art and human beings in his works brilliantly. His works were an embodiment of love and purity. Spenser was a prominent Renaissance poet and his poetry reflected a Renaissance spirit with Platonic idealism.

Spenser was a poet of sensuous images. However, he was an iconoclast too, who was "deeply suspicious of the power of images (material and verbal) to turn into idols." His works are also filled with archaic words and for that reason he is often referred to as a backward-looking poet. However, as mentioned earlier, Spenser used archaic words in order to pay homage to Chaucer, of whom he was a great admirer.

Spenser's poems reflect the classical epic forms. Like the classical epics they begin with an invocation of the Muses and have an epic hero. For example, in the beginning of *The Faerie Queene* Book 1, Spenser invokes the Muses. It also has a hero, The Redcrosse Knight, who is the knight of Holiness. Spenser makes extensive use of figures of speech, especially similes and extended metaphor in his works. One also finds various allusions of classical epics like Homer's *Illiad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* and Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. There is symmetry in form e.g., parallels between characters such as Arthur & Lucifer, Una & Duessa, etc., and between settings—the House of Pride & the House of Holiness.

In the words of David in *The Norton Anthology*, Spenser was "an idealist, drawn to courtesy, gentleness, and exquisite moral refinement, yet also a celebrant of English nationalism, empire, and material power...as a British epic poet and poet-prophet, he points forward to the poetry of the Romantics and especially Milton—who himself paid homage to the "sage and serious" Spenser as "a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas."

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### **4.4 SPENSER'S CONTRIBUTION IN THE FIELD OF ENGLISH POETRY**

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Spenser's contribution to the field of English poetry is immense. He had a lifelong interest in theories of poetry and he is recognized as one of the great inventors in the English verse form. His Spenserian stanza and Spenserian sonnet are especially notable. Let us now examine both these forms briefly.

#### **4.4.1 SPENSERIAN STANZA**

Edmund Spenser invented the Spenserian stanza and used it in his *The Faerie Queene*. The stanza consists of eight lines of iambic pentameter followed by a single alexandrine, a twelve-syllable iambic line. The final line typically has a caesura, or break, after the first three feet. The rhyme scheme of these lines is "ababbcbcc." A perfect example of the form is found in the first stanza of Book I of *The Faerie Queene*:

A gentle knight was pricking on the plaine,  
Ycladd in mightie armes and silver shielde,  
Wherein old dints of deepe woundes did remaine,  
The cruell markes of many a bloody fielde;  
Yet armes till that time did he never wield:  
His angry steede did chide his foaming bitt,  
As much disdayning to the curbe to yield:  
Full jolly knight he seemed, and faire did sitt,  
As one for knightly jousts and fierce encounters fitt.

Critics note several earlier stanza forms as the basis for the Spenserian stanza. One widely cited source is the ottava rima. This is an Italian form that originated in thirteenth-century religious and minstrel poetry and consists of eight lines of iambic pentameter with the rhyme scheme "abababcc." A relatively modern use of the ottava rima can be found in Byron's *Don Juan*. Another possible source for Spenser's stanza is the "rhyme royal," a stanza of seven lines of iambic pentameter that rhymes "ababbcc." Chaucer invented this in his "Complaint unto Pity" and Shakespeare later used it in *The Rape of Lucrece*. But regardless of its sources, the Spenserian stanza is regarded as "one of the most remarkably original metric innovations in the history of English verse" (Preminger 807).

The Spenserian stanza fell into a period of disuse in the seventeenth century, but it saw a revival with Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes," and Shelley's "The Revolt of Islam" and "Adonais." Shelley is perhaps the greatest exponent of the Spenserian stanza after Spenser himself. His grasp of the form is quite notable in this, the third stanza from "Adonais":

Oh weep for Adonais-he is dead!  
Wake, melancholy Mother, wake and weep!  
Yet wherefore? Quench within their burning bed  
Thy fiery tears, and let thy loud heart keep,  
Like his, a mute and uncomplaining sleep;  
For he is gone where all things wise and fair  
Descend. Oh dream not that the amorous deep  
Will yet restore him to the vital air;  
Death feeds on his mute voice, and laughs at our despair .

Following this revival in the period of English Romanticism, the Spenserian stanza petered out again in the mid-nineteenth century. A twentieth-century example of the Spenserian stanza is in the "Dieper Levensinkijk" by Dutch poet Willem Kloos; this is a rare example of the form written in a language other than English.

#### **4.4.2. SPENSERIAN SONNET**

As the name suggests, the Spenserian Sonnet is named after Edmund Spenser . You have already read about sonnet in B.A. II and would be knowing that a sonnet is a type of lyric

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poem. The Spenserian Sonnet inherited the tradition of the declamatory couplet of Wyatt/Surrey. However, Spenser makes use of the Sicilian quatrains to develop a metaphor, conflict, idea or question logically, with the declamatory couplet resolving it.

There are three types of sonnets namely:

- Petrarchan or Italian sonnet
- Shakespearean or English sonnet
- Spenserian sonnet

Sonnets of all types share the following characteristics:

- number of lines: 14
- basic meter: iambic pentameter
- rhyme scheme: follows one of several set patterns
- traditional subject: love

However, the different types of sonnets are set apart by the rhyme scheme.

The **Petrarchan or Italian sonnet** form was perfected by the Italian poet Petrarch in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It has the following characteristics:

- First 8 lines (octave) rhyming abbaabba
- Last 6 lines (sestet) with rhyming as:
  - cd cd cd
  - cde cde
  - cddc ee

Octave presents a problem, and sestet offers a solution.

The **Shakespearean or English sonnet** form was perfected by Shakespeare in the 1590s. It has the following characteristics:

- Three quatrains (groups of four lines) rhyming abab cdcd efef
- One couplet (pair of lines) rhyming gg
- Main shift in content (meaning), as in rhyme scheme (form, structure), usually comes right after line 12.

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The **Spenserian sonnet** form was created by Edmund Spenser in the 1590s for Amoretti and used by few other poets, is a variation on the Shakespearean sonnet. The Spenserian sonnet has the following characteristics:

- Three quatrains (groups of four lines) rhyming ababbcbc cdcd (interlocking rhymes)
- One couplet (pair of lines) rhyming ee
- Main shift in content (meaning), as in rhyme scheme (form, structure), usually comes right after line 12.

In addition to the general features of sonnets, the Spenserian Sonnet is also marked with the following characteristics:

- a quatrain made up of 3 Sicilian quatrains (4 lines alternating rhyme) and ending in a rhyming couplet
- metric, primarily iambic pentameter.
- rhymed, rhyme scheme ababbcbccdcdee.
- composed with a volta (a non physical gap) or pivot (a shifting or tilting of the main line of thought) sometime after the 2nd quatrain. The epiphany is arrived at logically.
- written with each quatrain developing a metaphor, conflict, idea or question, and the end declamatory couplet providing the resolution.

After reading about the biography, poetic style and the contribution of Spenser in the field of English literature, let us now move on to his most ambitious book *The Faerie Queene*. Book 1 of the *The Faerie Queene* is prescribed in your syllabus but before proceeding on with the book let us take a look at allegory which is an important device used by literary writers to tell their stories.

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### **4.5. WHAT IS AN ALLEGORY?**

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Allegory is a literary device, which is Greek in origin and means ‘speaking in other terms’. It is a way of representing thought and experience through images, by means of which complex ideas may be simplified or abstract, spiritual or mysterious ideas and experiences may be made tangible. Allegory conveys a message to the readers by means of symbolic figures. Plato’s “the Cave Allegory” has had a considerable influence on western philosophy for in the book Plato has used allegory to illustrate a very complex philosophical idea. Allegories are also found in the Hebrew Bible, in the morality play *Everyman*, in Chaucer’s *The Romance of the Rose*. In the Renaissance, Spenser’s *The Faerie Queen* employs religious, political and Platonic allegories to convey the writer’s

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deeply felt concerns. John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* is one of the finest allegories of English Literature. Jonathan Swift's *A Tale of Tub* and *Gulliver's Travells* are also well known allegories of early eighteenth century. Charles Dickens was another writer who made brilliant use of allegory. His *A Christmas Carol* makes brilliant use of allegory. Allegory has continued into modern times.

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### 4.6 THE FAERIE QUEEN AS AN ALLEGORY

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In his "A Letter of the Authors", Spenser states that the entire *Faerie Queen* is "cloudily enwrapped in allegorical devices" and that the aim of publishing *The Faerie Queen* was to "fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline." It is an allegory that can be interpreted (as Spenser presumably intended) on several levels of allegory, including as praise of Queen Elizabeth I. In a completely allegorical context, the poem follows several knights in an examination of several virtues. Spenser invites the readers to interpret the characters and adventures in the book in terms of the particular virtues and vices they come to embody. The Redcrosse knight in Book 1 is the knight of Holiness, and also saint George, the patron saint of England. Similarly, Sir Guyon in Book 2 is the knight of Temperance. In Book 3, the female knight Britomart and the knight Chastity represent chaste love leading to marriage. The protagonists of Books 4, 5 and 6 represent Friendship, Justice and Courtesy.

Spenser's use of allegory in *The Faerie Queene* is not a simple one as it has various moral, historical, religious and religious tones. In the book both the Faerie Queene and Britomart are personifications of Queen Elizabeth. There is also an allusion to various events and important persons in both England and Ireland like Queen Elizabeth, her rival Mary, Queen of Scots, the Spanish Armada, the English Reformation, the religious controversies and the bitter colonial struggles against Irish rebellion. Spenser also makes use of conventional symbols and characteristic to put forward his point. For example, throughout his life, Spenser was very acrimonious towards the Roman Catholic Church and in his early days was strongly influenced by Puritanism and remained a Protestant throughout his life. He expresses his resentment towards the Roman Catholic Church by portraying it as "a woman who wears a miter and scarlet clothes and who dwells near the river Tiber." The book also is a spiritual allegory as it presents the Christian (the Redcrosse Knight) struggling heroically against evil forces and temptations like doctrinal error, hypocrisy, Seven Deadly Sins and despair, to some of which he bows down at times, but finally emerges victorious. Thus, *The Faerie Queene* is a fascinating story with layers of meanings to it which convey Spenser's deeply felt ideas as a poet and a nationalist.

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### 4.7 THE FAERIE QUEENE AS AN EPIC

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*The Faerie Queene* is a brilliant epic poem. As mentioned earlier, it is modeled on Virgil's *Aeneid* and like it each book is divided into twelve cantos. Book 1 of *The Faerie Queene* can be called complete in itself and has been called a miniature epic. The book revolves around the exploits of the protagonist Redcrosse and how he emerges victorious in the end. As mentioned earlier, *The Faerie Queene* begins the invocation of a muse.

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The Oxford English Dictionary defines a muse as the inspiring goddess of a particular poet (1136). In order to gain inspiration for the writing of his epic work, Spenser calls upon the classic authors, Virgil and Homer as his muses.

Lo I the man, whose Muse whilome did maske,  
As time her taught, in lowly Shepherds weeds,  
Am now enforst a far vnfitter taske,  
For trumpets sterne to chaunge mine Oaten reeds,  
And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds;  
Whose prayes hauing slept in silence long,  
Me, all too meane, the sacred Muse areeds  
To blazon broad emongst her learned throng:  
Fierce warres and faithfull loves shall moralize my song.  
(Spenser, I.i.1)

In addition to calling upon these fellow epic authors, Spenser again exemplifies the convention by inviting the muse of epic poetry, Calliope, to assist him with his task.

Now O thou sacred Muse, most learned Dame,  
Faire ympe of Phoebus, and his aged bride,  
The Nourse of time, and everlasting fame,  
That warlike hands ennoblest with immortall name;  
O gently come into my feeble brest,  
Come gently, but not with that mighty rage,  
(Spenser, 1.11.5,6)

After the invocation of the Muse, Spenser prepares for the journey which is an essential component of epic. Examples of this digression can be found in Virgil's *The Aeneid*. And likewise, Spenser continues the classic tradition in Book I with Duessa's descent to hell with hopes to bring the recently deceased Sansjoy back to life with the help of Night.

Thence turning backe in silence soft they stole,  
And brought the heauie corse with easie pace  
To yawning gulfe of deepe Auernus hole.  
By that same hole an entrance darke and bace  
With smoake and sulphure hiding all the place,  
Descends to hell: there creature neuer past,  
That backe returned without heauenly grace;  
But dreadfull Furies, which their chaines haue brast,  
And damned sprights sent forth to make ill men aghast.  
(Spenser, I.v.31)

The final component to be discussed will be the epic catalogue, “whose distinctive flavour can be just as discernable as other conventions found within *The Faerie Queene*.” However, it does not necessarily shape the storyline of any epic work, Spenser places at least seven of these encyclopaedic-type lists in the book. The first of the epic catalogues

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can be found in Book 1 and reminds one of specific passages in *The Parliament of Fowls* by Chaucer, but additionally was also similar to passages from works by Ovid, Lucan, Statius, Boccaccio and Tasso.

And fourth they passe, with pleasure forward led,  
Ioying to heare the birdes sweete harmony,  
Which therein shrouded from the tempest dred,  
Seemd in their song to scorne the cruell sky.  
Much can they prayse the trees so straight and hy,  
The sayling Pine, the Cedar proud and tall,  
The vine-prop Elme, the Poplar neuer dry,  
The builder Oake, sole king of forrests all,  
The Aspine good for staues, the Cypresse funerall.  
The Laurell, meed of mightie Conquerours  
And Poets sage, the Firre that weepeth still,  
The Willow worne of forlorne Paramours,  
The Eugh obedient to the benders will,  
The Birch for shaftes, the Sallow for the mill,  
The Mirrhe sweete bleeding in the bitter wound,  
The warlike Beech, the Ash for nothing ill,  
The fruitfull Oliue, and the Platane round,  
The caruer Holme, the Maple seeldom inward sound.  
(Spenser, I.i.8,9)

To conclude, one must understand that Spenser was aware of all the other necessary components that are required to compose an epic poem and incorporated them in his work. David, in the Norton Anthology says, “If *The Faerie Queene* is thus an epic celebration of human heroism, Queen Elizabeth, the Protestant faith, and the English nation, it is also a chivalric romance, full of joustling knights and damsels in distress, dragons, witches, enchanted trees, wicked magicians, giants, dark caves, shining castles...As a romance, Spenser’s poem is designed to produce wonder, to enthrall its readers with spawling plots, marvelous adventures, heroic characters, ravishing descriptions, and esoteric mysteries.”

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### **4.8.LET US SUM UP**

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In this unit we discussed the life and poetic style of Edmund Spenser. We also glanced at the poetic style of Spenser and saw why he is called the “poet’s poet.” We also took a look at Spenser’s contribution in the field of English poetry with a special mention of the Spenserian stanza and the Spenserian sonnet. You were also introduced to *The Faerie Queene* as an allegory and an epic poem which is important to the understanding of the poem.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

- Q1. Who suggested Spenser to show the first three books of *The Faerie Queen* to Queen Elizabeth?
- Q2. Name the poem that Spenser wrote on the death of Sir Philip Sidney.
- Q3. Where is Spenser buried?
- Q4. What is the rhyme scheme used in Spenserian stanza?
- Q5. What is the rhyme scheme of Spenserian sonnet?
- Q6. Why does Spenser make use of archaic language in *The Shepheardes Calender*?
- Q7. What is the poem “epithalamion” about?
- Q8. Write short notes on the following:
- i. poetic style of Spenser
  - ii. *The Faerie Queene* as an epic
  - iii. Allegory

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**4.9.ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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- A1. Sir Walter Raleigh
- A2. “Astrophel”
- A3. Poet’s Corner Westminster Abbey
- A4. ababbcbc
- A5. abab bc bc cdcd ee

Note: To know the answers of Q6, Q7 and Q8, please refer to the relevant sections of the write-up.

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**4.10.REFERENCES**

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- Daiches, David. Ed. *A Critical History of English Literature* Volume 1. New Delhi: Supernova Publishers and Distributors Pvt. Ltd. 2010. Print.
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- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund\\_Spenser](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund_Spenser)
- [www.tnellen.com/cybereng/lit\\_terms-\\_allegory.html/](http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/lit_terms-_allegory.html/)

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**4.11.SUGGESTED READING**

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www.bartley.com>...> The Poetry of Edmund Spenser

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**4.12.TERMINAL AND MODEL QUESTIONS**

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Q1. Draw a biographical sketch of Edmund Spenser in your own words.

Q2. Discuss why *The Faerie Queene* can be called an allegory.

Q3. Write short notes on the following:

Spenserian Stanza

Spenserian Sonnet

**UNIT 5 SPENSER: THE FAERIE QUEENE**

**BOOK1 (PART 2)**

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5.1. Introduction

5.2. Objectives

5.3. Summary and Critical commentary of *The Faerie Queene* Book 1

5.3.1. Book 1, Cantos I& II

5.3.2. Book 1, Cantos III, IV & V

5.3.3. Book 1, Cantos VI, VII & VIII

5.3.4. Book 1, Cantos IX & X

5.3.5. Book 1, Cantos XI & XII

5.4. Major characters of *The Faerie Queen* Book 1

5.5. Let Us Sum Up

5.6. Answers to Check Your Progress

5.7. References

5.8. Suggested Reading

5.9. Terminal and Model Questions

**5.1. INTRODUCTION**

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In the previous unit you read about the life of Edmund Spenser and saw his achievements as poet par excellence. This unit will discuss in detail Book 1 of his most celebrated incomplete epic poem *The Faerie Queen*, the first half of which was published in 1590, and the second in 1596. Spenser describes *The Faerie Queen* as an allegory and encourages the readers to “interpret the characters and adventures in the several books in terms of the particular virtues and vices they enact or come to embody.”

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**5.2. OBJECTIVES**

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After going through this unit you will be able to understand the following:

- Summary and commentary on the various cantos of Book 1
  - Brief sketch of the major characters of Book 1
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**5.3.SUMMARY AND CRITICAL COMMENTARY OF *THE FEARIE QUEENE: BOOK 1***

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**5.3.1. BOOK I, CANTOS I & II**

*The Faerie Queen* Book 1 tells the story of the Knight of Holiness, the Redcrosse Knight, who gets his name from the blood-red cross emblazoned on his shield, whom Gloriana, the Queen of the Faerie Land, appoints on a mission to accompany Una, on a journey to her kingdom to destroy a dragon who is destroying the land and holding Una’s parents captive. Redcrosse undertakes the journey along with Una and a dwarf servant. On the way, all of a sudden, it starts raining heavily as a result of which they take refuge in a cave in the woods. Una recognizes the cave as the Den of Error and warns Redcrosse. However, Redcrosse ignores her warning and enters the cave where he is attacked by a monster that Redcrosse defeats eventually. Continuing their journey further, they meet Archimago (the “arch-magician”), who had disguised himself as an old man. He invites Red Cross and Una to spend the night in his home. In the night, Archimago conjures up two spirits to trouble Redcrosse. One of the spirits obtains a false dream from Morpheus, the god of sleep and the other takes the shape of Una. Archimago sends the spirit impersonating Una to Redcrosse making sexual advances towards him and, when this is unsuccessful, Archimago shows Redcrosse the spirit impersonator of Una having sexual intercourse with another man. Seeing this vision, Red crosse is distressed and leaves alone the next morning. On his way he meets the old witch Duessa in the garb of Fidessa, a young and beautiful girl. Duessa is accompanied by Sansfoy, whom Redcrosse kills in a fierce battle. After slaying Sansfoy, Duessa and Redcrosse take rest under two trees. While resting, Redcrosse breaks the branch of one of the trees and is shocked when blood drips forth from it and a voice begins to cry out in pain. The tree then gives the account of its life. It tells Redcrosse that he was once a valiant knight called Fradubio who was travelling with his love Fraelissa and while they were crossing the forest how he came across a beautiful maiden and was attracted towards her. For the sake of the fair maiden, he forsook his beloved Fraelissa. However, when the “beautiful

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maiden” was bathing, he realized that she was a witch who had turned Fraelissa into a tree to end Fradubio’s love for her. Later when Fradubio discovered who she was, she also turned him into a tree. By telling his own life’s story, Fradubio indirectly was trying to warn Redcrosse of Duessa, who in reality was the witch who was disguised as a fair maiden but Redcrosse failed to see it and continued with Duessa on his journey.

### **COMMENTARY**

Redcrosse is the hero of Book I, and in the beginning of Canto I, he is called the knight of Holiness. He undergoes many ordeals and fights fierce monsters throughout the course of the story. However, the more important purpose of *The Faerie Queen* is its allegory, ie the meaning behind its characters and events. The fanciful “faerie land” is in reality Spenser’s homeland, England and the Faerie Queen is Queen Elizabeth. Redcrosse represents the individual Christian on the search for Holiness, who is armed with faith in Christ, with the blood Red Cross emblazoned on his shield. His companion is Una, whose name means “truth”. For a Christian to be holy, he must have faith and so the plot of Book 1 mostly concerns the attempts of evildoers to separate Redcrosse from Una. Most of these villains are meant by Spenser to represent one thing in common: the Roman Catholic Church. Spenser was of the view that with the coming of the English Reformation, people embraced “true religion” (Protestantism/ Anglicanism) thus defeating the corruption that had existed in Roman Catholicism. Spenser takes up the character of Redcrosse whose task is to defeat villains who imitate the falsehood of the Roman Catholic Church.

The first of these villains is Error. When Redcrosse throttles him, Spenser writes, “Her vomit full of books and papers was (I.i.20).” These papers represent Roman Catholic propaganda that was used against Queen Elizabeth and Anglicanism. Next comes Archimago, whose name means “arch-image”. His name stands for extensive images used by Catholics in their acts of worshipping. Archimago, the sorcerer, through acts of deception tries to separate Redcrosse who stood for Holiness from Una who stood for Truth many times. Once separated from Una (Truth), Redcrosse (Holiness) falls prey to falsehood. Although he is able to defeat Sansfoy (literally “without faith”) but he becomes a helpless victim to the wiles of Duessa who represents the Roman Catholic Church and all its malpractices. Much of Spenser’s imagery comes from a passage in the Book of Revelation, which describes the “whore of Babylon.” Many Protestant readers took this Biblical passage to indicate the Catholic Church.

Besides Biblical references, the *Faerie Queen* has other references too. Spenser’s works are loaded with references from ancient epics such as Homer’s *Illiad* and *Odyssey* and Virgil’s *Aeneid*. In the tradition of the great Greek and Latin epics, Spenser opens Book I of *Faerie Queen* by invoking the Muses to guide his poetry. The episode of the bleeding “human tree” reminds us of a similar incident in *Aeneid*. However, while these ancient poets wrote to tell stories, Spenser has another purpose in mind. In the letter that introduces the *Faerie Queen*, he says that he followed poets like Homer, Virgil, Aristo and Tasso because they all have “ensampled a good governour and a vertuous man.”

Thus, Spenser intends to expand on this example by defining the qualities of a good, virtuous, Christian man.

### **5.3.2. BOOK1, CANTOS III, IV & V**

Meanwhile, Una, left alone in the forest, goes wondering in search of Redcrosse and comes across a lion who is about to attack her. However, seeing her innocent beauty decides to be her companion and protector. There, in the middle of the forest, they see a girl carrying a pot of water. The girl, deaf and dumb, gets terrified on seeing the lion and runs back home to her mother. Una and the lion too follow her as they were looking for a place to halt at night. The deaf and dumb girl was called Abessa and her mother Corceca who is blind. At first they are unwilling to let them in but the lion forces his way into their house. Later at night, Kirkrapine, a church robber and also Abessa's lover, enters the house but is killed by the lion. The next morning the lion and Una leave the house, only to be approached by Archimago in the guise of Redcrosse. Una thinks Archimago to be Redcrosse and goes with him. On the way they meet Sansloy, who seeing the red cross on Archimago's chest, mistakenly takes him for Redcrosse and challenges him to a duel to avenge the death of his brother Sansfoy, whom Red Cross had killed earlier. Sansloy injures Archimago and then removes his helmet only to discover that he is not Redcrosse. Seeing that the injured man is not Redcrosse, he spares his life and takes Una as his prize, killing the lion who tries to save her. After killing the lion, Sansloy forcefully drags Una onto his horse, riding off into the forest.

The scene then shifts to Redcrosse who he is being led by Duessa into the House of Pride. On seeing the palatial house, Redcrosse is spell bound. There they are welcomed by Lucifera, the Queen of the Palace. Lucifera shows off for the knight by calling her coach which is pulled by six beasts upon which ride her six counselors. They are: Idleness, Gluttony, Lechery, Avarice, Envy and Wrath. The six beasts along with their Queen, Queen of Pride, represent the Seven Deadly Sins. Soon this procession of the Seven Deadly Sins is interrupted by Sansjoy, who comes to avenge the death of his brother Sansfoy. Sansjoy challenges Redcrosse to a duel. Lucifera arranges a duel between the two for the next day. Both men suffer great injuries in the duel. Just as Redcrosse is about to kill Sansjoy, a dark cloud covers Sansjoy and he suddenly disappears in it. Duessa mourns the loss of Sansjoy and goes to awaken Night. Together they recover the body of Sansjoy and she descends into hell. There they find Aesculapius, the Greek physician, who has the power to bring men back to life, a power that Jove (Jupiter) did not want mortals to enjoy. Duessa and Night persuade him to try and restore Sansjoy's life. Meanwhile, Redcrosse is carried back to the House of Pride where he is treated for his wounds. Meanwhile, the Dwarf makes a horrible discovery of bodies of victims of Pride and other Deadly Sins in the dungeon. He warns Redcrosse of it. On being warned by the Dwarf, Redcrosse makes an escape from there. When Duessa returns from hell, she finds that Red Cross had departed from there.

### **COMMENTARY**

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The lion in the story represents natural law, which may be violent at times but is sympathetic to Christian truth. According to Christian theology, natural is a part of God's divine law and so the Christian is not an opponent of nature but acts in harmony with it. Thus the lion naturally aids Una. The two women who benefit from the booty of Kirkrapine (church robber) represent monasticism; Abessa's name suggests connection with "Abbess", the head of an abbey. Monasticism is a feature of the Catholic Church, and in Spenser's time, monasteries were accused of forcing donations from the poor for themselves. The deafness and dumbness of Abessa and Corceca's blindness show Spenser's belief that the monks, nuns, friars are ignorant of the needs of the world works as as they live in seclusion. The next character, Sansloy (literally meaning "without the law of god") functions outside the realm of divine law and kills the lion who is an embodiment of natural law.

The ancient and medieval thought about sin and evil come together in the House of Pride. Lucifera, the Queen of the House of Pride, stands for Lucifer (Satan) and like Satan is full of pride. In Christian theology, Pride is the greatest of sins, and all other vices are born out of it. Pride was the cause of Satan's downfall. Like Satan, the Queen of Pride is conceited and stands in contrast with the true Queen to whom the poem is dedicated: Queen Elizabeth, who was a just queen, devoted to her country and people and who represented True Religion.

Spenser uses a variety of sources in constructing his imagery. Spenser writes that the House of Pride, although lavishly built, sits on a weak foundation. This evokes the Gospel of Matthew in which Jesus preaches to his disciples that those who do not follow His words will be likened to a foolish man who builds his house on sand. (Matthew 7.26) The architectural details of the castle, such as the surrounding walls covered by gold foil (outward beauty hiding inner weakness) are borrowed from *Orlando Furioso* by the Italian poet Aristo, whom Spenser admired. Besides The New Testament and *Orlando Furioso*, Spenser also borrows the scene in which Duessa and Night descend into hell from Virgil's *Aeneid* in which he describes Aeneas' travel through Hell to meet his father.

### **5.3.3. BOOK 1, CANTOS VI, VII & VIII**

Meanwhile, Sansloy attempts to seduce and rape Una in the woods, but he is scared off by a group of fauns and satyrs, (wood gods which are half human and half animals) who come to Una's aid when she cries. Seeing these weird creatures, Sansloy gets terrified and flees off. After Sansloy leaves, these creatures enamoured of Una's beauty, take her to their leader, Sylvanus, to be worshipped as goddess. Soon a knight, Satyrane, whose is born out of a satyr father and a human mother, comes by and on seeing Una comes to her rescue and helps her to escape from there. When the two are trying to get out of the woods, they come across a pilgrim who claims that he has witnessed the death of Redcrosse at the hands of a pagan knight and that he knows about the whereabouts of that knight. He leads the two to him who is Sansloy. As already mentioned above, Sanslot did not in fact kill Redcrosse but had defeated Archimago who was disguised as Redcrosse. On seeing Sansloy, Satyrane challenges him. Una recognizes Sansloy and runs away

from the scene. She is followed by the pilgrim who in reality is Archimago, in another of his many disguises.

Mean while, Duessa begins searching for Red Cross and discovers him next to a magic fountain whose waters, once drunk, results in a loss of strength. Duessa and Redcrosse are reconciled, and, after drinking the water of the magic fountain, Redcrosse loses his powers. Redcrosse is busy courting Duessa until he hears Orgoglio, a hideous giant, approaching. As Redcrosse, owing to the water of the magic fountain, had lost his powers, Orgoglio easily overpowers him, but Duessa asks him to spare the life of Redcrosse and in return agrees to become the mistress of the giant. Redcrosse survives but is thrown into Orgoglio's dungeon. Luckily, the Dwarf witnessed the fight scene between the two and sets out to help the defeated Redcross. While on his way to help Redcrosse, he sees Una who is fleeing from Sansloy. The Dwarf relates the story of Redcrosse to Una and the two then head towards Orgoglio's castle. On the way they meet a brightly dressed knight, whose armour has a diamond shield which can turn men to stones and overthrow monsters. The shield is so powerful that it forever remains covered with a piece of cloth. Una tells the story of her life to the knight who promises to help her. The knight, though unnamed, is Prince Arthur.

Arthur, along with his squire, Una and the Dwarf, approaches the castle, and the squire blows a horn whose sound is so powerful that it bursts open the castle door. Orgoglio comes running out along with Duessa who is riding a seven-headed beast, a gift received from Orgoglio. Arthur and his squire confront Orgoglio and the seven-headed beast in a fight. In the middle of the fight, the piece of cloth that had covered the shield drops from it and its dazzling surface got exposed. The glare of the shield was too strong for the eyes of Orgoglio and the seven-headed beast, allowing Arthur to kill both the monsters. Duessa attempts to escape but is held back by the squire. After the fight, Arthur goes inside the castle in search of Redcrosse, but he just finds an old servant called Ignaro who walks with his head facing backwards and who cannot answer any of Arthur's questions. Arthur takes the keys of the castle from Ignaro and starts searching for the Redcrosse knight in the rooms there. He comes across a beautifully decorated room where the altar is stained with the blood of martyrs. Then he opens another door and falls into a dungeon where he sees Redcrosse, hungry and distressed after months of imprisonment. With great difficulty they manage to come out of the dungeon and Arthur presents Redcrosse Knight to Una, and the two finally reunite. Duessa is made to strip in front of everyone so that Redcrosse can see that she is a witch.

### **COMMENTARY**

The wood gods, in spite of being good creatures who dwell in sylvan surroundings and help Una are not representatives of "pure" nature like the lion was as they are idolater of Greek and Roman mythology. When they see Una they start worshipping her, not realizing that she stands in stark contrast with idolatry. As Spenser was opposed to idolatry and the complexities of the Roman Catholic Church, so he rejects them. Satyrane, on the other hand is only a part wood god, still has the goodness of nature and helps Una. However, he does not stand for anything Christian so he cannot defeat

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Sansloy. Through this allegory, Spenser chooses Redcrosse to prove his loyalty to the Queen. However, as Redcrosse, who stands for holiness is separated from Una, who is an embodiment of truth, he cannot accomplish the task assigned to him. He becomes a prey to evil forces. He does not recognize the falseness of Duessa and eventually he gets caught in the jaws of death in the dungeon. The giant represents godless pride, which can overcome the weak Christian, still separated from Truth.

Finally, Arthur comes as a Christ like figure as he helps to elevate Redcrosse to a higher pedestal. However the allegory sees a change, when Redcrosse is himself transformed into a Christ like figure. The role of Arthur in the *Faerie Queen* is very diverse as he stands for many other things within *Faerie Queen*. On the first level, he is the hero of the whole poem; Spenser intends to have him appear briefly in each book, usually when things reach a nadir. The character of Arthur has deep significance for the sixteenth century audience. The Arthurian legend was well developed by Spenser's time and had turned a semi-historical fifth century king into a timeless hero. Through the figure of Arthur, Spenser makes it possible for the sixteenth century English audience to return to the extraordinary age of Arthur.

In the *Faerie Queen*, the Catholic Church is shown to be the main enemy of the true Christian spirit. This is evident again in the battle outside Orgoglio's castle. Outside the castle, Duessa is shown riding a very strange beast, which is parallel to the scene from the Book of Revelation in which the whore of Babylon, "sits on a scarlet-coloured beast...having seven heads and ten horns." (Rev. 17.3-4) The Protestants traditionally associate the whore to the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, Duessa stands for the Roman Catholic Church and all the beasts that Redcrosse and Una confront are the evil forces within the Roman Catholic Church. The Protestants felt the need of cleansing Christianity of the malpractices of the Roman Catholic Church. The conflict between the various malicious beasts and the knights is in reality the confrontation between the Roman Catholic Church and Protestantism.

### **5.3.4. BOOK I, CANTOS IX & X**

Still unaware of the brave knight's identity, Una and Redcrosse question him about his life and lineage. Arthur tells them that he does not know the identity of his parents as he grew up in Wales where he was raised by Timon, an old knight, and educated by a magician Merlin, who told him that Arthur's father was a king and that Arthur would discover his identity some time later in future. Una then asks the knight the reason for his coming to the Faerie Land to which he replies that he was visited by the Queen of Faeries in his dream, he was captivated by her beauty, he had been searching for her in Faerie Land for the last nine months. Redcrosse and Una sympathize with him. He then leaves Una and Redcrosse to resume his search. Una and Redcrosse, likewise, resume their long-delayed journey but are soon interrupted by Sir Trevisan, a knight running along the roadside with a rope around his neck. Trevisan tells them how he was fleeing a terrible man Despair who had persuaded his companion, Sir Terwin to end his life by committing suicide. As a result of Despair's persuasion, Terwin, sick of his life, stabbed himself, but Trevisan did not get trapped and ran away from there. On hearing Yrevisan's account,

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Redcrosse vows to challenge Despair. He is led by Trevisan into a dark cave where an old, gloomy man was sitting on a corner. This man was Despair. On seeing him, Redcrosse asks him to give up his persuasions. However, Despair convinces Redcrosse that his mission was noble and that he has been instrumental in liberating many people from the miseries of human existence as death ended a life full of sins. The arguments relating death that Despair gave was so convincing that Redcrosse raises his dagger to end his own life but Una intervenes at the right time and stops Redcrosse from committing this cowardly act. She tells him that it would be foolish on his part to end his own life and reminded him of Heavenly Mercy. Convinced by Una, Redcrosse escapes from the cave of Dispair.

Seeing that Redcrosse was in a disturbed state of mind, Una leads him to the House of Holiness, so that he could recover well. The House of Holiness is ruled by Caelia along with her three daughters Fidelia, Sperenza and Charissa. Here Charissa gives Redcrosse lessons on good behaviour, love and righteousness. Thereafter, he is taken to a hospital where seven charitable characters like Patience, Penance, Remorse and Repentance tend to his physical ailments. All these characters provide the best of services to Redcrosse as a result of which his condition begins to improve. Charity, one of the characters residing in the House of Holiness, instructs Redcrosse on practising love instead of hatred and Mercy gives him lessons on charity. Once fully recovered, Contemplation, a wise old hermit leads him to the top of a high mountain and informs him that one day he will enter New Jerusalem as Saint George, the patron saint of England. Amazed on hearing this, Redcrosse descends downhill to continue his journey with Una to her native land.

### **COMMENTARY**

Spenser glorifies Queen Elizabeth by connecting her with King Arthur's lineage in Canto ix. Arthur tells Redcrosse and Una that he was born in western Wales, which hints his connection with the House of Tudor, Elizabeth's family. Through this Spenser suggests that Elizabeth shares the same secular power and religious authority as Arthur held. In the book, Arthur is likened to Christ. In the exchange of gifts that take place between Arthur and Redcrosse, Arthur gives Redcrosse a "few drops of liquor pure,/ Of wondrous worth and excellent,/ That any wound could heal incontinent" (I.ix.19) The liquor probably represents the Eucharist, which is a symbol of Christ giving his body and blood to the Apostles at the Last Supper and Redcrosse gives him his "Saveours Testament" (I.ix.19)-that is, the New Testament, which tells of Christ's life Christ's life on Earth. This foretells Redcrosse's eventual role as a Christ like figure, and, in fact, a more important one than Arthur.

On his journey, Redcrosse has to make yet another confrontation. This time with Despair whom the lion had confronted earlier in the form of Sansjoy. The lion could not conquer despair then and here too in its purest form, it had almost defeated Redcrosse but he had the strong support of Truth in the form of Una and the mercy of Truth is greater than the pang of despair. This is an important lesson which Redcrosse learns in the House of Holiness. The House of Holiness stands in sharp contrast to the House of Pride from Canto iv.

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In the House of Holiness, we meet Caelia (Heavenly); instead of a parade of vices, there is a multitude of virtues. First we meet the three daughters of Caelia, Faith, Hope and Charity, which according to St. Paul are the greatest virtues. Each one gives lessons to Redcrosse based on her virtue. The seven physicians who take care of Redcrosse are the correspond to the seven bodily vices of the House of Pride whose care rejuvenates Redcrosse as a result of which he gathers the strength to carry on with his journey.

### **5.3.5. BOOK 1, CANTOS XI & XII**

Finally Redcrosse and Una reach her native place where they are confronted by a huge dragon. The dragon is covered with a flawless coat of scales, has a long tail with razor sharp spikes and powerful wings that can sweep off anything off its feet. Redcrosse and the dragon enter into a fierce fight that lasts for three days. Redcrosse appears to be no match for the dragon. Every blow given by the dragon proves too much for Redcrosse to handle. Each time the dragon knocks Redcrosse down and finally, when Redcrosse injures the dragon, in retaliation the dragon spews fire on Redcrosse, burning his armour. The heat of the armour burns Redcrosse and he writhes in pain. Then the dragon knocks him backward causing him to fall into the Well of Life which has the power to heal his wounds but the dragon thinks that Redcrosse is dead and sleeps soundly at night. Una prays all night long for the recovery of Redcrosse and in the morning, a rejuvenated Redcrosse, rises from the spring. The next day also fighting continues in which both suffer heavy losses. At last, Redcrosse cuts a deep wound in the dragon's head. Again when the dragon delivers a deathly blow, Redcrosse falls into mire where a sacred tree stands. The tree like the Well of Life had healing powers. The balm of the blessed tree boosts the knight for another day of fighting. When the dragon sees the knight alive, he is furious and vows to kill Redcrosse and finish off the battle. However, it is Redcrosse who eventually kills the dragon by piercing his throat and emerges victorious in the end. At last, the land is set free and the inhabitants celebrate their freedom and honour Redcrosse as their hero. They also start making preparations for the marriage of Una and Redcrosse when a messenger comes with a letter stating that Redcrosse and Una cannot get married as he has already pledged his hand to another woman. Redcrosse clarifies the situation and tells them that the woman was Duessa, a witch, who only got his pledge by deceit and witchcraft. Una seconds all this and also recognizes the messenger, who is Archimago in disguise. Archimago is captured and imprisoned in a dungeon and in the end Redcrosse and Una get married. However, Redcrosse tells them that he cannot stay with Una as he has to proceed further to fulfil his duty for he is obliged to carry out his pledge of six years of service to Gloriana, the Queen of the Faerie Land.

### **COMMENTARY**

The final battle between Redcrosse and the dragon is the culmination of the allegory. It covers all the different levels of religious and political meanings that Spenser has put into the story. Redcrosse's victory represents three distinct events: Christ's victory over death and the devil in the Crucifixion and Resurrection, the victory of the individual Christian over the temptation of sin and the defeat of the Roman Catholic Church at the hands of the Protestantism and the Church of England. Redcrosse stands for both as an individual

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Christian as well as a champion of Protestants against Catholics. Here, in Canto xi, he is also represented as a Christ like figure because just like Christ's resurrection took place after three days, Redcrosse too defeats the dragon after struggling for three days with him.

During Redcrosse's fight with the dragon, he is saved twice. Once by the Well of Life, into which he fell accidentally, and got baptized. The Tree of Life is the Eucharist, the symbol of Christ's body and blood. Both the well and the tree represent the grace that God bestowed on mankind. Through the story of Redcrosse and Una, Spenser wants to drive home the point that no matter how well a man is prepared, he is no match for sin and death without the Grace of God. Therefore, we can say that Redcrosse's victory was possible only as a result of God's grace.

Finally, Redcrosse is again established as the hero of Protestantism against Catholicism in the last Canto. Even though he has conquered the dragon, his marriage to Una must be delayed; his work is not yet finished. The knight must "Backe to return to that great Faerie Queene / And her to serve six yeares in warlike wize, / Gainst that proud Paynim king (I.xii.18)." This brings the allegory back from the general to the specific and back from the purely religious to the political. We know that the Faerie Queene represents Queen Elizabeth; thus, the "proud Paynim king" whom she is fighting must be either the Pope or a Catholic king; either way, the enemy is the Roman Church. Spenser is bringing us back to his own time where, although England now is Protestant, the Catholic Church is still powerful. Redcrosse will be united with Una only when the battle against false religion is over--we see that Duessa is still working her evil ways in defeat. And the battle, of course, will not end until the end of the world, when Christ will reveal which religion is false and which is true.

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### **5.4.MAJOR CHARACTERS OF THE FAERIE QUEEN BOOK 1**

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**Arthur:** The central hero of the poem, although he does not play the most significant role in the action of the book. Arthur is in search of the Faerie Queen, whom he saw in a vision. The "real" Arthur was a king of the Britons in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D but the little historical information we have about him is overwhelmed by his legend.

**Faerie Queen (also known as Gloriana):** Though she never appears in the poem, she is the focus of the poem; the castle is the ultimate goal or destination of many of the poem's characters. She represents Queen Elizabeth, among others, as discussed in the Commentary.

**Redcrosse:** The Redcrosse Knight is the hero of Book 1; he stands for the virtues of Holiness. His real name is discovered to be George, and he ends up becoming St. George, the patron saint of England. On another level, though he is the individual Christian fighting against evil or the Protestant fighting the Catholic Church.

**Una:** The beautiful future wife of Redcrosse, and the other major protagonist of Book 1. She is meek and humble but strong when it is necessary. She represents truth, which Redcrosse must find in order to be a true Christian.

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**Duessa:** Duessa is the opposite of Una. She represents falsehood and nearly succeeds in getting Redcrosse to leave Una. She appears beautiful but in reality is a witch.

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### 5.5. LET US SUM UP

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In this unit you read the summary and critical commentary of the various cantos of Book 1. You saw how Redcrosse knight, the patron saint of Holiness is appointed by Gloriana, Queene of Faerie Land to accompany Una on a journey to her kingdom to destroy a dragon that is destroying the land and holding Una's parents captive. On their way to the kingdom of Una's parents both Redcrosse and Una undergo various hardships, a detailed account of which has been given above. In the eighth canto of the book comes a brilliantly arrayed knight, whose armor includes a magic diamond shield with such great powers that it can turn men to stone and overthrow monsters; The knight, though unnamed, is the great Prince Arthur. He helps Redcrosse and Una in overcoming their final ordeals and plays a great role in the unification of the two. In the end with the dragon killed, the land is freed from its captivity and Redcrosse emerges as their hero. Ceremonies for the betrothal of Redcrosse and Una are celebrated, until a messenger arrives with a letter stating that Redcrosse is engaged to Fidessa. However the messenger is recognized to be Archimago in yet another disguise. He is finally captured and thrown into a dungeon, and the betrothal of Redcrosse and Una takes place. Red Cross, however, cannot remain with Una as he has to continue with his journey as he has to fulfill his pledge of six years of service to Gloriana, the Queen of Faerie Land.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- Q1. What does the Redcrosse knight stand for?
- Q2. Who is Fidessa in reality?
- Q3. Who is the hero of the first book of *The Faerie Queene* ?
- Q4. What does Una stand for in the book?
- Q5. Who is the knight who proposes to help Una ?
- Q6. How does the Redcrosse knight get his name?
- Q7. Who was Archimago?
- Q8. Describe the House of pride.
- Q9. Describe the fight scene between Orgoglio and the Redcrosse knight.
- Q10. How are Redcrosse and Una re-united in the end of Book 1?

**5.6. ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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- A1. Holiness
- A2. Duessa, the witch
- A3. Redcrosse knight
- A4. Truth
- A5. Arthur

Note: To know the answers of Q6 TO Q10, please refer to the relevant sections of the write-up.

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**5.7. REFERENCES**

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Griffeth, Tim. Ed. *The Faerie Queene Edmund Spenser*. Kent. Wordsworth Editions Limited. 1999.Print.

[www.sparknotes.com](http://www.sparknotes.com).>...> PoetryStudyGuides>FFQ

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**5.8. SUGGESTED READING**

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Griffeth, Tim. Ed. *The Faerie Queene Edmund Spenser*. Kent. Wordsworth Editions Limited. 1999.Print.

[www.sparknotes.com](http://www.sparknotes.com).>...> PoetryStudyGuides>FFQ

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**5.9. TERMINAL AND MODEL QUESTIONS**

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Q1. Summarize the following cantos in your own words:

- iCantos I& II
- iiCantos IX&X

Q2. Give the critical appreciation of the following cantos:

- iCantos III, IV & V
- iiCantos XI& XII

**UNIT 6 METAPHYSICAL POETRY**

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6.1. Introduction

6.2. Objectives

6.3. Definition of Metaphysical School of Poetry

6.4. Major Metaphysical Poets

6.5. Characteristics of Metaphysical School of Poetry

6.5.1. Imagery and Conceit

6.5.2. Obscurity

6.5.3. Figures of Speech

6.5.4. Language and versification

6.5.5. Unusual Opening

6.5.6. Use of Wit

6.5.7. Intellectualism and Argumentation

6.6. Let Us Sum Up

6.7. References

6.8. Suggested Reading

6.9. Terminal and Model Questions

**6.1. INTRODUCTION**

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You have already read about different kinds of poetry, namely Chaucerian, Elizabethan and others. While poetry in general, as you all know, is a combination of imagination and emotion, which Wordsworth calls ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’. In this chapter you are going to read about a kind of poetry that will be full of reasoning though emotions too will be scattered here and there. Actually, Elizabethan age, as you all might have read, was a nest of singing birds and William Shakespeare, the master poet and dramatist had brought such finesse to poetry that something new and novel alone could tempt the literary lovers. Shakespeare and Bacon wrote largely during the reign of James I yet their work is Elizabethan in spirit. After the death of Elizabeth in 1603, the poets who appeared on English literary horizon were mostly song writers. The increasing influence of French instead of Italian verse and the development of music as art were witnessed at the close of 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was during this period that a group of poets who were considered revolutionary both in matter and manner appeared on the literary scene to spread intellectual reasoning and to attract readers by their choice of diction and thought. These poets were later called metaphysical poets.

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**6.2. OBJECTIVES**

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In this unit you will read about

The definition of Metaphysical Poetry

Characteristics of Metaphysical Poetry

The Metaphysical School of Poets

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**6.3. DEFINITION OF METAPHYSICAL POETRY**

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The name ‘metaphysical’ was given by Dr. Johnson to the race of poets in derision because of the fantastic form of their poetry. John Donne was the leader of the metaphysical school of poetry and the followers of this school included Herbert, Waller, Denham, Cowley, Vaughan, Davenant, Marvell and Crashaw. While calling them ‘metaphysicals’ Dr. Johnson said;

“The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour; but unluckily resolving to show it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry they only wrote verses, and very often such verses as stood the trial of the finger better than of the ear; for the modulation was so imperfect, that they were only found to be verses by counting the syllables.”

Now you might be curious to know what made these metaphysical poets appear different. Did they deal with different themes? Did they show any difference in maintaining the rhythm, metre etc? The answer is a direct ‘no’. These poets touched upon various subjects and gave a different treatment while dealing with those subjects. Since Dr. Johnson is of the opinion that the verses created by these poets were not pleasing to the

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ear, you may wonder what made the verses so unpleasant. It would, of course, be better for us to know the chief characteristics of the metaphysical school of poetry.

If we interpret the word ‘metaphysical, it appears quite appropriate to seek its composition as ‘meta’ meaning beyond and ‘physics’ meaning physical nature. Hence, linguistically metaphysical poetry may mean poetry that is beyond physical nature. But if we take a look at the nature and content of the poetry written by Donne and his followers, they may not be considered metaphysical in the true sense. In this connection, it is right to quote John Dryden, who observed: ‘Donne affects the metaphysics’. A metaphysical poem, in general, should be long and should border on philosophical system of the universe while the poems of the school of Donne are soaked in love though one often finds intellectual reasoning in them. Grierson’s views on Donne’s poetry can be considered quite relevant. He says: ‘Donne is metaphysical not only by virtue of his scholasticism, but by his deep reflective interest in the experiences of which his poetry is the expression, the new psychological curiosity with which he writes of love and religion.’

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### **6.4. MAJOR METAPHYSICAL POETS**

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After knowing about the term metaphysical poetry, you might be eager to know who the poets of the metaphysical school of poetry were and what made them write so. As we have read earlier, John Donne was the leader of the metaphysical school of poetry. He also had a good number of followers and we shall here discuss only the major ones, namely John Donne, George Herbert, Thomas Carew, Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan, Abraham Cowley and Andrew Marvell. You have been prescribed ten poems of John Donne and four poems of Andrew Marvell. But for better understanding, we shall read about the life and works of some major metaphysical poets.

#### **JOHN DONNE**

John Donne(1573-1631) was born in London in the house of a rich iron merchant. His father was a Welsh and his mother was from Heywoods. Donne’s parents were Catholics and because of the unfavourable conditions of Catholics in England, Donne and his family suffered a lot. Donne couldn’t continue his education at Oxford and Cambridge because of his religion. He studied law and then joined Lincoln’s Inn. Donne’s life was not smooth and there were several setbacks. He lost his brother and this seemed to affect him much more. He repudiated the church and called himself simply Christian. He became secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton, fell in love with his niece, Anne More and secretly married her. Donne was not only dismissed from Egerton’s service but was also imprisoned for eloping with Anne More.

Donne started writing poetry and helped his Catholic relatives. As he progressed in fame, he was forgiven by his kinsmen, Sir George More. While he had begun writing love poetry in his youth, Donne became religious later and apart from writing amorous verses, he also turned to composing numberless satires, sermons, holy sonnets and religious poetry. He experimented with a new kind of verse and used far-fetched imagery and

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conceits in his poems. His famous poems are 'The Extasie', 'The Canonization', 'The Flea', 'The Blossoms', 'The Sunne Rising,' 'The Relique', and 'The Funeral'. His religious poems include 'Good Friday,' '1613', 'To God, the Father' etc. His *Songs and Sonnets* include fifty-five lyrics in various metres. *The Elegies* include 20 poems. He wrote five satires and his religious poetry includes *La Corona* and *Holy Sonnets*. Donne breathed his last in 1673. Donne's poetry had a remarkable quality about which you will read later. You will read ten poems of Donne. While some poems of Donne prescribed for you deal with love, others deal with his religious views.

### **GEORGE HERBERT**

**George Herbert** (1593-1633) is another name which needs mention. He has been called 'the saint of metaphysical school of poetry'. His famous collection *The Temple* consists of 60 poems about which the poet himself had said that they were 'the many spiritual conflicts that have passed bewixt God and my soul before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus, my master, in whose service I have now found perfect freedom.' Herbert's poems have a blend of intellect and sensibility which may bring him close to metaphysical poets but his verses are free from ambiguity and hence he is the least metaphysical of Donne's followers. His famous poems are 'Virtue', 'The Pulley,' 'The Quip', and 'The Collar'. An example Of Herbert's devotion to the Almighty can be seen in the following lines of 'The Pulley':

Yet let him keep the rest,  
But keep them with repining restlessness:  
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,  
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness  
May toss him to my breast.

The poet is of the view that God gave men all sorts of comforts so that if they do not remember Him in good times, they will soon get tired of everything and turn to the Almighty when they got exhausted and craved for peace.

### **THOMAS CAREW**

Thomas Carew(1598-1639) started writing in the fashion of Ben Johnson and John Donne and wrote poems like 'To My Inconsistent Mistress', 'Mediocrity in Love Rejected', 'Disdain Returned', 'A Rapture', 'Elegy Upon the Death of Donne' etc. One can find in Carew the bold assertions like the metaphysical poets. Carew didn't have the intellect and profundity like the metaphysical poets yet he had in him the metaphysical wit, which had a combination of lightness with seriousness.

Carew is connected with Donne by his fine elegy 'Elegy Upon the Death of Donne' with which he honoured his memory. The poem has more feeling and is one of the best pieces of criticism written in this period. Carew discovered newness in Donne, his contempt for outworn ornament and his need of personal and virile expression. Though he followed

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Donne yet he had his originality. In his famous song 'Ask me No More', Carew finds his mistress having all the beauties united in her and says:

Ask me no more where Jove bestows,  
When June is past, the fading rose;  
For in your beauty's orient deep  
These flowers, as in their causes, sleep.

### RICHARD CRASHAW

Richard Crashaw's (1612-49) poems bear a mark of metaphysical strain in *Steps to the Temple* written in 1649. Though most of the poems in it are religious in nature and are outbursts of passionate and lyrical intensity. When he was about 33, he became Catholic, and he ended his life in Rome as secretary to Cardinal Palotta. He had started writing poetry even when he was at the university and had become an expert Latin poet. Crashaw's *Delight of the Muse* is his secular verse. While his works are of a mixed nature, you will find Crashaw at his best in 'The Flaming Heart' and 'Wishes to His Supposed Mistress'. His conceits are not soaked in learning but are extravagant and at times uneven too. He had an extraordinary wealth of vocabulary and his observation was subtle. Grierson applauded Crashaw for ardour and music in his poetry.

Crashaw's *The Weeper* is a litany in praise of Magdalen's tears. The poem includes all sorts of conceits of a weeping mistress, together with many others invented by the poet. Crashaw's lyrical flights are considered to have been equalled by Shelley only. His poems have strangeness and obscurity yet had more warmth, colour and harmony. In *The Weeper*, the poet says that Magdalen's tears go to heaven and at the same time, he compensates by his vision the saint's grieving countenance:

Not in the evening's eyes,  
When they red with weeping are  
For the sun that dies,  
Sits sorrow with a face so fair;  
Nowhere but here did ever meet  
Sweetness so sad, sadness so sweet.

Crashaw has made abundant use of paradox, imagery and religious symbols in this poem. You will find the poet comparing the tears to milk. This reminds us of Donne comparing tears to the wine of love.

### HENRY VAUGHAN

Henry Vaughan (1622-95), though followed Donne and Herbert but his metaphysical influence is more of fancy than of the exploration of experience. The poet is influenced more by the imagery than by their underlying themes. Vaughan imitated Herbert but he also refined these imitations to make them his own. He became awfully interested in the relationship between God and Man. Though otherwise a plain poet, Vaughan expressed his interest both before birth and after death. This makes him a metaphysical poet. His

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sacred verse *Silex Scintillans* is considered his best creation. His famous poems from this collection are 'The Retreat' and 'Departed Friends'. Vaughan's poems, though, are not prescribed for you yet you will admire the lines from his famous poem 'The Retreat':

Some men a forward motion love,  
But I by backward steps would move ;  
And when this dust falls to the urn,  
In that state I came, return.

The poet expresses the wish to return to his childhood once again since he thinks it to be the state of innocence.

He is considered to be such a poet who had been most scorned and who surprisingly recovered his place in the eyes of the public. His verses were considered obscure, platitudinous and also rude. If you read his poems, you will find a progress from absolute blame to supreme praise in one poem after another. Vaughan's mysticism is more fluid, his argumentation less witty but his imagination more mellow than his contemporaries. He is more of hermit than a poet and hence his versification was more varied and had less skill in them. His poems are his meditations graced by images.

### **ABRAHAM COWLEY**

**Abraham Cowley (1618-67)** wrote in the metaphysical manner but his mind was different from his masters. You will find abundant use of conceits, puns and arguments in his poems but he lacked intensity and depth of insight. The fusion of thoughts and feelings, a quality of the metaphysical poets is found missing in his verses. His famous collections are *The Mistress*, *The Chronicle* & *The Civil War*. His other famous poems are 'The Spring,' 'The Change', 'The Wish', 'Mistress Moderately Fair' etc. He couldn't complete 'Davidiels', an epic having reflections of the struggles of Saul and David in those of Charles and Cromwell. It later got published in the poems of 1651. *Davidiels* begins with a vision of Hell, where there is uneasiness because of the progress of David, which Lucifer proposes to stem. Cowley also paid tributes to his dead friends by writing 'On the Death of Mr. William Hervey' and 'On the Death of Mr. Crashaw'. Cowley lacked the grandeur of imagination, but not ingenuity and wit. In fact, wit is the special mark of Cowley and one of his small masterpieces is 'The Ode of Wit'. He condemns wit which is not reasonable and hence adds in a lavish manner:

Rather than all things Wit, let none appear.

### **ANDREW MARVELL**

**Andrew Marvell(1621-78)** was born at Winstead-in- Holderness, Yorkshire. He left Hull Grammar School and joined Trinity. He graduated and then fled from Cambridge. His father discovered him in a bookseller's shop and persuaded him to return to his college. His early life was not smooth as he lost first his mother and then his father.

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Marvell became the tutor to the daughter of Lord Fairfax, the great parliamentary general and a friend of John Milton. Marvell spent four years in Holland, France, Italy and Spain prior to his stay with Fairfax. He lived longer with Fairfax and later he became Latin secretary and then Member of Parliament. While religion does not find much room in Marvell's poetry, he does not lack in serious thoughts. But in his mature poems too, you will find a jovial and mirth-loving spirit. His poems are full of humanism and though he revered the Bible, he also loved wine women and song. Marvell's poetry combines Puritan piety with a Cavalier-like delight in the pleasures of life. His famous poems include *To His Coy Mistress*, *The Garden*, *Upon the Hill and Grove at Billborow*, *Bermudas*, *A Horation Ode Upon Cromwell's Return From Ireland*, & *The Definition of Love* etc.

Marvell had a quality of transforming familiar themes and techniques into very fresh and original poems. You will find in him the quality of riddling which can surprise any reader. Maren Sofie Rostvig says about Marvell: "If surprise is a major source of delight in poetry, then Marvell must be considered a past-master in the art of delighting his readers in this particular manner. More often than not, the element of surprise derives from a clever use of paradox, and to a casual reader Marvell's relentless pursuit of paradox may, perhaps seem nothing but a clever mannerism."

Marvell uses simple words but they are packed in meaning. You will often find a discrepancy in his tone of voice and subject matter. One most often comes across the use of metaphysical conceit and scientific imagery and complex logic in Marvell's poetry. Even wit is also found in abundance, for example, in the poem *To His Coy Mistress*, you will find how the poet suddenly brings a turn and uses the element of surprise and also anti-climax. You can look into the following lines:

But at my back I always hear  
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;  
And yonder all before us lie  
Deserts of vast eternity.

In Marvell's other poems, such as 'The Definition of Love', you will come across the use of geometrical, astronomical and various other conceits that bring him close to the metaphysical school of poetry. In addition, you will also find Marvell having little regard for verification. His lyrical work is written almost entirely in rhymed eight-syllabled couplets, a pleasant metre, but at times tempting to carelessness. You will like the use of astronomical images, as in 'The Definition of Love':

Unless the giddy heaven fall,  
And earth some new convulsion tear.  
And, us to join, the world should all  
Be cramp'd into a planisphere.

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**6.5. CHARACTERISTICS OF METAPHYSICAL SCHOOL OF POETRY**

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The metaphysical poets did not follow the trodden path. They had their thoughts and Sir Walter Scott had rightly said, 'they played with thoughts'. The metaphysicals are considered to extend Elizabethan freedom of imagination to an extent that it became difficult for average readers.

Since you have read about the major poets of the seventeenth century, you might be feeling tempted now to know about the salient features of metaphysical poetry. You have seen some flashes while reading about the lives of some major metaphysical poets. Now you will see the fire that enabled these poets to be called 'metaphysical poets'.

Following are the major characteristics of the metaphysical school of poetry:

**6.5.1. IMAGERY AND CONCEIT:**

Imagery, as you have read in your previous classes is a picture created out of words. It is actually a use of language to represent objects, experiences, feelings or sense perceptions. Imagery can be of various types and most of them are based on our senses. There may be visual, olfactory, gustatory, auditory and kinaesthetic imagery. Visual imagery is related to eyes while auditory is related to hearing. Likewise, olfactory is related to smell and gustatory is related to taste.

Most of the images are expressed in a figurative language. You are acquainted with various figures of speech such as personification, simile, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and onomatopoeia etc. Poets often are tempted to make use of images to convey their ideas in the most dignified way. At times, images overlap each other too. It depends upon the use and mood of the poet.

Metaphysical poets not only made use of images in their poems but what lent their poems an additional quality was their use of metaphysical conceit. You may be curious to know what after all a conceit is. The word 'Conceit' has been derived from Latin word *conceptus*, which means an idea or thought. As a literary term, the word conceit means a fairly elaborate figurative device of a fanciful kind which often comprises various figures of speech. The main aim of conceit is to surprise and delight the readers by a witty statement. Conceit became immensely popular in the hands of metaphysical poets who made excessive use of similes and metaphors in their poetry to surprise and delight their readers. The metaphysical school of poets used similes and metaphors by drawing far-fetched and remote images in their poetry. Dr. Johnson has defined conceit as a ploy to show 'occult resemblances in things apparently unlike'.

You will come across various examples of conceits when you go through the poems in the coming units prescribed for you. For example, Donne in his poems has made use of conceits, such as comparing lovers with the two legs of compass in the poem 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning' and lovers as hermit in 'The Canonization', and extolling the flea as 'marriage bed' and 'marriage temple' in the poem 'The Flea.' These are the classic examples of metaphysical conceits. Likewise, you will find Andrew

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Marvell making garden the classic abode of all lovers –human and divine and considering it more beautiful than all the worldly beauties. Abraham Cowley compares being in love with different women to travelling through different countries, as he says:

Hast thou not found each woman's breast  
(the land where thou hast travelled)  
Either by savages possest,  
or wild, and uninhabited?  
What joy could's't take, or what repose  
In countries so uncivilised as those?

### **6.5.2. OBSCURITY:**

The metaphysical poets are also famous for their use of obscure language. Since their images are far- fetched and remote, they use words which really require lot of comprehension. Most of the metaphysical poets were men of learning. They had access to various experiences and their intellectual debate, which you may find in most of the poems; enable them to retreat to the use of words from various sources, such as astronomy, theology, philosophy. You will come across various contrasts such as remote and the near, abstract and concrete, physical and spiritual, sublime and the commonplace. Most of these metaphysical, as Dr. Johnson said, 'were men of learning and hence they often endeavoured in showing their learning.' This quality, at times, made their poetry look new, but not natural. T.S. Eliot is of the opinion that in order to find the verbal equivalent for mind and feelings, they made themselves difficult to understand.

### **6.5.3. FIGURES OF SPEECH:**

The metaphysical poets made abundant use of figures of speech. There is no dearth of simile, metaphor, metonymy, alliteration, and personification in their poems. They are habituated to make even common things look special and special things look commonplace. In the famous poem, 'Song', Donne makes all sorts of impossible things to become possible yet he asserts that it is quite difficult to find a woman who is both beautiful and faithful. The poet says that one can catch a falling star and get a child with a mandrake root but one cannot find a beautiful and faithful woman. Towards the end of the poem, he says that despite someone undertaking a journey of ten years and yet if he found one such woman, she would turn faithless by the moment the poet went to find her living even at the next door. The poet says:

Yet she  
Will be  
False, ere I come, to two or three.

Likewise, Donne in another poem named 'The Flea' praises the small creature for its quality of unifying the lovers because of it sucking the blood first of his beloved and then of the poet. The poet calls the flea as the marriage bed and marriage temple. Donne tells

his beloved not to kill the flea since it accommodates three lives. The poet forbids his beloved not to kill the flea because it would be like self-murder. He says:

Though parents grudge, and you, we're met,  
And cloister'd in these living walls of jet.  
Though use make you apt to kill me,  
Let not to that self-murder added be,  
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

#### **6.5.4. LANGUAGE AND VERSIFICATION:**

The metaphysical poetry was a revolt against the popular Elizabethan poetry which was musical since most of the poets of that age were like singing birds. Donne and his followers brought a change by bringing new experiments in language and versification. You will find most of Donne's poems as metrical and there is smoothness in them. In many poems where the poet thinks, as readers you have to understand the sense to understand the metre. The metaphysical poets look for verbal equivalents for various emotional states and thus at times the language becomes archaic and strange. Donne was infamous for violating established rules of metre and at times his rhythms shocked his readers. Ben Johnson had remarked: "Donne for not keeping the accent deserved hanging."

Donne and his followers were adept at using paradox as a form of language in poetry. You might ask what actually paradox is. Paradox is a statement which seems on its face to be self-contradictory or absurd yet it turns out to have valid meaning. The metaphysical poets used paradox in both religious and secular forms. Talking about the language of paradox, Cleanth Brooks says: "We may permit it in epigram, a special sub-variety of poetry at all. Our prejudices force us to regard paradox as intellectual rather than emotional, clever rather than profound, rational rather than divinely irrational."

Donne uses paradox in most of his poems. While he calls profane love as divine love in 'The Canonization', he says:

We can die by it, if not live by love,  
And if unfit for tomb or hearse  
Our legend be, it will be fit for verse ;  
And if no piece of chronicle we prove,  
We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms ;

You will also come across the use of paradox in the poem 'Death, Be Not Proud' when the poet says:

One short sleep past, we wake eternally  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

Likewise, Andrew Marvell in the poem 'The Definition of Love' makes a paradoxical statement, saying:

For Fate with jealous eye does see  
Two perfect loves, nor lets them close;  
Their union would her ruin be,  
And her tyrannic power depose.

As you read further, you will come across many such examples.

#### **6.5.5. UNUSUAL OPENINGS:**

Since the metaphysical poets were making experiments and bringing a revolt against the existing tradition of poetry, you will find most of their poems beginning quite abruptly and on an unusual note. Let us take the first lines of some of the poems:

For God's sake, hold your tongue, and let me love. (The Canonization)

Where like a pillow on a bed (The Extasie)

Mark but this flea, and marke in this (The Flea)

The forward youth that would appear (Horatio Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland)

The poems begin in a colloquial manner and in many of them you may find that the poet is addressing someone. For example, in Marvell's poem 'The Definition of Love, it is not clear whether it is the poet's friend, beloved or somebody else who is addressed.

#### **6.5.6. USE OF WIT:**

The metaphysical poets were specialized in the use of wit in their poetry. Wit though generally considered to be an element that creates laughter, gained variety of meaning as it came to be used by poets. Wit, which once meant 'intelligence' became popular during seventeenth century because of its profound use by metaphysical poets. It was through with that these poets explored the medium of discovering brilliant and paradoxical style. Wit can be defined as a short verbal expression intentionally created to shock or surprise the readers. Pope described wit as 'being which has been often thought, but was never before so well expressed.' John Dryden had confessed of himself and his contemporaries that Donne excelled him and others in the use of wit but could not surpass in poetry.

Wit, according to Samuel Johnson was a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. Johnson further said about wit: 'the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their

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learning instructs, and their subtly surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased.' Donne is a master in the use of wit. He often surprises his readers with his wit, as in 'The Canonization, he says:

Wee can dye by it, if not live by love,  
And if unfit for tombes and hearse  
Our legend bee, it will fit for verse.

He uses wit by calling 'king's real' and his 'stamped face' too. Donne has also made adequate use of wit in the poem 'The Flea' and in 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning'. What can be more witty than calling the flea as 'a marriage bed' and 'marriage temple'.

### **6.5.7. INTELLECTUALISM AND ARGUMENTATION**

The metaphysical poets were men of learning. A reading of their poems hints that one can find all sorts of allusions in the poetry of Donne and Cowley. An average reader would find it quite difficult to unravel the references available in metaphysical poetry. Reading, of course, as you all will agree, enhances one's personality and enlightens even widely read people. But a reader of poetry is not supposed to know all the references nor can one have the patience to find out these references. Dr. Johnson remarked that the metaphysical poets 'sometime drew their conceits from recesses of learning not very much frequented by common readers of poetry.' Poetry is all about emotions and experiences but metaphysical poetry expects its reader to have a taste for intellectualism.

Donne and many of his followers load his poems with arguments galore. Like a lawyer Donne in the poem 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning' says that the lovers should not become unhappy when parting. And again in 'The Canonization', he says that true lovers are saints of love. Marvell, too, in the poem 'The Definition of Love' calls his love as something which is the conjunction of minds' and 'opposition of stars'. The poet says:

Therefore the love which us doth bind,  
But Fate so enviously debars,  
Is the conjunction of the mind,  
And opposition of the stars.

It is actually the argumentative quality of the metaphysical poets that lends them a unification of sensibility. Dr. Johnson's views in this regard are quite relevant to be mentioned: "No man could be born a metaphysical poet, nor assume the dignity of a writer, by descriptions copied from descriptions, by imitations borrowed from imitations, by traditional imagery and hereditary similes, by readiness of rhyme, and volubility." The metaphysical poets, despite their rugged verses and obscure ideas always seem new.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q1. What do you understand by metaphysical poetry?

Q2. Mention the features of metaphysical poetry?

Q3. Why do the metaphysical poets always appear new?

Q4. Define the following terms:

Imagery, metaphysical conceit, obscurity, wit

Q5. Give a brief sketch of any metaphysical poet you admire the most.

Q6. "The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour; but unluckily resolving to show it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry they only wrote verses, and very often such verses as stood the trial of the finger better than of the ear; for the modulation was so imperfect, that they were only found to be verses by counting the syllables."

Mention the name of the critic who remarked this? Also explain the meaning.

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### **6.6. LET US SUM UP**

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In this unit you were given the definition of Metaphysical Poetry. You were also introduced to the metaphysical poets and saw why they were called so. Some works of these poets were also taken up. You also learned the chief characteristics of this school of poetry.

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### **6.7. REFERENCES**

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Alexander, M. *Metaphysical Poets: York Notes Advanced*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India. Print.

Williamsin, George: *Six Metaphysical Poets: A Reader's Guide*. Syracuse University Press. Print.

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### **6.8. SUGGESTED READING**

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Alexander, M. *Metaphysical Poets: York Notes Advanced*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India. Print.

Williamsin, George: *Six Metaphysical Poets: A Reader's Guide*. Syracuse University Press. Print.

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### **6.9. TERMINAL AND MODEL QUESTIONS**

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Q1. Give the chief characteristics of Metaphysical School of Poetry.

Q2. Write short notes on the following:

(i) John Donne

(ii) Andrew Marvell

**UNIT 7 THE POEMS OF JOHN DONNE (1)**

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- 7.1. Introduction
- 7.2. Objectives
- 7.3. “Good Morrow”: Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 7.4. “The Extasie”
  - 7.4.1 Introduction
  - 7.4.2 Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 7.5. “The Song”
  - 7.5.1 Introduction
  - 7.5.2 Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 7.6. “The Flea”
  - 7.6.1 Introduction
  - 7.6.2 Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 7.7. “The Bait”
  - 7.7.1 Introduction
  - 7.7.2 Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 7.8. References
- 7.9. Suggested Reading
- 7.10. Terminal and Model Questions

**7.1. INTRODUCTION**

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In this unit you will read some of John Donne’s poems. The text of each poem. The poems are summarized for your understanding. Thereafter is given a critical appreciation of all the poems. The poems dealt with in this unit are “Good Morrow”, “The Extasie”, “Song”, “The Flea” and “The Bait”.

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**7.2. OBJECTIVES**

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In this unit you will

- Read some famous poems by John Donne
  - Be given a summary of Donne’s poems so that you understand what the poem is about.
  - Critically examine the poems
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**7.3. “Good Morrow”: Summary and Critical Appreciation**

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The first poem, “Good Morrow”, is about the unflinching love between the poet and his beloved. Donne in this poem asserts that love is a powerful force, a new knowledge, awareness from the ignorance. It is actually an oasis in a desert and the two lovers stand united devoid of worldly divisions and distances. True love can provide succour during times of crisis and make life a memorable experience even for others who can find inspirations galore.

In the very instance when you read the poem, you may find that the poet is pleading a case. But as you go through it, you will find there are many instances of the metaphysical elements which you have read in unit six. But before we appreciate the poem critically, let’s find out the meaning of the poem.

The poem is divided into three stanzas –all consisting of seven lines. The opening stanza of the poem gives the poet’s reminiscence of the past. The poet wonders why he couldn’t understand that all his days in the past, before the two lovers met, were simply wastage since they were separated. He admits that his past was an age of ignorance, of sleep, which blinded his vision. While they spent their days in childish pleasures, they were like seven sleepers who in their sleep of two hundred years were quite unaware of the real pleasures and moments that were yet undiscovered. The poet admits that though he longed for love and his desires also got fulfilled when he met some beautiful beloveds but all of them simply were the dream like reflections of his real beloved who was to be found in the form of his present beloved. Compared to his present state, the poet disparages his past as devoid of love and fulfilment.

In the second stanza the poet talks about the present state, which is a state of awareness, a new morning after the night’s travails. The lovers want to welcome the arrival of this new morning, whose benignities would enable them to forget the childish pleasures. Their souls are awakened now and they look at each other not in awe but out of the

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magnanimity of love. The lovers have discovered a new world which surpasses the geographical discoveries making the sea-discoverers busy in their search. The poet is pleased to have discovered his love, which is not only all-absorbing but also accommodating. Love has a controlling power and true love can make a vast world even in a small room. Donne very beautifully argues that a loving union is empowered enough to possess the world as a macrocosm even in a microcosm.

In the third stanza, the poet pleads how their true can become always dynamic and attain the status of immortality. The lovers can see each other's faces in their eyes which are the mirror of their hearts. True and plain hearts stay in faces. The faces of the lovers, according to the poet, are two hemispheres which are above the considerations of division and decline. The poet regards his love as an equal alchemy that defies the ravages of time. He asserts that something that dies was perhaps not mixed equally nor had the resistance to bear the odds. In this way, he considers his love as supreme and sublime.

*The Good Morrow*, thus, is Donne's love poem where he shows his argumentative ability and his propensity for the use of metaphysical imagery, wit and the unification of sensibility. While talking about love, the poet takes his readers to the world of allusions. The references to sea-discoveries, maps, hemispheres, declining west etc. lend not only variety to the ordinary thought but also attest to Donne's use of imagery, which have been called far-fetched by many of his critics. The shift from the past to the present and from the ordinary to the philosophic provides a movement to the poetic sensibility that John Donne excels at.

The poem also has Donne's characteristic style of beginning in the colloquial manner, which attracts the readers and startles at times to make them listen to the reasoning, which the poet adopts as a ploy to drive home his thoughts. Donne's language may appear difficult at times because of the spellings used yet the thoughts are presented in such a manner that it relaxes the readers and helps them extract the meaning. Grierson is all praise for Donne's variety of sources and hence the verbal relations in his poem offer intellectual food.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

- Q1. Give a critical appreciation of Donne's poem 'The Good Morrow'.
- Q2. Justify the title of the poem 'The Good Morrow.'
- Q3. Give examples of wit and imagery in Donne's poem 'The Good Morrow'.
- Q4. Explain the following lines and show the elements of metaphysical poetry in them:

'Twas so ; but this, all pleasures fancies be ;  
If ever any beauty I did see,  
Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.

b. My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,  
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest ;  
Where can we find two better hemispheres  
Without sharp north, without declining west ?  
Whatever dies, was not mix'd equally ;

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#### **7.4. “THE EXTASIE”**

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##### **7.4.1. Introduction**

The poem ‘The Extasie’ is once again a love poem by John Donne. While in the earlier poem, you read about the supremacy of love in a mundane world, the present poem will show you how Donne argues in favour of love not only being a sacrosanct and spiritual feeling but also something that is not devoid of physical passion. Love is spiritual, no doubt, but it is physical too. The sublimity in love cannot be attained by ignoring the claims of the body. Donne seems to be modern in this poem as he puts the logic that our souls are the ultimate goals and to attain the spiritual bliss, the journey has to be undertaken through our bodies. Our bodies, thus, are the mediums to our souls. If our soul is a pilgrimage, the pilgrims have to undergo the physical rigours. Human bodies, in this respect are mundane and act as purifiers so that the bliss of Eternity can be sought after. Donne seems to add his own alibi to the teachings of medieval thinkers who consider body as sensuous and sinuous acting as impediments in realising the spiritual fulfilment of the soul.

##### **7.4.2. Summary and Critical Appreciation:**

Let’s first try to understand the meaning of the title of the poem. The title of the poem has been taken from the Greek word ‘Ekstasis’, which means ‘to stand out’. The medieval and mystical notion of extasie is ‘a trance-like situation in which the soul leaves the body and communicates with the Divine or the Supreme. Donne in his poem too, makes the souls of the lovers come out of their bodies but in stead of communicating with the divine, they communicate with each other. Donne’s pre-occupation in this poem is to establish the fact that while the soul is supreme, the body is the medium, which leads to this supreme mansion.

The Extasie is long poem and has been considered one of the greatest of Donne’s love poems. An analysis of the poem would help you all to unravel the philosophy of Donne’s idea of love. The opening stanza of the poem provides a natural setting where the swollen river bank provides the pillow to the snuggling lovers who held their hands in each other’s and enjoyed the proximity of being the best for each other. The poet finds the lovers’ hands firmly cemented lest the worldly impediments should separate them. The act of gazing into each other’s eyes affirms the image of their love never to dwindle by the volatile conditions of the world.

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In this blissful state of love, the souls of the lovers escape from their bodies and Fate had yet to decide the victory. While their souls were out of their bodies, the lovers lay motionless, simply rejoicing in the proximity without exchanging any language. The language of love surpasses speech but is felt in the in-breathings of the body while the soul remains hung between the two. The souls of lovers, being equally matched like two armies seemed to hold negotiations while the lovers remained unmoved and still. The soul of the lovers, unmindful of bodies, perfected in ennobling the love to a state of its being spiritual, where bodies mattered less.

The two souls in a blissful state became so engrossed that they spoke the same language. Their union had reached the state of ecstasy where the question of sex did not matter. It was for the first time that the lovers experienced the reality that love was purely a question of the soul and not of the body. Humans are unmindful of the various qualities that our souls possess. When love brings two souls together, it brings a sort of re-animation and provides a new blend just like the transplantation of a violet develops in strength, colour and size. This gives birth to a new soul providing authenticity and stability which can remove the strains of loneliness. The unification of two souls, thus, becomes an added strength and provides variety and also helps overcome the deficiency if any in either soul.

The knowledge that we are the new soul makes us realize that we are composed of various components which grow and improve with time; this soul is not subject to change. The poet laments at the realization that humans are under the impression that the body and the soul are two distinct entities. The poet refers to Ptolemy's astronomical belief and Elizabethan's doctrine that favoured the supremacy of intelligence, i.e. souls over bodies. According to Ptolemy, there was an inter-relationship between 'Concentric Sphere' and 'Intelligences' 'Intelligences were invisible and unsubstantial spirits which remained in the spheres. Donne opposes the view that souls are free to move out. Instead, he regards souls to be bound with the bodies in which the respective bodies are the spheres and their souls the intelligences. The Body cannot be denied its claims. It is actually our bodies which prompt us to understand the various urges. The poet tells humans to be thankful to the bodies which generate in us varieties of feelings. Our bodies should not be considered dross rather they are the alloys, which, if mixed with gold, not only makes it scintillate more but also provides more reliability. Likewise, bodies help in refining and providing alchemy in association with the soul. Therefore, the claims of the body must not be ignored.

Donne refers to the astrological belief that the influence of heavenly bodies works on man. This influence affects the soul of man through the medium of air. Hence the soul touches through the medium of the body. While the union of lovers materialises through the convergence of two souls, the role of the body in affecting the soul cannot be denied. Again the poet talks about the physiological belief which considers blood to purify spirits in order to give commands to our souls. Thus, the working of these spirits depends upon the union of the body and the soul together. Neither the body nor the soul in isolation can make us man.

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According to the physiological belief, the blood produced three kinds of spirits, namely natural, vital and animal. The possibility of such spirits, thus, without the importance of body, which runs with the help of blood cannot be thought of. It is human body that creates desires of all kinds and hence humans in general and lovers in particular must realize the validity of the body. The poet makes a strong appeal to lovers to make a cold realization of the bodily sensations. The body is a medium which communicates with the soul. For the soul to reveal its benignities, the body's claims have to be responded. Otherwise, it would appear like a prince imprisoned. An imprisoned entity cannot reveal the true message, however great it is.

Having realized the importance of the body in providing the basis for the spiritual union, the poet observes humans' return to their bodies. As humans, we quite often fail to understand the mysteries of love. The mysteries of love can be found in souls but not without the participation of the body. It is the body that preserves the secrets of love and love can be expressed through the body and can culminate in the soul.

The poet finally asserts that if any lover, like the poet and his beloved has heard such a proposition, he should observe no change when they go back to their bodies.

Thus, after reading this poem you will find that Donne, despite referring to various sources, and various opposite views, presents and fuses it with his own to come to a conclusion. The mingling of the medieval and the modern may appear at times intricate yet it conforms to the qualities of metaphysical poetry. We have found that while the poem begins on a natural note, it augments further and touches upon astrological, physiological, and philosophical beliefs. In addition, Donne uses the scientific approach and becomes rational in prescribing the relationship between the body and the soul and thus furthering in the formation of human personality. The use of various conceits makes the poem a typical metaphysical poetry. James Reeves has rightly called it 'a great metaphysical poem in which there is a perfect reconciliation of the spiritual and the physical.' Donne, according to Joan Bennet, opposed the medieval view of the sinfulness of sex. Her views about 'The Extasie' are worth mentioning: 'The Extasie', as in so many of his serious love poems, is that a man and a woman united by love may approach perfection more nearly than either could do alone:

A single violet transplant,  
The strength, the colour, and the size—  
All which before was poor and scant—  
Redoubles still, and multiplies.

When love with one another so  
Interanimates two souls,  
That abler soul, which thence doth flow,  
Defects of loneliness controules.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q1. Give a summary of the poem 'The Extasie'.

Q2. Comment on the significance of the title 'The Extasie'.

Q3. Find out various metaphysical conceits used in the poem 'The Extasie'.

Q4. Explain with reference to the context:

(i) A single violet transplant,

The strength, the colour, and the size—

All which before was poor and scant—

Redoubles still, and multiplies.

(ii) To our bodies turn we then, that so

Weak men on love reveal'd may look ;

Love's mysteries in souls do grow,

But yet the body is his book.

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**7.5. "SONG"**

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**7.5.1. Introduction**

In the previous poem, you read about Donne's argument of the bodily union of the lovers in order to reach perfection in love. But the poem that you are going to read now, you will find Donne showing his utter disregard for the woman.

John Donne, a writer of love-lyrics often startles his readers by his queer and strange arguments. The poem 'Song' is a classic case of Donne's pessimism as far as his attitude towards women is concerned. While the poet in 'The Extasie' sings of the glorious significance of the body in culminating the spiritual satisfaction in love, he makes quite a contradictory statement in the poem 'Song' where he says that it is quite impossible to get a woman who is both beautiful and faithful. Many critics consider Donne's observation as based on his personal experience, namely of his failure in love. But the poem as a whole may appear as Donne's reaction to Petrarchan convention which adored women and heaped on them all sorts of praises.

**7.5.2. Summary and Critical Appreciation:**

The poem opens with impossibilities of all kinds. The poet tells the readers that they can find all sorts of impossible things save a woman who is true and fair. He names all sorts of impossible things, such as catching a falling star, getting a child with a mandrake root

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or even the knowledge of the passage of all past years. In addition, one can also discover who cleft the Devil's foot. It is, of course, difficult to catch a falling star in the same way as begetting a child on the forked root of the mandrake plant. Mandrake has human qualities and hence one can think of begetting a child on the mandrake root. Moreover, the poet also asks the readers if they could teach him to hear mermaids singing, a thing often impossible. It is also difficult for humans to forbear the sting of envy and to find the wind that helps a man become honest. While these impossibilities can become possible yet finding a woman who is true and fair is the most impossible thing.

The poet is so much soaked in his observation that he cannot be lured even by strange sights and invisible things. He later says that one can make rare feats and still one would, at the end of his adventure, will tell the same thing as not finding a woman true and fair. He tells his readers that people eager of making adventure may spend ten thousand nights and days till they grow old and yet on their return will come up with all strange wonders except finding a beautiful woman full of integrity.

Donne calls the journey of finding a faithful woman a pilgrimage and which one would love to undertake. Such a woman deserves praise and adoration. Still the poet is rigid in his opinion and he cannot believe any such woman to exist on earth. He thinks of the possibility of such a woman to live at his next door still he cannot believe her to be true. He further says that she might be true when one met her and wrote letter but might have turned false to two or three lovers, before the poet went to meet her.

The poet is determined in his opinion about women in general. He is of the view that they cannot be relied upon. Their natures are full of inconstancy and they can cheat men at the slightest chance. Donne's condemnation of women is the result of his bitter experiences of his own life. He charges women to be full of treachery and hence has used varieties of mythical references which cannot be true. The reference to 'child with mandrake root', 'mermaids singing', 'Devil's cleft foot' not only provide mythical connotations but also allows the poet to make use of dissimilar images. The use of hyperbolic language in the poem relaxes the atmosphere of hatred to a great extent yet the readers cannot save themselves from the poet's pessimistic attitude towards women.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q1. Give a critical appreciation of the poem 'Song'.

Q2. Mention the various impossible things that the poet thinks can become possible.

Q3. Trace the references of 'mandrake with a child's root' and 'devil's foot'.

Q4. Do you think that the poet expresses his own frustration in love through the poem 'Song'?

Q5. Explain the following :

a. Such a pilgrimage were sweet;

Yet do not, I would not go,

Though at next door we might meet

- b. Though she were true, when you met her,

And last, till you write your letter,

Yet she

Will be

False, ere I come, to two or three.

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## **7.6. “FLEA”**

### **7.6.1. Introduction**

‘The Flea’ is once again a manifestation of Donne’s metaphysical poem where the poet exemplifies his imaginative power and his logical argument in a manner that startles his readers. The poet considers flea as a symbol of his unification with his beloved who did not grant him favours because of certain social hindrances. The poet gives an imaginative touch to the sucking of a flea and makes seductive approaches to her beloved in order to satisfy his longings. The poem is written in a typical argumentative, colloquial and abrupt manner but the emotional appeals make the poem remarkable. The need of the body as discussed in the poem ‘The Extasie’ gets once again a hearing and the poet succeeds in merging the physical with the spiritual.

Flea was much popular during the Renaissance and the poets often attempted amorous poems on this subject. The poets often wrote about the jealousy for flea which was more fortunate to have a free access to the beloved’s bodies than their lovers. Donne also follows the same line of argument but immortalises the flea by granting it a very respectable position.

### **7.6.2. Summary and Critical Appreciation:**

The poem begins with an address to the beloved and seems to be conversational though the beloved does not seem to be present on the occasion. The lover-poet, who seems to be devoid of the beloved’s favour, to his advances, bares his heart and gives a harangue to seduce her. The tone of the poem is dramatic and the poet requests his beloved to take the flea carefully. While the beloved failed to grant the lover’s advances, the flea, in turn, became fortunate enough to get this favour. The flea sucked the beloved’s blood and then it sucked the lover’s body, which resulted in the mingling of their blood. Thus, the poet tells the beloved that the mingling of their bloods cannot be considered a sin, a shame or of the loss of her virginity. The Flea, thus, enjoyed the beloved’s body without any wooing, a state not granted to the lover. The swollen body of the flea is the result of the

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mingling of the two lover's bloods. The flea is fortunate and blessed as compared with human beings who often face various onslaughts in the path of their love.

The poet tells the beloved not to kill the flea as the flea has become sacrosanct since it contains the blood of both the partners. Moreover, the flea symbolizes the union of the two. The flea, according to the poet, is the marriage temple and marriage bed. The bloods of the lovers create a mixture in the flea's body and it is associated with the carnal drama that humans often enjoy in a marriage. While the social restrictions and the beloved's reluctance couldn't grant the lover this blissful state, the flea provided the medium of their meeting. The rendezvous granted by the flea amid its sheltered walls has made the meeting a celebration. Like all other humans, often habituated of killing the flea, the poet fears her beloved too to take such a drastic step. The poet forbids the beloved to kill the flea as it will lead to a cold-blooded murder. The killing of the flea will be a triple murder as the flea encompasses three bodies. The beloved will kill the lover, her own self and also the flea, and thus, it would also be a sort of suicide.

The third stanza of the poem shows the action taken by the beloved. The poet asks his beloved the reason behind the killing of the flea. Calling the beloved's act as cruel and premature, the poet charges her with purpling her nails with the innocent murder of the flea. The flea's only guilt was its sucking a drop of her blood. The poet derides humans at their heroism for killing a harmless creature. The poet wants his beloved to learn a lesson from her triumph as she finds neither loss, nor any weakness either on the side of her own or her lover for killing the flea. The poet very persuasively tells his beloved that since she did not lose any honour either in allowing her blood to be sucked by the flea or killing it, she should discard all fears and submit to her lover's advances.

The poem is remarkable for its emotional appeal and its argumentative ability. Donne has made a subtle use of conceit in this poem. He has compared the body of the flea to a marriage temple and bridal bed. Moreover, the associative value of the flea with human emotions lends the poem an additional charm. The poem is also exemplary in its manifestation of realism and seems to discard the notion that body is ignoble and the soul is supreme. Love is not a forbidden but a blessed fruit which requires the nourishment of longing and ripening of feelings.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q1. Give a critical appreciation of John Donne's poem 'The Flea'.

Q2. Why does the poet call the flea a marriage temple?

Q3. Trace the elements of dramatic poetry in 'The Flea'.

Q4. Explain the following lines of the poem:

- (a). Thou know'st that this cannot be said  
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead ;  
Yet this enjoys before it woo,

And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two ;

And this, alas ! is more than we would do.

(b) This flea is you and I, and this

Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is.

Though parents grudge, and you, we're met,

And cloister'd in these living walls of jet.

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### **7.7. "THE BAIT"**

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#### **7.7.1. Introduction**

The poem 'The Bait' composed by John Donne is a love poem which reminds readers of Christopher Marlowe's poem 'The passionate Shepherd to his Love'. The beginning lines of Donne's poem resembles Marlowe's but as the poem advances, the appeal changes. Marlowe's poem is soaked in romanticism and is more an invocation yet the note of idealism in it crosses all boundaries. On the other hand, Donne's poem offers a cynical realism as the critics point out.

Donne, the leader of metaphysical school of poetry also appeals his beloved to come and enjoy her time with him but towards the end of his poem, he ably proves his point that women are enticing and have in them the powers galore to attract men.

#### **7.7.2. Summary and Critical Appreciation:**

'The Bait' is a poem of seven stanzas – all comprising four lines each. The first three stanzas are very charming as they present the beautiful aura which can lure his beloved to come and become his love. The poet avidly insists his beloved to come to live with him so that they could prove some new pleasures 'of golden sands, and 'crystal brooks; with silken lines, and silver hooks'. The poet hints at the act of fishing by using words such as golden sands and silver hooks. The mention of the fish imagery is carried further in the second and third stanza too.

The poet tells his beloved that her presence will enable the river to create whispering sounds and there will be an atmosphere of attraction. The light of her eyes will fail the sun and the fish will stay charmed by her beauty. Actually, the fish will find themselves in a quandary if they could betray the bewitching influence of the poet's beloved. The poet dexterously compares women to the bait and men to the fish. Women have the power to seduce men in the game of love and men have always proved vulnerable in this sport.

In the third stanza, the poet tells his beloved that in the event of her swimming in the river, there will be a contest among fish to swim to her. In truth, the poet believes that her enticing beauty will act as a bait to trap fish and as a result, every fish will contend with each other to catch her. Women are more captivating than men and hence men throng to them and not the vice versa.

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The poet further tells the beloved that her beauty has the capability to tarnish the beauty of the heavenly bodies. The poet becomes a bit hyperbolic in comparing the beauty of the women to the heavenly bodies like the sun or the moon. The poet is so much charmed by her beauty that he won't love to see the light either of the sun or the moon. The beloved, i.e. the bait will create a competition for her wooers, the men, the fish.

The game of fishing requires adequate patience. The bait's appearance in the water bamboozles many fishes, who though curious to bite the bait, often get hurt with the angling reeds and shells and weeds. The poet extends the fish metaphor further by bringing in the implication of the sensual drama and also the power play enacted during fishing.

The poet talks about the betrayal of the fish at the alluring nature of the bait and often feels overthrown despite its strangling snare on window net. The fish feels exhausted in this game and is often found bedded towards the bank of the river. Donne tells his beloved that she doesn't need such betrayal as she herself is her own bait. The beauty of women in all ages have seduced men and one who is not caught by the charms of a woman, will of course, be wiser than the poet.

The poet in Donne is all praise for women's beauty and love but often looks at their love with suspicion. It is quite remarkable to note that while Marlowe's poem, which begins much like Donne's, the former, has been charged with idealizing love. Many critics have found Donne's argument as cynically realistic though as readers we cannot deny the blend of both harsh and soft words making the poem metaphysical in its treatment. At a larger level, Donne's poem expresses the futility of love though in the most philosophical manner.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q1. The content of Donne's poem 'The Bait' is nothing sort of a philosophical argument on love. Judge.

Q2. Explain the fish imagery used in the poem 'The Bait'.

Q3. Why does the poet say that his beloved 'need'st no such deceit'?

Q4. Explain the following lines:

(i) If thou, to be so seen, be'st loth,  
By sun or moon, thou dark'nest both,  
And if myself have leave to see,  
I need not their light, having thee.

b. For thee, thou need'st no such deceit,  
For thou thyself art thine own bait :

That fish, that is not catch'd thereby,  
Alas ! is wiser far than I.

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**7.8. REFERENCES**

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Alexander, M. *Metaphysical Poets: York Notes Advanced*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India. Print.

Williamsin, George: *Six Metaphysical Poets: A Reader's Guide*. Syracuse University Press. Print.

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**7.9. SUGGESTED READING**

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Alexander, M. *Metaphysical Poets: York Notes Advanced*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India. Print.

Williamsin, George: *Six Metaphysical Poets: A Reader's Guide*. Syracuse University Press. Print.

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**7.10. TERMINAL AND MODEL QUESTIONS**

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Q1. Critically examine the following poems:

“The Extasie”

“The Flea”

Q2. Summarize the following poems in your own words:

“Song”

“The Bait”

**UNIT 8: THE POEMS OF JOHN DONNE (2)**

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- 8.1. Introduction
- 8.2. Objectives
- 8.3. “Twickenham Garden”
  - 8.3.1 Introduction
  - 8.3.2 Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 8.4. “The Canonization”
  - 8.4.1 Introduction
  - 8.4.2 Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 8.5. “Death Be Not Proud”
  - 8.5.1 Introduction
  - 8.5.2 Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 8.6. “Thou Hast Made Me”
  - 8.6.1 Introduction
  - 8.6.2 Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 8.7. “Batter My Heart”
  - 8.7.1 Introduction
  - 8.7.2 Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 8.8. References
- 8.9. Suggested Reading
- 8.10. Terminal and Model Questions

**8.1. INTRODUCTION**

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In the previous unit you were introduced to five of Donne's poems. By now you must have got an idea about the poetic style of the Metaphysical Poets in general and John Donne in particular. This unit is a continuation of the previous unit. It will cover the remaining poems of John Donne namely, "Twickenham Garden", "The Canonization", "Death Be Not Proud", "Thou Hast Made Me" and "Batter My Heart". By a careful examination of these poems you will develop a deeper understanding to the poems of the poet.

**8.2. OBJECTIVES**

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In this unit

- (i) You will be introduced to some other famous poems of John Donne
- (ii) You will be given a summary of these poems so that you understand the central idea of these poems
- (iii) This unit will critically examine the poems so that you develop a critical insight to understanding and appreciating poetry.

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**8.3. "TWICKENHAM GARDEN"**

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**8.3.1. Introduction**

John Donne has been considered a misogynist by many of his readers and critics. His views about women are rather harsh and he has made adverse remarks about them in many of his poems. The poem *Twickenham Garden* too is one such composition which describes Donne's over generalization about all women.

The poem 'Twickenham Garden' is a record of the poet's grieved heart. This garden was the place where Lucy, the countess of Bedford lived. The poet considered Lucy his patroness and nourished an illusion of being in love. Since there was no warm response in this love, it affected the poet badly and he ran into despair. It is this suffering of love that prompted poet to compose the poem 'Twickenham Garden'. The poet drew the conclusion that all women of the world were false.

**8.3.2. Summary and Critical Appreciation**

The poem 'Twickenham Garden' consists of three stanzas and each stanza is a manifestation of the poet's hurts. While the poet depicts the surrounding of the garden, which despite, having a rich flora and fauna offers him no relief. He, being full of sighs and enveloped by tears, had come to seek a new life in the garden. Longing to get a relief in the springy joys of the flower, he had hoped the ambience to act as a soothing balm that could have cured his maladies. It proves rather disappointing to the poet that the beauties of the garden or even Nature too cannot cure his broken heart. But he himself admits that the fault did not lie in the garden but in him. He had a loving heart and love was the chief cause of all his sufferings. The poet considers love to be poisonous and

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foresees it to convert even manna to gall. The Twickenham garden was like the paradise but the serpent that the poet had brought had destroyed everything. The use of the word serpent is a reference to the temptation of Eve that brought mortality to the world. Moreover, the poet also intends to say that the beauties of the external world cannot be enjoyed unless we are at peace from inside.

The poet expresses his jealousy with Nature in the second stanza. His aggrieved soul makes him so cynical that he wants nothing but destruction all around. He wishes winter to destroy the beauty of the entire garden so that he could feel more wholesome. He further wishes the frost to stop the trees from laughing and mocking at his face. The natural growth of the trees and the blooming of the flowers seem to mock at his sorrow. He longs to be changed to a senseless object so that he may not feel further disgraced. He prays to the Almighty to make him mandrake or a stone fountain so that he could rue his own doomed fate.

While the poet expresses a note of personal despair in the second stanza, he seeks for other lovers' help to bring him out of his emotional avalanche. He calls other lovers to come to him with crystal vials to fetch his tears, which are the wine of love. He calls them to carry his vial of tears to their home and compare the taste of these tears with the tears of their beloveds. He is quite confident that the tears of their beloved won't taste alike since all of them are false. Donne makes use of a wit here. He says that women's thoughts cannot be judged by their tears since they have two faces. They often hide their real emotions and hence they cannot be judged by the shining in their eyes. The poet castigates women for their hideous looks and calls them false. He is determined that his beloved alone is true in this world. But the problem is her truth, which has caused him much suffering. In a world where all women are false, his beloved's loyalty in her love to someone is the cause enough to kill him.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q1. Give a summary of the poem 'Twickenham Garden'.

Q2. Why does the poet Donne call all women as false?

Q3. Do you agree with the view that Donne was a woman hater? Give a reasoned answer.

Q4. Mention the use of metaphors and wit in the poem 'Twickenham Garden'.

(i) Explain the following lines :

- 1.1. Hither with crystal phials, lovers, come,  
And take my tears, which are love's wine,  
And try your mistress' tears at home,  
For all are false, that taste not just like mine.

Alas !hearts do not in eyes shine,

Nor can you more judge women's thoughts by tears,  
Than by her shadow what she wears.

O perverse sex, where none is true but she,  
Who's therefore true, because her truth kills me.

1.2. Love, let me  
Some senseless piece of this place be;  
Make me a mandrake, so I may grow here,  
Or a stone fountain weeping out my year.

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## **8.4. “THE CANONIZATION”**

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### **8.4.1. Introduction**

You have read in the previous poem about the pining of the poet for his beloved. Actually, Donne believed love to be a potion that is both a giver and taker of life. Love is the basis of all joys and the deprivation of love becomes the source of all suffering. Love faces various onslaughts yet true love stands like a polar star, a guide to the wandering ships. True love has witnessed opposition in all ages and has passed acid tests.

The title of the poem ‘The Canonization’ may make you eager enough to know the meaning. You will find that while poems are short literary compositions, at times, the title of the poem provides you some hint so that you can guess the content underlying in the poem. The word ‘canonize’ means to declare a dead person a saint in formal church procedure. Hence, in connection with Donne’s poem, as we read and analyse the lines, we would find that the poet wants true lovers to be considered canonized in love, if not in this life, then the life hereafter.

In the present poem, the poet wonders why the world is against the love of two kindred souls. He wants people to mind their businesses than putting impediments in the path of true lovers. People world over are busy either making money or earning fame by carrying out various tasks that could not be called noble. Yet they are not able to bear two lovers, who devoid of all worldly possessions, simply want to express their love for each other. While their love does not break the bindings established by the society, it appears quite paradoxical to the poet to see the world posing problems in the path of two lovers who are quite saintly and want to prove their divine love for each other.

### **8.4.2. Summary and Critical Appreciation**

The poem ‘The Canonization’ is a love poem where the poet seems quite optimistic in his expression of love. In this poem, the poet shows his anger with the outside world that creates difficulties in the path of his love. The poet begins the poem by addressing an unnamed listener, who too, can be considered to represent the group of people infamous

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for creating rumours by way of their unjustified counselling or observations. The poet calls such people to stop their tongue and let him love his beloved. Since the poet is neither palsy-shaken nor gout-ridden, it would be useless for such people to stop his natural urges and dissuade him from love-making. Such people who give him suggestions do not understand the worth of their time, which according to the poet, can be used in acquiring knowledge or improving their economic conditions. The poet offers such people numerous ways to improve their fortune. They can take a course and also pay their obeisance to the king to make their life secure. But they should not waste their time by disturbing the poet in his love-making.

In the second stanza, the poet wonders whether his love could damage any one in the least or create any havoc to the goings-on of the world. He tells the big-mouthed people that he could be brought to the book if his love has injured anyone. The sighs of his love do not invoke any natural catastrophe. The poet is proud of his love, which is above the petty considerations of the world that is busy in crass commercialism. Quite argumentatively, the poet says that since his love has neither drowned any ships nor his tears overflowed the earth, any attempt to dissuade him from love-making will be considered foul. His love has a soothing and softening quality and is not soaked in attritions of war nor in quarrels. In addition, he also asks the world if his love has delayed the arrival of spring or passage of winter. The poet intends to emphasize that his love affects himself and not the world. Despite his advances in love, the soldiers and the lawyers continue to thrive in their profession. When the quality of his love is so harmless, he should be allowed to love.

The poet allows people to call him whatever they like. He won't be unnerved to be appended with various adjectives the people use for him. Actually, the poet and the beloved have been made so because of love. People may extract delight in calling the poet and his beloved fleas, tapers and even the eagle and the dove. The poet is happy to note that his unification with his beloved has been granted even by people's derisive and sardonic comments. Both the lovers have burnt each other in love and appear illuminated. The poet says that their love has a phoenix-like quality. And as such, the phoenix riddle can be understood well by their love. They are like the phoenix birds who take birth again even from the ashes. The example of sacrifice set forth by their love can enable others to unravel the mystery of love.

The poet further says that their love has an optimistic quality. He doesn't seem to be disheartened by the worldly disapprovals. The lovers may not be united as per the dictates of society; still they can triumph by dying in their love. They may not be recognized by being inscribed in tombs or memoirs yet they are hopeful to find room in verses composed by poets. The poet even does not want history to remember their words by recording them in chronicles or by people making monuments. He shows great satisfaction in being the part of love-lyrics and the sonnets. The sonnets are like small well-wrought urns or vases, as good for burial as a big monument spread over half an acre. Love does not require geographical spaces or palatial buildings to prove its worth rather the poet would be satisfied to be remembered in poetry, which can enable them to

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be remembered as saints of love. True love is like a prayer and is thus not devoid of divinity.

The last stanza acts as a conclusive remark drawn by poet's argumentation in the previous stanzas. The poet is of the view that once their love is canonized, the devotees of love will throng to them. The poet's love with his beloved will be treated as a pilgrimage where both the lovers will find the image of the entire world in their eyes. The poet seems to console all those aggrieved souls by saying that love is a source of peace. Being a little personal, he says that while for others, love may be the cause of suffering but for him, it is a mansion of peace. Hence, their love will be regarded as divine and the poet and his beloved will be treated as peace emissaries. All the lovers of the world will rush to them to pray to God on their behalf and persuade the Almighty to send them a pattern of their love. The poet and his beloved's unified love will act as a guiding force to the worldly lovers who often deviate from their path and take different routes.

Donne's poem 'The Canonization' is a perfect example of love poem that conforms to devotion and dedication in love. The poet wants love to guide people and also wishes everyone's love to be successful. This can be achieved by making one's love confined not only to the body but also expand to the spirit. Love has an immense potential and can overcome all barriers to become exemplary. The poet has used conceits and the imagery is rich by all standards. While the poet talks about love, references to church and Christian faith provide ample thought to readers.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q1.Explain the following lines:

(i) Alas !alas! who's injured by my love?

What merchant's ships have my sighs drown'd?  
Who says my tears have overflow'd his ground?  
When did my colds a forward spring remove?

(ii) The phoenix riddle hath more wit  
By us ; we two being one, are it ;  
So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit.  
We die and rise the same, and prove  
Mysterious by this love.

Q2.Give a critical commentary of the poem 'The Canonization'.

Q3. The poem 'The Canonization' has a note of optimism in it. Examine.

Q4. The poem 'The Canonization' abounds in the use of paradox and wit.

**8.5. “DEATH BE NOT PROUD”**

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**8.5.1. Introduction**

You may wonder to find John Donne not merely as a love poet but also as one who wrote on death, religion and also various aspects of life. Actually, Donne’s life, as you have read in the previous unit, had various ups and downs. Poetry, for Donne, can also be understood as a po to ease off the tensions and the tribulations he suffered from.

The poem ‘Death, be not Proud’ has been taken from Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* composed during 1609-17. Holy Sonnets comprise nineteen poems bordering on doubt and intense frustration which the poet experienced because of the ban on his entry into the church.

The poem addressed to death talks about various faces of death that humans often come across in their real life. The poet argues that death should be proud since in our everyday life, we, too, come across the reflections of death. Death is real and hence it should feel empowered and proud since it has the quality of depriving people of the pleasures of life.

**8.5.2. Summary and Critical Appreciation**

‘Death Be Not Proud’, a holy sonnet consists of fourteen lines. A sonnet, as you all know, consists of an octave and a sestet. An octave has eight lines and the sestet has six lines. The poet addresses Death not to be proud enough since many people of the world the world calls it so, appended it with adjectives like mighty and dreadful. Death is neither mighty not dreadful. Donne disparages Death’s might and calls it a destroyer. It overthrows the life of people in a merciless manner. Death may think of killing people and terminating them from the worldly joys. Yet the poet says that death is simply a killing of the body and bones. Death cannot deprive humans of sleep and rest. Since rest and sleep provide a greater relief than the noises of the world, humans are habituated to enjoy peace during sleep. Hence, death provides much pleasure and yet more lies in store. How can death be proud when it terminates the lives of virtuous people on earth? Death releases humans from the mundane affairs of life and provides them greater comfort in the form of rest. It is only the collapse of the body and the bones. With every death on earth, souls undertake the journey of the Eternity.

Death, according to the poet, is not independent and free. It is a slave to fate, chance, kings and desperate men. Donne, being witty, takes a dig on people’s reliance on fate and chance. He might also be ironical of the cruel orders of kings to execute people to death. The reference to Death being slave to term ‘desperate men’ may hint at the heinous crime of suicide. Death cannot have its own command since it also has to obey the instructions of various factors such as, poison, war and diseases. Death is servile to numberless situations as well. And hence, death should be proud as it is only an agent to the dictates of God. The poet tells death not to be proud because it does not have the quality of providing relief which many intoxicants can. There are numerous drugs that can induce sleep and that too without any sudden stroke. Death can make us sleep only for a short while and we can get up refreshed. We sleep to wake up again in a new world—full of possibilities. Death is only a fright that restricts us from enjoying the pleasures of the

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world. One should have a fearless determination to fight and overthrow death. Death itself will die and be defeated before the determination and realization of mankind.

The poem is paradoxical in the sense that the poet seeks optimism even in the face of death. Death is a certainty, no doubt, but it should be considered simply as the termination of our body. The soul never dies rather it seeks its shelter in a new world after our bodies collapse.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q1. Write a summary of the poem 'Death Be not Proud.'

Q2. Explain the use of paradox in the poem 'Death Be not Proud.'

Q3. Why does the poet say that Death will die?

Q4. Explain the following lines and find out the use of figures of speech in them:

(i) Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill mee.  
From rest and sleepe, which but thy pictures bee,  
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee doe goe,  
Rest of their bones, and soules deliverie.

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### **8.6. "THOU HAST MADE ME"**

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#### **8.6.1. Introduction**

You have already read in the previous chapter about the poet's longing for God's grace. While the previous poem was about the poet's attempts to discard death, the present poem shows his total commitment to God. The poet talks about the wounds and the injuries that human beings on earth often have to face. He is of the view that our worldly stay makes us polluted because of the earthly temptation and longing for carnal satisfaction. But as one prepares for one's spiritual journey, the sins of the past life often start haunting. It becomes an impediment and hence man's pining for redemption begins.

The poem 'Thou Hast made me' has been taken from Donne's *Holy Sonnets* and expresses the poet's pining for receiving God's grace. *Holy Sonnets* comprise nineteen poems bordering on doubt and intense frustration which the poet experienced because of the ban on his entry into the church.

The poem is in the form of an argument and the final lines of the couplet express the poet's unshaken belief in the Almighty.

#### **8.6.2. Summary and Critical Appreciation**

John Donne's poem 'Thou Hast made me' is a sonnet which unveils the poet's pining for God's grace. As you have read earlier, Donne's personal life was full of thorns because of his religious preferences. As a Catholic, he received all sorts of suffering and then he

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converted himself. Still he was not at peace. Most of the pieces of his *Holy Sonnets* are his profound meditations and his submission to God. He was of the belief that God only had the magnetic power to call his disciples to Heaven.

Donne shows his intimacy towards God in the very first line since he opens the poem with an address and says—Thou hast made me. All of us, in fact, are the creations of Almighty. Donne also admits that since he was made by God, it is only His right to let him decay. He asserts that God won't let his creatures decay. Admitting his own fault that enabled him to be worldly, he says that his soul too had been corrupt because of his participation in the mundane affairs of life. As his earthly existence is going to be over, he comes with a painful realization that he is approaching death. He has only some days left and he can listen to the impending and speedy wings of Death. But he fears that his soul won't be able to reach Heaven since he couldn't utilise the blessed life that he had been given. He prays to God to repair him as there are several wounds on his soul.

The poet admits that while in his earthly stay, he enjoyed all the pleasure but now they are the moments of past. He has, of late, realized that they were transitory moments. Humans often become oblivious of Death and get themselves involved in monetary and momentary pleasures. All the pleasures of the past fall heavy on him now and he faces despair. Yet he feels himself advancing towards death, which is a release. But the poet is grieved to realize that his death too won't release him since he has a tormented soul. The worldly temptations in the form of bodily cravings and materialistic pleasures have sealed his soul. Now when his body has become feeble, he can understand the importance of the purity of the soul. But the dominant cravings of the body have affected his soul so badly that it has become difficult to get salvation without the blessings of God.

The poet makes a proper estimation of his life himself and asserts that he has wasted his time and opportunity and hence his soul will be taken to hell. He fears the advancing wings of Devil and knows well that the doors of Heaven are closed for him. Yet he knows that God can relent and forgive the sins of his disciple. While the poet moves between pessimism and optimism throughout the poem, he ends the poem on an optimistic note. He is confident that God won't let his work go waste and will come to the aid of his disciple. The poet wants God to give him one chance to wash away his sins and that is possible only when the Almighty casts his benign look on him. Donne prays to God to allow him to look towards his humble kingdom, which once again raises his hope of recovery.

Through this sonnet, the poet also wants to convey the message that humans on this earth are engrossed in a perpetual battle between the good and the evil. But the tragedy is that the evil often overweighs the good and causes disappointments and despair. We have to get disillusioned in order to know the inevitable truth that the abode of God doesn't allow entry to the wrong doers. God is merciful but his disciples need to be humble and they have to fear His wrath. The poet is hopeful that his sins will be forgiven. He prays God to shower His grace on him and draw his iron heart even adamantly. God's will to accept his disciple can enable the poet to undertake his spiritual journey in the right direction.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

- Q1. What is a sonnet? Why Donne's sonnets are called Holy Sonnets?
- Q2. What is the theme of John Donne's Holy Sonnets? Are they based on Donne's personal experiences?
- Q3. Give a critical appreciation of the poem 'Thou Hast made me'? Why should this poem be called a sonnet?
- Q4. Explain the following with reference to the context:

- (i) I dare not move my dim eyes any way,  
Despair behind and Death before doth cast  
Such terror, and my feeble flesh doth waste  
By sin in it, which it towards Hell doth weigh.
- (ii) Thy grace may wing me to prevent his art,  
And Thou like adamant draw mine iron heart

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**8.7. "BATTER MY HEART"**

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**8.7.1. Introduction**

John Donne's religious poetry too abounds in love. While he shows his unflinching love for his beloved in his love poetry, the unalterable love for God pervades throughout in his holy and divine sonnets. God, according to Donne, did not show His presence in the form of man's grudge against Him but in his abiding faith and his adoration. Godliness is the refined form of love and man's love towards God is no lesser than one's love for his beloved. As humans allow their partners in love to rely upon each other and also charge them for their follies, so should God allow their devotees not only to bare their hearts before them. God expects humans to submit before Him and explain the reasons that deterred him from the path of truth and integrity.

The poem 'Batter My Heart' is Donne's submission of his noble sentiments before God. The poem expresses Donne's highly charged emotions soaked in his adoration of the Almighty.

**8.7.2. Summary and Critical Appreciation**

The poem 'Batter My heart, Three Person'd God' reveals in its title that God is supposed to have three-fold personality. He appears to humans as three persons, namely the Father, the son and the Holy Ghost.

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Like a typical Donne poem, 'Batter My Heart' also begins with the use of an imperative through which the poet requests God to batter him. The poet goes on to offer variety of reasons for which he deserves God's wrath. God has every right to shatter him with the blows of a battering ram, and then re-shape it. The poet uses here the metaphor of tinker and pot. God is benevolent enough to act like a tinker and re-shape the poet with His gentle touches both inside and outside. The words 'knock', 'breathe', 'shine' and 'seek' connote God's ways of battering and re-shaping. The poet is ready to receive all sorts of punishment for straying from the holy path of God. Compared to God's treatment, the poet's erring is more and hence he deserves a harsh treatment.

The gentle methods of God have not worked in mending the ways of the poet. The poet is anguished enough at his own actions and wants God to take stringent measures to improve him. The poet is of the view that God should wreak havoc on him to bring him to the path of righteousness. Unless God unleashes his violent forces on him, the sins of the poet cannot be washed away.

The poet compares himself to a town that has been conquered by God's enemy, the Devil. What the poet hints at is man's temptation of the worldly evils which have blinded his vision. The poet expresses his inability to withstand the temptation of Devil, who is God's enemy. He admits of his vulnerability but also expresses his helplessness to be captivated by the coils of evil. While God had granted him the felicity of reasoning yet the poet could not save himself. Even, reasoning which is God's viceroy could not protect him. While the poet's heart pines for God's love, the Devil's influence would not enable him to come out of the imprisonment. Some critics find metaphorical meanings in the word 'town', which also has an image of a woman. The implication here may refer to a captive princess who was forced into marriage reluctantly and was not able to get released from the confinement. The princess cannot be held untrue or unfair but is simply helpless. Her physical confinement cannot seal her soul, which still possesses the fountain of love.

The poet further says that his problem is his betrothal to God's enemy. He beseeches God to help him break the reluctant bonding which his heart does not approve of. It's only with the blessings of the Almighty that the poet, like the beloved, can come out of this mental trauma. The poet feels himself mortgaged and looks forward to God for help. He prays to the Almighty to help him divorce from the imposed binding. God can use force to separate the poet's soul from captivity and take him in His embrace. The poet's loyalty and devotion are still with the Almighty and hence he looks for an imprisonment again. But this imprisonment should be in the ambience of God. The poet's release is possible only if God intervenes and snatches him from the clutches of Devil. The poet's body and soul have been vitiated because of the former's stay with His enemy. God's grace alone can make him chaste again.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q1. What do you understand by the term 'Batter My Heart Three person'd God'?

Q2. Why does the poet think that his body has been polluted?

Q3. Find out the use of imagery and conceit in the poem 'Batter My Heart Three person'd God'?

Q4. Write the explanation of the given lines:

a. I, like an usurp'd town to'another due,  
Labor to'admit you, but oh, to no end;  
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.

b. Divorce me,'untie or break that knot again,  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
Except you'enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

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#### **8.8. REFERENCES**

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Alexander, M. *Metaphysical Poets: York Notes Advanced*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India. Print.

Williamsin, George: *Six Metaphysical Poets: A Reader's Guide*. Syracuse University Press. Print.

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#### **8.9. SUGGESTED READING**

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Alexander, M. *Metaphysical Poets: York Notes Advanced*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India. Print.

Williamsin, George: *Six Metaphysical Poets: A Reader's Guide*. Syracuse University Press. Print.

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#### **8.10. TERMINAL AND MODEL QUESTIONS**

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Q1. Critically examine the following poems:

"Twickenham Garden"

"Death Be Not Proud"

Q2. Summarize the following poems in your own words:

"Thou Hast Made Me"

"The Canonization"

**UNIT 9 THE POEMS OF ANDREW MARVELL**

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- 9.1. Introduction
- 9.2. Objectives
- 9.3. “The Garden”
  - 9.3.1 Introduction
  - 9.3.2 Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 9.4. “A Dialogue Between the Soul and the Body”
  - 9.4.1 Introduction
  - 9.4.2 Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 9.5. “The Definition of Love”
  - 9.5.1 Introduction
  - 9.5.2 Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 9.6. “A Horatian Ode Upon Cromwell’s Return From Ireland”
  - 9.6.1 Introduction
  - 9.6.2 Summary and Critical Appreciation
- 9.7. References
- 9.8. Suggested Reading
- 9.9. Terminal and Model Questions

**9.1. INTRODUCTION**

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In this unit you will be introduced to another well-known Metaphysical Poet, Andrew Marvell. You will be reading some of his famous poems like “The Garden” “A dialogue Between the Soul and the Body” “The Definition of Love” and “A Horatian Ode Upon Cromwell’s Return of Ireland”. By a careful examination of these poems you will develop a deeper understanding to the poems of the poet.

**9.2. OBJECTIVES**

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In this unit

- You will be introduced to Andrew Marvell, another famous Metaphysical Poet.
- You will be given a summary of four of his famous poems so that you understand the central idea of these poems.
- This unit will critically examine the poems so that you develop a critical insight to understanding and appreciating poetry.

**9.3. “THE GARDEN”**

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**9.3.1 Introduction**

Andrew Marvell, like John Donne, is another metaphysical poet whose poetry is replete with the use of paradoxes and ironical statements. Marvell’s poetry is simple but subtle. You will also find in Marvell’s poems the use of conceits and depth of feelings. Marvell’s association with Milton lent him the knowledge of classics. He was also influenced by wit much in the fashion of John Donne. He had mastered the art of shapeliness, compactness, and continuity from Donne. Marvell’s poems possess a rhythmic quality. Marvell was influenced by politics too and this has been manifested in some of his poetic pieces too. You are supposed to read four poems of Andrew Marvell and all the four pieces represent the poet’s manifold poetic attractions.

The first piece prescribed for you is ‘The Garden’. The Garden is, as the title itself suggests, is a nature poem. The poet makes garden a medium through which he talks about various things both worldly and divine. While the poet sings of the glory of the garden calling it a symbol of peace and innocence, he also rues at the losses or damages mankind have done to it. The garden is a metaphor of beauty and liveliness, its gifts have a divine quality but the crass commercial attitude of mankind has shown its indifference and callousness to this earthly paradise. The garden has a quality to provide both sensual and spiritual pleasures. The poet makes a profound use of his imagination in describing the charms of the garden and calls it a meeting point even for gods and goddesses.

**9.3.2 Summary and Critical Appreciation**

Andrew Marvell’s poem ‘The Garden’, according to many critics, might have been written during 1651-53, when the poet was a tutor to the daughter of General Fairfax at

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Nun Appleton House in Yorkshire. This period has been considered by Marvell's admirers and critics as the years of piece and piety for the poet.

The poem 'The Garden' consists of nine stanzas. The stanzas are beautifully blended with one another yet at times, we find the poet's mind moving from the external to the internal and vice versa. While the description of flora and fauna fills our minds with smells, sounds and taste, the Biblical references prompt us to create a connection between the physical and the spiritual leading to our reverence for the Almighty whom the poet later calls the skilful gardener.

The poet opens the first stanza with the worldly tradition of showing their appreciation to poets and artists by honouring them with Palm, Oke or Byes. The poet wonders why people run after such honours which are just illusionary. The leaf of the palm tree, or an oak garland and even a garland of bayes are just small tributes given to celebrities for their exhaustive labours. All these are plucked from a herb or a tree. The poet is of the view that the labours of these geniuses are just underestimated by being awarded these leaves. The poet intends to mock at the idea of attaining fame at the cost of a herb or a tree. Such a craze for fame is short-living as compared to the pleasures gathered in a garden. It is better to long for the company of a garden than getting some leaves for their hard work.

The poet is all praise for the garden, which is an apostle of peace and solitude. He calls Quiet as fair and adds that his search for quiet ended in the garden where innocence lived as quiet's sister. He says that men often look for tranquillity in a turbulent world where people are busy making deals and seeking comforts. But it is our folly to long for solace in a world full of people with unending desires and unbound expectations. The garden, according to the poet, is not only beautiful and peaceful; it also has innocence prevalent all around. The poet makes a reference to the world of mankind, which comprises all sorts of unethical practices aimed at garnering wealth and prosperity. The worldly charms may look enticing to human eyes yet are devoid of the peace and solitude that the garden may offer. The poet personifies Quiet and Innocence in this stanza and finds them residing in the garden and not in the busy companies of men and women of the city.

The poet extends the busy company of men and women further in the third stanza. While the company of men and women are blind in their craze for power and their desire of fulfilment, they often forget the damages they do to the garden. The garden is a junction of colours and while its texture is all green, no individual colours are found as amorous as in the company of the garden. The garden is a metaphor of beauty and it far excels the worldly beauties of vainglorious maidens. The avid lovers burning in the heat of their love often carve the trees of the garden and write the names of their beloveds. The poet bemoans the passion of these lovers who fail to understand that their mistresses cannot supersede the beauty of the garden. The poet not only laments at the callous treatment meted out to these lovers but assures the garden of his unshaken love. He tells the trees that in case, he has to write any name on their barks, it would be only the name of the garden and none else. The poet shows his wit and ingenuity in the stanza by referring to the colours of earthly beauties, who are, often proud of their white or red colours.

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The poet asserts in the fourth stanza that the garden has not only been a favourite haunt of humans but also of gods and goddesses. Gods, too, in their chase for mortal beauties found their love consummated in a tree or garden. Apollo, the god of medicine, music, archery and prophecy longed for Daphne, a mountain nymph and priestess of the mother earth. Daphne's efforts to flee from Apollo became successful as the mother earth converted Daphne into a laurel tree. Likewise, Pan, the Greek god of meadows chased another nymph Syrinx who got converted into a reed to escape the advances of her lover. The poet advocates that the garden is not only a shelter but also a saviour for those in grief. While Apollo is said to continue worshipping the bay tree, Pan invented the musical pipe of seven reeds, which he named Syrinx, just to celebrate his love.

The poet in the fifth stanza talks about the wondrous life one can enjoy in the company of the garden. Giving a reference to the garden at Appleton House of Lord Fairfax, the poet gives an account of the fruits he can savour in the garden. He finds ripe apples dropping about his head and his mouth enjoys the delectable wine of the luscious clusters of vine. His hands reach the nectarine and the peaches. He often stumbles on melons and ensnared by flowers, he falls on the grass. The poet presents the tender and gracious nature of garden, which gives mankind not only a divine taste but also a blissful life. The poet generates in this stanza the images of touch, taste and smell and makes humans long for the pleasures of the garden.

While life in a garden is rich and plenty, human minds can far excel than the earthly joys. Our minds have a capacity to explore farther worlds. It has a capacity to withdraw into the happiness. The reflection of all worldly pains and pleasures can be found in human minds. While the mundane world may be full of complexities, human mind had a quality to transcend. It can not only create other worlds and seas but can also destroy all man-made things. The bodily or the sensual pleasures can often tire our humans and hence the poet summons mankind to retreat to their minds and rejoice in the green thoughts of a garden. In order to accomplish the spiritual bliss, it is mandatory to forget the sensual pleasures and soar into the world of spiritual tranquillity.

The poet's invocation to the world of imagination where the mind can find solace has a soothing tranquillity. The poet imagines his soul to be bereft of the body, which is a detriment to spiritual longings. He can contemplate his soul to make a preparation for a higher flight while enjoying the freedom, like a bird that can sit and sing at its own discretion, far from the maddening crowd of the ethereal world.

The poet is reminded of the Garden of Eden, which was once an archetype of all happiness. The Garden of Eden was a state of happiness because man lived there without a mate. Adam was sent to Paradise without a company. But it was not in human control to live alone and hence the sanctity of Paradise was broken after the arrival of Eve. The poet makes a reference to the Bible and might have Milton's *Paradise Lost* in his mind. One does not need any human company in the ambience of garden, which is not only sweet and serene but also has a pristine glory. The garden has been called two paradises in one. While the garden itself was a paradise, living in it solitary was another paradise. But the poet laments the humans' tendency not to live alone even in a paradise. We do

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not have a control over our desires and hence with desire comes all evils and temptations. The poet says that the loss of the paradise was caused because of man's excessive greed and his violation of God's command to live in the garden without a mate.

In the last stanza the poet once again comes back to the external world in which he observes the beautiful sundial created by the opening and closing of the flowers. Calling God as the skilful gardener, he is all praise for God's skill of creating the dial from where the milder sun runs through a fragrant zodiac sign. And as long as the dial works, the industrious bee calculates the time. Time, too, seems to have lost its power during this act. The beauty of Nature overpowers Time. Nothing could be as wholesome and sweet as the pleasant hours spent in the company of herbs and flowers. Finally, the poet concludes by saying that the pleasures extracted in the company of the garden are superior to all other pleasures that humans vainly amaze at.

Thus, Marvell's poem 'The Garden' is a superb example of the poet's love for Nature in its wildest and most sacrosanct way. The poem is symbolical and can have layers of interpretation. It can suggest man's disregard to Nature and also the prevalent commercial attitude that seem to blind our senses. Nature has plenty to offer and it is ultimately man's discretion whether he uses or misuses the bounties. Marvell uses various conceits to prove his point and the choice of his words also is praiseworthy.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q1. Discuss Andrew Marvell's poem 'The Garden' as an example of metaphysical poetry.

Q2. Trace the elements of symbolism in 'The Garden'.

Q3. Do you agree with the view that Marvell laughs at man's negligence to Nature through the poem 'The Garden'? Give examples in support.

Q4. Find out the example of paradox in the poem 'The Garden'.

Q5. Explain the following lines:

- (i) Apollo hunted Daphne so,  
Only that she might laurel grow,  
And Pan did after Syrinx speed,  
Not as a nymph, but for a reed.
- (ii) Two paradises 'twere in one  
To live in Paradise alone.
- (iii) Yet it creates, transcending these,  
Far other worlds, and other seas ;  
Annihilating all that's made

To a green thought in a green shade.

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#### **9.4. “A DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE SOUL AND THE BODY”**

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##### **9.4.1 Introduction**

Andrew Marvell’s poetry has different colours. While you have read about his depiction of love, of Nature and also of the exploits of Cromwell, you will read about the conflict between body and soul in this poem. Marvell, like all other metaphysical poets, was a man of learning and in this poem; you will find how beautifully the poet mingles fact with fiction, and common knowledge with intuition.

The poem is in the form of a dialogue and the tone is conversational. You will find a subtle use of contrasts when the poet describes the ‘restless’ and ‘insecure soul, longing for Heaven, with those of the enclosing and complaining prison of the body.’ Both the soul and the body complain of their agonies to each other. The poem begins with the groaning of the soul and ends with the cries of the body. The idea behind Marvell’s ending the poem with the body’s dialogue may suggest the poet’s acrid realisation that body is the truth and the soul’s journey to its highest seat, i.e. Heaven is not devoid of bodily jerks and earthly fever and frets.

##### **9.4.2 Summary and Critical Appreciation**

The poem opens with soul’s complaints of it being imprisoned in various ways. The soul, which considers itself sacrosanct and divine, does not have its own entity. The soul finds itself in a dungeon from where it wants to be raised. But because of its superiority granted by mankind, it does not find a listener who can understand the travails. The soul finds chained and fettered through limbs, which are earthly and hence prone to various ills. The soul is ‘hung up’ and feels various sensations and tortures through nerves, arteries and veins. It has a vain head and a ‘double heart’. While the soul in inchoate, the various receivers of the body keep sending painful messages.

In response to the soul’s complaints, the body also expresses its own travails. The body, too, is not free. It craves for wholeness. It leads a fragmentary life where its various parts act differently. The body is in the terrific grip of the soul. Since the soul is a regulating force and a rule book, the body feels itself often in doldrums. The soul always tries to pull it up to the path of righteousness and its actions are always bound to severe judgment. Its actions are never justified. The body has several hindrances. While the soul, during times of crisis, may have a flight of its own, the body cannot escape. It is accursed to bear its stay till its death or decay. The body groans in agony that it can never rest and it is always in the process of movement. Though always dynamic, it always seems possessed and overpowered by the soul.

The soul wonderfully expresses that it is confined to the grieves of others. All the wrong doings of the body ultimately are received by the soul. And as a result, it is most often engrossed in the pains of others. The earthly diseases which the body bring fitter away

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the strength of the soul. There are times when the soul feels that it does not have a life of its own rather it has simply become a storehouse of all ills. The sanctity of the soul seems challenged by the threats of the body in the form of various diseases. The soul destroys itself in preserving the wounds of the body. The soul feels shattered since the body looks for cure and in finding cure; the soul once again has to retreat to the body.

The final part of the poem unveils the real agonies of the body. The body tells the soul that physique is still not able to reach the maladies that the former teaches the latter. In fact, the body has various detriments. The body is prone to many ills and the very foundation of all these is the tearing of hope. The body becomes feeble everyday with various diseases digging holes in it. In addition, the elemental passions, too, weaken its composition. The pestilence of love, the ulcer of hatred, the madness of cheerful joys and sorrows fall heavily upon the body. Memory, too, is a kind of malady that keeps the body in utter stress. The body asserts that it was the prerogative of the soul to have the wit. Yet it seems surprising that the soul chose nothing but the body suitable for the sin. Redemption was not the prerogative of the body. It is actually the architects who in order to bring more joys, often resort to stunting the growth of green trees that grow in the forest. The body finally admits that while it is fated to decay but the role of the makers cannot be denied in bringing the decay.

While the poem is a conversation between the body and the soul, there are different threads in the poem. The poet uses paradoxes, personification and imagery and also extended conceits. The exchange between the soul and the body may also be extended to the thoughts of identity. While the soul has, in all ages, been considered privileged, its inner journey is full of chaos. The dichotomy between the soul and the body as suggested by Marvell may also be thought of as a dig on the religious authorities and savant thinkers that the body and the soul are two distinct beings.

The poem abounds in the use of alliterations, such as, ‘bolt of bones’, ‘fettered stands in feet’, ‘deaf with drumming’, and ‘hatred’s hidden ulcer’. These lend the poem a musicality besides the musicality of thought. In addition, we can find the use of conceits such as ‘blinded with an eye’, ‘vain head’, and ‘double heart’ etc. The poet has followed a regular rhyme scheme throughout the poem.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q1. Both the soul and the body have their own painful stories. Examine the statement in the light of the poem ‘A Dialogue between the Soul and Body.’

Q2. Which figures of speech have been used by the poet in ‘A Dialogue between the Soul and Body?’

Q3. What according to you does the poet want to convey through this poem?

Q4. Explain the following lines :

- (i) A soul hung up, as 'twere, in chains  
Of nerves, and arteries, and veins ;  
Tortured, besides each other part,  
In a vain head, and double heart ?
- (ii) But Physic yet could never reach  
The maladies thou me dost teach ;  
Whom first the cramp of hope does tear,  
And then the palsy shakes of fear ;  
The pestilence of love does heat,  
Or hatred's hidden ulcer eat ;
- (iii) So architects do square and hew  
Green trees that in the forest grew.

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## **9.5. “THE DEFINITION OF LOVE”**

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### **9.5.1 Introduction**

Andrew Marvell’s poem ‘The Definition of Love’ is a classic example of metaphysical poetry since you will come across the use of hyperboles and far-fetched imagery throughout. The title of the poem will attract you in the first instance but once you read the poem, you will come across Marvell’s argumentation and his profound thoughts from the inner recesses of his mind.

While love is considered to be the union of two kindred bodies and soul, the poet calls his love to be full of odds and devoid of any hope. A serious reading of the poem may give you an impression that the possibility of a union of two lovers is just impossible. Such a remark may often irk the lovers of poetry. You might have come across several love poems where the poets have glorified the union of true lovers and asserted that true love stands all the obstacles and impediments. But metaphysical poets claim their superiority by drawing unusual conclusions and the charge of blending two dissimilar images stands justified.

### **9.5.2 Summary and Critical Appreciation**

‘The Definition of Love’ is a poem of eight stanzas. The poet’s idea of love in this poem is not an ordinary affair but a rare feat. The poem begins with the poet’s assertion that his love is different from other’s love. His love is like a rare birth and is completely different from other loves of the world. The very opening words of the poem ‘My love’ make the poet boast of a particular kind of love like a rare birth. His love was born of despair and impossibility. The poet personifies despair and impossibility.

The poet carries forward the birth of love in the second stanza and says that it was his dark days that could show him a divine thing as love. His love, which was begotten by

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despair and impossibility, had no hope at all. Hope never seemed to appear in the path of his love but was seen tirelessly flapping its wings uselessly.

The impediments in the path of his love often stunted the little hope that seemed to flutter its wings. While the poet longed for meeting and tried to unite with his beloved, fate brought in strong divisive forces that barred the ways of true lovers. The poet uses the image of 'iron wedges' to separate the true lovers. While there are oppositions and obstacles in the ways of love, bringing in fate as an obstructive force is truly a metaphysical quality of Marvell and other poets of this school. In this stanza too, you will find the poet making use of personification as with fate.

The poet calls Fate as jealous and charges her with having a jaundiced eye. He further says that Fate cannot tolerate the meeting of two lovers. Fate is scared that the union of two lovers will weaken her tyrannical powers and will also bring damnation. It makes all attempts to keep the lovers separately. It, actually, has given the judgment that true lovers should never unite. We are all aware of the fact that when any of our ambitions are not fulfilled, we held our fate responsible. Marvell, here, tells that Fate has issued orders, according to which, the lovers are to kept like separate poles. It is quite distressing to note that while the whole world moves on love, the lovers are kept separately so that they do not embrace each other like the two poles.

The poet shows some sign of union in the sixth stanza. But the costs of meeting are such that it can never fructify. He says that the union of true lovers is not possible in this age and on this earth. The union may seem possible only when the Heavens fall or the earth crumbles. The union is not possible unless the whole world is cramped into a new plane. Hence, the poet foresees no possibility of their union. And when his love is full of deprivations, it is bound to be rare and born of despair and impossibility.

The poet opines that it is for the ordinary lovers to meet and get united. Rare lovers are not facilitated to enjoy such earthly bonding. The poet brings in a geometrical image in this stanza. Calling ordinary loves like oblique line, he asserts that oblique lines often cut, meet, greet and make angles. But true lovers are like parallel lines which run on up to infinity but never meet. The poet says:

As lines, so love's oblique, may well  
Themselves in every angle greet:  
But ours, so truly parallel,  
Though infinite, can never meet.

The poet shows a note of optimism in the last stanza. Continuing his line of argument that his love has a rare quality, it is above the consideration of the body which stands at two poles separately. But true lovers do not require a meeting of the bodies. Love cannot attain its perfection unless it culminates in mind. The love of the poet is great because like heavenly bodies, which are fixed, the poet and his beloved may remain separately yet they live in each other's mind. The poet in this stanza uses astronomical images and

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compares the union of true lovers as conjunction. The use of the image 'opposition' suggests the obstruction in the path of true lovers. The poet calls his love as the conjunction of the mind. Fate may have its evil eye on the poet's love yet cannot stop the lovers from meeting each other through their minds. The poet ends the poem on a note of optimism and says:

Therefore the love which us doth bind,  
But Fate so enviously debars,  
Is the conjunction of the mind,  
And opposition of the stars.

Thus, Marvell's poem 'The Definition of Love' typically manifests itself in its use of learning, use of far-fetched images, hyperboles, paradoxes and arguments. The poet, while taking of the definition of love, refers to his own love and hence starts advocating right from the beginning. He personifies Despair, Hope, Fate and Impossibility. The references to astronomy and geometry reveal the poet's association with his penchant for higher learning and his crave for using dissimilar images. Love, an inherent quality of human being, has been thought of having its perfection only in minds while the body has been considered merely as gratification of the flesh. The poet seems to escape from the realistic and worldly view of love and over-emphasizes that true love is just impossible on this earth.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Give a critical appreciation of the poem 'The Definition of Love'.

What makes the poet call his love rare?

Find out the use of various metaphysical elements in 'The Definition of Love'.

Explain the following lines and say which figures of speech have been used in them:

(a.) Magnanimous Despair alone

Could show me so divine a thing,  
Where feeble hope could ne'er have flown,  
But vainly flapped its tinsel wing.

(b.) For Fate with jealous eye does see

Two perfect loves, nor lets them close ;  
Their union would her ruin be,  
And her tyrannic power depose.

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## **9.6. "A HORATIAN ODE UPON CROMWELL'S RETURN FROM IRELAND"**

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### **9.6.1 Introduction**

You have already read and enjoyed different kinds of poems by Donne and Marvell. But you will find this poem different from other poems. The very title of the poem may make

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you very curious. The poem is an ode and in ode also, it is a Horatian ode. Further, you will also be eager to know about Cromwell. Since the last word in the poem is Ireland, it suggests that the poem should have something to do with history.

You might be acquainted with ode. An ode, as you might have read earlier, is a lyric poem usually of some length. What makes an ode different is its elaborate stanza-structure, a marked formality and full of lofty sentiments and thoughts. The odes may be both public and the private. While the public odes are used to celebrate occasions like funerals, birthdays and state events, the private odes are used to celebrate private and personal occasions. You might have read various private odes, namely Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale', 'Ode to Autumn', Wordsworth's 'Ode on Intimations of Immortality', Shelley's 'Ode to West Wind' etc.

Pindar and Horace are considered to be two earlier composers of Odes. While Pindar's odes were mostly for public occasions, Horace showed his preference for the private ode. Odes are stanzaically regular and based on limited metrical pattern.

The present poem is an ode written to praise the qualities of Cromwell, who returned from Ireland and succeeded in fighting against Charles's monarchy to bring Republicanism. Marvell is full of plaudit for the bravery and determination of Cromwell.

### **9.6.2 Summary and Critical Appreciation**

The poem talks about the heroism of Oliver Cromwell against the turbulence of Charles who was the king of England, Scotland and Ireland. Charles had become quite unpopular because of his autocratic and tyrannical rule. His marriage with a countess and his levying of unnecessary taxes had created lot of dissatisfaction. In order to get relieved from the clutches of tyranny, a hero's appearance was needed and it was Oliver Cromwell who played a significant role not only in dethroning Charles but also freeing people from his unjust claims. The poem is an encomium to Cromwell.

The poet begins his poem predicting about the arrival of a heroic figure, who could move forward, leaving his passion for poetry. During the times when one's country is in crisis, one should forsake peace and get ready to fight by bringing one's armour to life again. It was Cromwell who had got fed up with the tyrannies of the king and he came forward to fight the evil forces. Considering the arts of peace as devoid of any glory, Cromwell undertook an adventurous war and became an inspiration to others. He didn't hanker after fame but he was worried to change the fate of nation plagued under the treacherous acts of the king.

The poet is all praise for Cromwell's action. The hero looked gallant and like the three-forked lighting, he decided to break even the clouds in the parliament. Cromwell seemed ready to dispel any other doubt even if expressed from his own side as regards opposing the advances and tyrannies of the king. He was convinced like all other ambitious people that there were always oppositions even from inside when one wanted to realise one's

own courage. It has been true in all ages that while someone climbs the ladders of success, even close friends also become jealous.

Cromwell in his fit of anger and adventure undertook his feat. All around him seemed ranting with his thunderous advances. And, as a result of his fiery spirit, he finally through his heroic deeds, captured king, severed his head. The king resembled Caesar, who, too, in his fame had invited many enemies. The poet is of the view that it cannot be considered Cromwell's madness unable to be resisted. Such acts are often destined and man simply becomes a medium through which such exploits are achieved. It would not be false to say that such a laurel was due to Cromwell, who represented the wishes of his countrymen. Cromwell, a lover of peace could have lived his life well but only for his country, he forsook his longings and undertook the adventurous path. The poet also gives a hint of Cromwell's nature. Cromwell was highly reserved and led an austere life. His heart lay in his plot where he wanted to grow bergamot, a kind of fruit tree from which perfumes are extracted. The poet reiterates that Cromwell showed an exemplary courage and sacrifice by abandoning a life of sheer romantic longings just for the welfare of his country and people.

The poet tells the readers that Cromwell was capable enough to turn the tide against time. His valour and hard labour were the weapons that helped him destroy the old kingdom and build a new England. It was possible for industrious men like Cromwell to challenge the monarchy and bring Republicanism in England. While justice often complains against Fate, it never takes heroes like Cromwell to yield to pressures. The king might have appealed for justice but justice becomes a dwarf before fate. Cromwell might have acted against rights but the king's action too was not justified. It was the great work of time for Cromwell to demolish the wrongs.

It is Nature's rule that does not allow emptiness. When there are tough times, one does not get the opportunity of distinguishing between the good and evil. It is quite congenial, thus, to allow room for greater spirits to come. The greater spirits change the predicament into progress. Nature does not allow two powerful people to live together. While the king was misusing his power in a wrong way, it had become mandatory on the part of Nature to allow space for the nobler spirit like Cromwell over the autocratic king. The poet makes a good use of metaphor in the word 'greater spirits.'

The poet further describes the exploits of Cromwell in the civil war. In the war between the king and the parliament, Cromwell engineered the war plan so carefully that the king was forced to flee from Hampton Court. The king had to decamp to Isles of Wight. Cromwell's dexterous plans twined hope with fear and prompted the king to seek escape. It was during this fight that Cromwell received fewer injuries and showed that adversity can make even common people brave. The king was taken to the scaffold and he maintained poise. King Charles was executed and Cromwell became a royal actor. The incidence of the king's execution enabled the soldiers to clap their bloody hands to express their victory. The poet is all praise for Charles too who did not show any cowardice but seemed to accept the turning of history. He remained exceptional in showing his downfall and let the edge of the sharp axe fall on him.

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Charles did not even summon God for help, nor express envy. He even did not plea to get his helpless right but in a very submissive manner, bowed his head down as on a bed. The poet says that the supporters of Cromwell were in the beginning frightened on seeing the bleeding head. But as per the Etruscan seer, they foresaw a great progress in the bleeding head of Charles. Etruscan considered the omen of bleeding head as symbol of progress. Thus, the new Republic established by Cromwell and his aides symbolised a new regime of peace and progress.

The poet further states that Cromwell was not a dictator but very soon gained the confidence of his people. Even the Irish people too started praising him in a short time. They were rather ashamed to be subdued just in a year. They did not hesitate in applauding the genius of Cromwell who not only gained everyone's confidence but who also was loved even by those who were defeated and controlled by him. The Irish showered all praises on him and wondered how a common flesh and blood could be both good and just.

The poet also shows a comparative picture of Charles and Cromwell. While Charles had become arrogant and blind because of power, Cromwell showed his humility in the best possible manner. He did not become harsh because of power and nor ignored the rules of the parliament. In fact, Cromwell obeyed the commands and considered Parliament above himself. He proved in a very short time that he was not autocratic and was not a monarch either like his predecessor. He deserved to command since he obeyed the Parliament and held the same in high esteem. He gave credit to his party and presented to the house everything that he had won in the wars. He was not possessive by nature and presented first five years' tribute from Ireland to the House of Commons. He had no hesitation in considering his fame as the fame of the parliament and the House of Commons.

Cromwell's merits touch everyone to the core. The poet compares Cromwell to a falcon. While, he like a falcon, soared high and swooped on his prey but went to sit on the branch after killing the victim. Cromwell is not blind and crazy in his ambition after he has achieved his goal. Satisfied after relieving England from the clutches of Charles' despotic rule, Cromwell feels satisfied and like a falcon, sits on its usual tree.

The poet offers glorious tribute to the victorious Cromwell who behaves like a common human being. Pride has not touched him in the least. The poet heaps all sorts of praises on Cromwell and says that people in England didn't foresee any fear if any ruler continued to rule like the Republican messiah. Cromwell's achievements made everyone proud yet he did not declare himself as the king. Cromwell is compared to England's Caesar and Italy's Gaul and Hannibal. The poet goes on to prophecy that Cromwell will bring a new era in England and will make the state free from crisis.

The poet eulogizes Cromwell and says that while the English and the Irish held Cromwell in high esteem, the Scots didn't enjoy the valour of the new ruler. They didn't like him rather they felt frightened under Cromwell. They always wanted to keep themselves away from Cromwell's attention. The poet is of the view that Cromwell, the English hunter,

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may consider them as thickets and not chase them. Again the poet uses animal imagery and compares the English soldiers with dogs and the Scottish with deer. The English soldiers have been called as 'dogs pursuing the Scots' who are like deer.

The poet applauds Oliver Cromwell for his full control over his enemies. While he has fulfilled his mission, yet he always keeps himself ready to take on challenges. He is the son of War and Fortune and is never tired of marching ahead. He keeps his sword and armour always ready. Like the true son of war, Cromwell is indefatigable. He knows well that a true warrior not only applies force in subduing the intimidating powers of his opponents but also threatens them from time to time. The evil forces require to be overpowered. The poet predicts that Cromwell will apply the same arts to control the negative forces and will also maintain his power.

Marvell in the poem 'A Horatian Ode Upon Cromwell's Return to Ireland', thus, not only shows his admiration for Cromwell but also describes the noble qualities that a hero and a ruler should possess. The poet makes use of various figures of speech such as, simile, metaphor, personification and puns. You might have also found use of bird and animal imagery in the poem. What makes the poem an ode is its dignified composition and tone. Marvell also shows his dexterity in the use of wit and humour in this poem. While the poem is a beautiful blend of history and politics yet we cannot deny the presence of the various qualities that make the poem an exemplary metaphysical one.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q1. Show your acquaintance with ode and its function.

Q2. What is the background of the poem 'A Horatian Ode Upon Cromwell's Return to Ireland'?

Q3. Write a critical commentary of 'A Horatian Ode Upon Cromwell's Return to Ireland.'

Q4. Give examples of personification in the poem.

(i) Explain the following stanzas:

(ii) And like the three-fork'd lightning, first

Breaking the clouds where it was nurst,

Did thorough his own Side

His fiery way divide:

(iii) Nature, that hateth emptiness,

Allows of penetration less,

And therefore must make room

Where greater spirits come

**9.7. REFERENCES**

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Alexander, M. *Metaphysical Poets: York Notes Advanced*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India. Print.

Williamson, George: *Six Metaphysical Poets: A Reader's Guide*. Syracuse University Press. Print.

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**9.8. SUGGESTED READING**

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Alexander, M. *Metaphysical Poets: York Notes Advanced*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India. Print.

Williamson, George: *Six Metaphysical Poets: A Reader's Guide*. Syracuse University Press. Print.

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**9.9. TERMINAL AND MODEL QUESTIONS**

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Q1. Critically examine the following poems:

“The Garden”

“The Dialogue Between the Soul and the Body”

Q2. Summarize the following poems in your own words:

“The Definition of Love”

“A Horatian Ode Upon Cromwell's Return From Ireland”

**UNIT 10 MILTON AND HIS AGE**

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- 10.1. Introduction
- 10.2. Objectives
- 10.3. The Age of Transition: An Analysis
  - 10.3.1. The Political Scene
  - 10.3.2. The Religious Scene
  - 10.3.3. The Socio – Economic Scene
- 10.4. Life of Milton
  - 10.4.1. Milton’s Important Works
- 10.5. Milton: His Literary Inheritance – A Belated Elizabethan?
  - 10.5.1. Theme: What is Milton’s Poetry About?
  - 10.5.2. Renaissance Element
  - 10.5.3. Reformation in Milton’s Poetry
  - 10.5.4. Blending of the Two
  - 10.5.5. Grand Style
  - 10.5.6. Epic/Homeric Similes
- 10.6. Milton’s Place down the Ages
- 10.7. Summing Up
- 10.8. Answers to Self-Assessment-Questions
- 10.9. Glossary
- 10.10. References
- 10.11. Terminal and Model Questions

**10.1 INTRODUCTION**

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Have you ever given thought to what makes a creative writer select a particular theme for his text? Don't you think that a writer seeks and derives his inspiration from his experiences as well as experiences of others? In fact, in order to understand a poet or a writer, it is important to know about the time in which he writes. The events that take place in the political, economic, religious and social life of a community immensely affect and shape the world view of its members. The writers are conscious beings; keen observers as they are, they look beneath the veneer and see what is invisible to an ordinary mind. Rightly therefore, the texts that they pen down, owe a lot to the prominent events, circumstances and happenings of their times. Sometimes, there are also passing references, indirect mention of the socio- cultural conditions of their society.

John Milton (1608-1674) was also the product of his age and his works project the true reflection of society. As it is difficult to comprehend Chaucer's works without knowing the religious and political scene of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, similarly, Milton's literary works cannot be properly interpreted without understanding his age. By the Age of Milton, we mean that he is the foremost English poet of his time and his works reflect the period's spirit most comprehensively.

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**10.2. OBJECTIVES**

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This unit will help you to -

- Identify some of the major events which took place in the Age of Milton and how they shaped the poet's life and creativity.
- Comprehend the socio- religious and political scene of Milton's Age.
- Explain the uniqueness of Milton's poetry.
- Develop an understanding of the trends in literary scene especially poetry.
- Enumerate elements of epic tradition and their incorporation in poetry.

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**10.3 The Age of Transition: An Analysis**

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The period 1608-1674 is known as the Age of Milton. It is also known as the Puritan Age. It was a very eventful and complex age in the history of England. It was an age of transition- England was moving away from the medieval ideals towards the modern age. Transition was taking place in every field and at all levels- be it political, social, religious or cultural.

**10.3.1. THE POLITICAL SCENE**

Below is given a list of significant political events of this age.

1. The Elizabethan age closed with the death of the Queen Elizabeth I and the accession of James I in 1603.
2. The first English Civil War broke out in 1642. The parties to war were Charles I and Parliament. After several battles, Charles I was defeated and beheaded in 1649.
3. England became a republic and Milton's friend Oliver Cromwell became the Lord Protector – a King in all but name.
4. After Cromwell's death in 1658, monarchy was restored in 1660 and King Charles II became the king of England.

### **10.3.2 THE RELIGIOUS SCENE**

Religion and politics were inseparably blended together in England during this period. It was obvious that Elizabethan compromise between the Catholic and Protestant claims, in matters of religion broke down with the accession of James I to the throne. The extremists- the Puritans and the Jesuits opposed the King, the official Anglican Church and Archbishop openly. The Puritans felt that English Reformation had not gone far enough and that the Church of England was tolerant of practices which they associated with the Catholic Church. The Puritans advocated 'Purity' of worship and doctrine as well as personal and group piety. They believed that secular governors are accountable to God and thus opposed supremacy of the monarch in the church. A belief in conformity to the teachings of the Bible and that man existed for the glory of God and that man should fulfill God's will was what they stood for. Puritans became a major political force in England and came to power as a result of the first English Civil War (1642-46) and the beheading of Charles I. Religion thus dominated both national and personal life.

### **10.3.3. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SCENE**

It was an age of economic prosperity, of growing urbanization and of reforms. The champions of liberty demanded more political rights such as extension of suffrage, especially women's voting rights. As a result, a change could be noticed in women's position. People asked for simplifying the complexities of the law. Milton's *Tractate on Education* is significant in that it demands educational reforms.

### **10.3.4. THE LITERARY SCENE**

As compared to the golden age of literature i.e Elizabethan age which witnessed an effervescence of best poetic and dramatic talent in the pages of Shakespeare, Spenser, Bacon etc, and the literary scene in England during the age was not so animated and inspiring. The towns especially London became the centre of literary and cultural activities. Romances, histories, religious pamphlets, guides on manners and on business became very popular. The writers got engaged in the war of pamphlets during the fateful years of the Civil War. Thus, notwithstanding the publication of some very good poetry,

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the emphasis now shifted to prose writings. Milton too penned excellent prose. Except John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* and Milton's *Samson Agonists*, no other drama merits attention. The majority of poets, except Milton, preferred to write short lyrical poetry. Ben Jonson wrote passionate lyrics and Andrew Marvell, Vaughan, Cowley, George Herbert, Richard Lovelace, John Donne, Thomas Carew, Richard Crashaw, John Suckling wrote religious and metaphysical poetry. Metaphysical school of poets reacted against the smooth and sweet tones of much 16<sup>th</sup> century verse. Their literature evinces a preference of reason over intuition and mysticism. Their poetry is labeled as the 'poetry of strong lines' and was not popular in this period. The credit of resurrecting metaphysical school of poetry out of oblivion goes to T.S. Eliot who in his essay *The Metaphysical Poets (1921)* appreciated their work for the fusion of reason and passion, a unification of thought and feeling which later grew into a dissociation of sensibility.

Another group of poets generally known as Cavalier Poets included Thomas Carew, Sir John Suckling, Richard Lovelace, Lord Herbert, Edmund Weller etc. They accept the idea of the Renaissance man who is at once a lover, soldier, and wit, man of affairs, musician and poet. Significant and amazing is their avoidance of the subject of religion and their poetry illustrates that it is possible for poetry to celebrate the minor pleasures and sadness of life. A marked change could easily be noticed in the language, style and diction. The conventional phraseology and formal elaboration was discarded and in its place, originality and a fusion of passionate feeling and logical argument was preferred.

Surprisingly, Milton keeps himself aloof from these newer trends and carries forward the rich legacy of Renaissance literature. He freely exploits classical mythology and learning and loads his verse with similes and imagery. That Milton, both as a poet and a prose writer stands head and shoulders above all literary figures of the age is evident in the discussions that follows.

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### **10.4 Life of Milton**

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You may question why are you advised to go through the biographical introduction to the poet and his work? The answer is simple - when a writer writes, he depends to a great extent upon his experiences and his world vision which are framed mostly by the events and situations, taking place all around him. His objective, the view point, the argument he forwards, the images he draws upon – seem to bear the impact of happenings in his life. Rightly therefore, knowing about the relevant incidents in the life of a poet as well as the times in which he is situated will definitely help you comprehend and appreciate his creativity in a better way.

John Milton was born on December 9, 1608 in Bread Street, London. Milton was greatly influenced by his parents. His father also named John Milton, embraced Protestantism and inspired his son to study literature while he inherited deep interest in religion. At St. Paul's school, he studied various languages-Greek, Latin, Italian, French and Hebrew which is evident in his initiation of words and phrases of these languages in his work. He passed B.A. in 1628-29 and M.A. in 1632 from Cambridge University. Milton wrote his first poems *On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of Cough* and his first great poem *On the*

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*Morning of Christ's Nativity*. As he was a Puritan and believed in the independence of mind and religious belief, he abandoned the idea of joining the church. Instead, he devoted himself to studies and meditation. His twin pastoral lyrics- *L Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* (1632) were written in the background of quiet country life at Horton. *Comus*, a masque (1634) displays Milton's love of music. *Lycidas*, an elegy commemorates Milton's friendship with Edward King who died in the Irish Sea in 1637, initiating a trend that was later imitated by Shelley (*Adonais*) and Keats(*Hyperion*).

In 1638, Milton left for continental travel. He sailed from France to Genoa and reached Florence and met Grotius, the great pioneer of international law and Galileo, the famous astronomer. Milton's tour was cut short and he returned to England in 1639 when he heard the news of the Civil War (1642-46) between the King Charles I and the Parliament. Deeply stirred by the political and religious upheavals of the times, he wrote about twenty five pamphlets on the current social, political, religious conditions. He justified and defended the people's revolt against the tyranny of the government and the Anglican Church. In *Aeropagitica*, he champions the cause of liberty and equality. It has been accepted as the world's classic on the freedom of the press. Milton wrote a number of small treatises in which he supported the execution of King Charles I. When Oliver Cromwell got power, Milton was made secretary for Foreign Tongues to the New Council of State. In 1642, Milton married Mary Powell. It was a mismatched marriage. He was thirty three; she was barely seventeen. She was a royalist while Milton was a republican. She preferred a free life while Milton stood for puritan ways. She refused to live with Milton which probably resulted in writing series of tracts in which he advocated the need and desirability of divorce. After Mary Powell's death, he married Katherine Woodcock in 1652 who died of consumption. In 1658, he married Elizabeth Minshull. Earlier, in 1652 Milton became blind which proved to be a boon for the poet.

After the Restoration in 1660, a difficult and dismal period started for Milton. The Republicans were prosecuted and punished by courts. Milton escaped death penalty under the Act of Amnesty and Oblivion in 1652. Andrew Marvell, his intimate friend saved Milton by getting his name included in the general oblivion. However, as sweet are the fruits of adversity, Restoration came as a blessing in disguise; as Milton's political and personal hopes were now dashed, he could now once more turn to poetry. He now decided to take up *Paradise Lost*, the plan for which he had made years ago. As he was blind, he dictated it orally to his nephew Philip and other pupils. He completed *Paradise Lost* in 1663. On the request of his friend Thomas Ellwood, he wrote *Paradise Regained* (1671); his final work was *Samson Agonists* (1671), a classical tragedy.

### **IMPORTANT WORKS BY MILTON**

Milton's literary and intellectual career falls into three periods.

1. The period from 1608-1638 may be called his Early Verse Period. During this period he wrote the following:

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- a. On the Morning of Christ's Nativity (1629) – An ode.
  - b. Sonnets – 'O Nightingale' and 'How Soon hath Time' (two English sonnets) and five Italian sonnets (1630-31)
  - c. L' Allegro and Il Penseroso(1633)
  - d. Comus (1634) - A Masque
  - e. Lycidas (1637) – A Pastoral Elegy
2. During the period from 1638 to 1660, he focused on writing prose. Major works are:
- a. Aeropagitica, of Education (1644)
  - b. Sixteen English sonnets (1642-1658)
  - c. Besides, he also wrote pamphlets on Church Discipline, Divorce and related matters.
3. In the third phase, Milton penned his greatest works:
- a. Paradise lost (1667) - An Epic
  - b. Paradise Regained (1671) – Written at the suggestion of Ellwoods made after reading the manuscript of Paradise Lost.
  - c. Samson Agonists (1671) – A dramatic poem on Greek Model.

Now you might have got an idea of the immense and versatile talent of Milton. He experimented with almost every genre – ode, sonnet, masque, pastoral elegy, prose, dramatic poem etc. but his stature as an epic poet remains unchallenged even today.

### **Exercise 1**

1. Write a note on the biographical information which you think is important to understand Milton's work.
2. Prepare a list of all the major religious-political events which took place in Milton's Age.
3. What makes you think that Milton was a religious man?
4. In Milton's life the period from 1632-1637 during which he wrote L'Allegro, IL Penseroso, Comus and Lycides is popularly known as
  - i. Horton period
  - ii. Blindness period
  - iii. Boston period

iv. Period of Despair

5. During Milton's age, which of the following school of poetry flourished?

- i. Metaphysical, Dramatic and Romantic
- ii. Cavalier, Metaphysical, Puritan
- iii. Religious, Romantic and Classical
- iv. Heroic, Puritan and Romantic

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### **10.5 Milton: His Literary inheritance – A Belated Elizabethan?**

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When Milton was born, Shakespeare was still writing his romances and Bacon, Ben Johnson and Spenser too were very popular. It is but natural that Milton looked up to them for inspiration and it will not be an exaggeration to say that Elizabethan literature is Milton's literary inheritance. He is an Elizabethan in his outlook and temperament as well as in his love for romance and beauty. Besides, his passion for music and art, the glow of imagination, pastoral poetry places him among Elizabethans. *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, *Comus*, *L' Allegro*, *Lycidas*, *Il Penseroso* have echoes of Spenser, Sidney and Shakespeare. The spirit of adventure, rebellion, liberty, high imagination, love of learning and the Renaissance spirit link *Paradise Lost* with the Elizabethan literature. However, in several other respects such as order and restraint, classical allusions and learning, Milton stands distinct and unique. Evidently, just as a mighty lover breaches its banks with its great rush and moves ahead carving a new path for itself, similarly Milton's genius could not remain constricted by Elizabethan literary traditions and produced immortal classics writing in his distinct style.

#### **10.5.1. Theme: What is Milton's Poetry about?**

Every poet or writer cultivates his own typical and unique style. To believe in T.S Eliot's concept of tradition and Individual talent, all that is decadent, similar and repetitive dies and it is only the fresh, innovative and excellent that survives. Thus, we remember Shakespeare for unraveling the innermost care of human heart, Bacon for his epigrammatical style, Pope and Dr. Johnson for their scholarship, Wordsworth for his exalted conception about nature etc. Milton's poems are distinct in that they are sublime-in theme, in design, in conception, in sentiments, in imagination as well as in language and style.

Even a cursory glance through Milton's poetic oeuvre suggests that he writes about sublime themes and avoids writing on common and ordinary objects. He chooses as his subject material, themes such as the Fall of man, of good and evil, of heaven and earth, of rebellion and freedom, of happiness and innocence, of mortality and immortality, of hope and peace. What he wrote was not limited to a nation but the whole mankind. His thoughts and sentiments, and their expression are equally sublime. A man of vast learning, his works draw heavily from philosophy, metaphysics, cosmology, religion and

theology. His works are exceptional in that they exhibit how far man's imagination can distend itself.

In order to understand sublimity in thought and expression, it is essential to know what sublime is. In fact, sublime is that which elevates, consoles and sustains us. Sublimity in literary works, it may be well assumed, could have proceeded only from a mind and character that had something of true nobility. Despite his blindness and adversity, Milton exhibits a true courage and tenacity of purpose which rightly commands the admiration of people.

### **10.5.2 THE RENAISSANCE ELEMENT**

By now, it is evident that without discussing the two very important aspects of Milton's poetry – Renaissance and Reformation and their blending, no study of Milton is complete. Renaissance, as you have read earlier, was the movement characterized by renewed interest in the writings of the ancient Greek and Romans. Love for life, beauty, art, music, adventure, liberty marks Renaissance spirit. When you go back in historical times, you read that in the conflict between society and individual, it was always the collectivity which prevailed upon individual. The single voice though sane, submerged in the sea of collectivity. In recent times, traces of medieval society can easily be seen in the dictatorial decisions of Khap Panchayats and Moral Police. Milton's age was the age in which medieval traditions were on the wane and Renaissance with its insistence on modern values was coming of age. Now, Man was at the centre of the movement. Humanism, a respect for man, a broader outlook on life and culture formed the spirit of Renaissance.

Reformation on the other hand emphasized on radical reforms in the religious, social and political life of people. It advocated austerity, simplicity, faith and righteousness. It is indeed surprising that these two opposite streams not only exist together but complement and blend harmoniously in his poetry. Though he, a puritan thinker Milton was also a great Renaissance artist. He fuses into one the Hellenic love of knowledge and beauty and the Hebraic zeal for ethics and righteousness.

Renaissance spirit is the spirit of humanism. Man was believed to be the centre of all creation and all philosophy. Milton, the staunch individualist extolled man and respected his freedom. God is omniscient but he leaves man's will free. It is no wonder that Milton celebrates not only the independence of Adam but also of Satan. Satan, even in his misery and defeat retains his dignity and worth. Independence, to the Renaissance man, was the one ambition and goal of life. An insatiable thirst for knowledge, adventure and exploration characterizes the Renaissance spirit. Milton's Satan is a typical renaissance figure who risks and breaks away from the Heaven and explores the Chaos and stars and the newly created human world.

Beauty in all its forms- sensuous, intellectual and spiritual lured the Renaissance man. Beauty was for Milton all his life, an appetite, an object and a guide. His beautiful words, phrases, images, descriptions draw analogy in the poetry of John Keats, the romantic

poet. Renaissance learning, art and literature, philosophy and metaphysics greatly influenced Milton. As a result, his poetry draws heavily from classical mythology and learning. Echoes of romance, chivalry, pastoral music and dance are the other Renaissance features found in Milton's poetry.

### **10.5.3 REFORMATION IN MILTON'S POETRY**

Puritanism advocated orthodox theology and opposes the claims of art, science, culture and all that helps to beautify and gives value to our secular life. It stands for the evolution of noble but stern and hard type of character. Too much emphasis on austerity, religiosity and narrowness of vision characterizes it. A reading of *Paradise Lost* gives you an idea that the very basis and purpose of the epic is puritanical thought. Instead of selecting Arthurian legends as his subject matter, Milton preferred the Biblical story of the Fall of Man. *Paradise Lost* renders the basic precepts of all the Christian scriptures. It is in fact the Bible poetized by Milton. In the true spirit of a puritan, Milton writes that his main purpose in writing *Paradise Lost* is to

Assert Eternal providence

And justify the ways of God to Man.

Throughout his epic, he is found condemning the mental levity of man and justifies the divine order and sings of the glories of creation and its creator as well as His unbounded love and benevolence. He presents the eternal struggle between the powers of good and the powers of evil exposing the utter powerlessness and depravity of evil as well as beauty and benevolence of God. Obedience to the will and law of God is the highest religion. Too much liberty leads to corruption and licentiousness.

The above discussion may lead you to think whether Milton was a puritan in the narrowest sense. Is he really so? Actually, a stern and austere treatment of the themes, an advocacy of simplicity and righteousness and a reluctance to indulge in simple pleasures of life seem to justify this allegation. A glance through his works, however suggests that he is a liberal puritan. Instead of despising this world, he loves and wonders at the creation of God. A lover of art, literature and music, Milton celebrates the love of life and salutes the irrepressible freedom of the will of man.

### **10.5.4 BLENDING OF THE TWO**

As said earlier, Milton's poetry startles the reader by its harmonious fusion of the two seemingly opposite elements that is—of the Renaissance and the Reformation. In his early poetic career, he could not harmonize polytheistic world of Pagan classical imagery with a Christian theme hence, the Renaissance element dominates here. In his middle poetry, the two elements exist side by side. But in his later poetry, he blends Renaissance and Reformation elements perfectly though there is apparent, a leaning towards Puritanism. In fact, no other English poet was at once so profoundly religious and so much an artist.

### **10.5.5. GRAND STYLE**

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Sublimity of expression bears the connotation of perfection of expression. A reading of even a few pages would suggest that Milton has a unique style of writing which is known as grand style wherein the sublime thoughts are expressed in an equally sublime manner. The grandeur of his style is due to the linguistic and artistic devices that Milton uses in his poetry. You would study this aspect in another unit on Milton. Here just to acquaint you with his style, some points are enumerated. He does not prefer to use familiar words and construction and frequently uses old archaic expressions. He strains upon the reader's knowledge; only a scholar can claim to understand his works fully. Further, Milton makes use of such words and phrases which recall similar passages in Homer, Virgil, Horace Dante, Spenser and other great writers. Besides, he uses Latin and Greek constructions. Well adept in the art of word- compression, use of proper nouns, repetition, alliterations, successive use of similar words, rhetorical questions, vivid details etc Milton seeks to win scholars' appraisal. Epic similes are literary and poetic devices which add up to his grand style. Besides, his unequalled command of blank verse also contributes to his grandeur. A beautiful harmony between sound and sense, variations in stresses and pauses, number fall, syllable arrangement in lines add up to the charm of his blank verse. Often there is a subtle lyrical charm and felicity of phrase which even great romantic poets like Shelley and Keats could have never surpassed.

### **10.5.6 EPIC/HOMERIC SIMILES**

You are familiar that poets resort to several poetic and artistic devices to enhance the charm and effectiveness of their poetry. A simile is a literary device used to produce a number of effects in the text. Milton uses similes in order to make his images and sentiments comprehensible. He draws his material for similes from classical literature and mythology. In order to explain the beauty and sublimity of heaven as well as the Chaos of hell, Milton falls upon similes. He also picks up similes from contemporary social and political life. The similes, Milton uses are epic similes or Homeric similes. They are known so because they are very long and at times stretch over several lines and even pages. Drawn from ancient history and mythology, nature, natural sciences, scriptures, the similes not only decorate the narrative and descriptions but also help in comprehending them. You will read about them in detail in the next unit. s

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### **10.6 Milton's Place down the Ages**

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Milton enjoyed a reputation which no other poet in English literature could even conceive. People may have diverse views regarding his personal life, and may disagree with his political creed and religious beliefs, however they all rate him very high and respected. Miltonic criticism has undergone different phases which are evident in the following lines. Surprisingly, Milton enjoyed little reputation in his own times. Though his major works drew the attention of the scholars and critics, his minor poems were not even known. After the Restoration, he suffered a lot. His poetry came to be recognized and appreciated only when *Paradise Lost* was completed. Dryden praised him saying 'this man cuts all out and the ancients too'. In eighteenth century, Pope and Addison admired Milton. For the neo-classical poets of the age of Pope, Milton served as a model. Thomas Gray admired Milton's poetry for its sublime quality. Influence of his black

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verse is seen in Thomas Gray, William Collins, Young and Thomson. Dr. Johnson, however, criticized Milton but his criticism centered mainly around his dislike of Milton's character and his political views. He found *Comus* and *Lycidas* harsh in diction and uncertain in rhymes. He however, praised the design and execution of *Paradise Lost*. In the romantic age, Milton was ranked just next to Shakespeare and was highly eulogized by Blake and Shelley for his rebellious views against authority. William Hazlitt and John Keats appreciated Milton's imaginative power and beauties of texture and sound. Wordsworth and Coleridge also admired him greatly. Milton's reputation continued in the Victorian Age. Tennyson called him the 'God gifted organ voice of England'. The leaders of the Oxford movement found in Milton, inspiration and support. The *Paradise Lost* became a handy Bible for the believers and supporters of Christianity. In the conflict between science and religion, faith and skepticism which characterized the Victorian Age, Milton's religious beliefs instilled faith in God. Mathew Arnold's concept of 'High Seriousness' or his theory of poetry, its functions and objectives owe a lot to Milton. In the twentieth century, Miltonic Criticism gets divided into two groups- the detractors and admirers. Critics find Milton archaic and outdated and question his theology and cosmology. They also criticize his style and language as it is not for the average reader. T.S. Eliot criticizes Milton because he fails to maintain the unified sensibility and dissociates thought and emotion. However, his admirers defend him. Thus, Dr. Lewis says that his style is his solution for the need of solemnity.

### **Exercise Two**

1. A writer is the product of his age – How far is this statement true in the case of Milton ?
2. Renaissance was the movement which ushered in an era of modern values. Do you think that Milton's mind reveals a transition from medieval ideals to the modern ones?
3. 'The temper of Milton's mind is profoundly religious'. Discuss the puritan strain in Milton's poetry in the light of the above statement.
4. Give a brief write up of the literary scene in Milton's age.
5. Among the following, who advocated a high principled, austere and God fearing life?
  - a. The Royalists
  - b. The Republicans
  - c. The Puritans
  - d. The Epicureans

**10.7 Summing Up**

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In this unit you got familiarised with

- \* Various facets of Milton as a poet as well as a person.
- \* An overview of the religious – political scene of Milton’s Age.
- \* The literary scenario of Milton’s Age.

You now know that Milton, the poet cannot be comprehended without knowing Milton, the man. In his works, we find the fusion of the true seemingly dichotomous elements of Renaissance and Reformation, classical learning and Hebraic features and the puritan and the humanist. It was in his age that we see a thorough break with the religious worldview and religious ethics of the middle ages. For the first time perhaps, we see the boldest assertion of individuality of man. To the world at large, Milton stands out as before all things, the poet of sublimity, of awful grandeur ‘what other author ever soared so high, or sustained his flight so long’ (Dr. Johnson).

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**10.8 Answers to Self-Assessment Questions**

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Exercise One

1. Consult Wikipedia for biographical information.
2. Go through the section The Age of Transition: An Analysis
3. Refer to the discussion given at 10.4 and 10.5.3
4. Horton Period
5. Cavalier, Metaphysical and Puritan

Exercise Two

1. Refer to the discussion at 10.1
2. Refer to the section on Renaissance
3. Refer to the discussion at 10.5.3
4. Refer to the section 10.3.4
5. The Puritans

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**10.9 Glossary**

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**Renaissance-** Literally, Renaissance means a ‘rebirth’ or revival. It was a cultural movement beginning in Italy in 14<sup>TH</sup> century and lasting into the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This refers to a time period when interest in art, literature, education etc. along with interest in

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Ancient Greece and Rome was reborn. Renaissance is viewed as a bridge between the Middle Ages and the modern era. Love for the individual, love for beauty, romance, chivalry etc. characterize Renaissance.

**Reformation-** It was a religious and political movement of 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe. It aimed at reforming the Roman Catholic Church and resulted in the establishment of the Protestant churches.

**Puritanism-** It was a religious reform movement in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. It sought to 'purify' or reform the Church of England. It preached the spirit of moral and religious earnestness.

**Restoration-** Restoration refers to the event when monarchy was restored in 1660. After the Civil war in England (1642-48), Oliver Cromwell dethroned the King Charles I and became the first Lord Protector of the countries of England, Scotland and Ireland. The Royalists restored Charles II to the throne. Generally speaking the years (1660-1714) are covered up by the term Restoration.

**Transition-** The change from one period or process to another is known as transition. It is the stage when past, present and future seem to exist together.

**Scepticism-** Simply speaking, to question or doubt any knowledge, fact, opinion or belief is scepticism.

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### **10.10. REFERENCES**

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### **10.11. Terminal and Model Questions**

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1. Critically examine the blending of two opposing movements – Renaissance and Reformation in Milton's works.
2. Discuss why Milton qualifies the esteem of even those who do not share his political and religious beliefs?
3. Trace Milton's Criticism through the ages.

**UNIT 11: PARADISE LOST BOOK I**

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- 11.1. Introduction
- 11.2. Objectives
- 11.3. Background to the Epic
  - 11.3.1. Sources of Paradise Lost
  - 11.3.2. Milton's cosmology
- 11.4. Theme and Moral Purpose
  - 11.4.1. The Argument of Book I
  - 11.4.2. The Principle of Free will and Divine Justice
  - 11.4.3. Description of Hell
- 11.5. Paradise Lost as an Epic
  - 11.5.1. Milton's Epic Similes
- 11.6. Renaissance and Reformation Elements
  - 11.6.1. Human Interest in Paradise Lost
- 11.7. Autobiographical Element in Paradise Lost: The Man in Poetry
  - 11.7.1. Milton's Political Views
- 11.8. Satan- the question of hero in Paradise Lost/ God and other Devils
- 11.9. Milton's Use of Blank Verse
- 11.10. Summing up
- 11.11. Glossary
- 11.12. Answers to SAQ
- 11.13. References
- 11.14. Terminal and Model Questions

**11.1. INTRODUCTION**

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All of you are familiar with the great Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. *Ramayana* celebrates the momentous achievement and exemplary life of Rama while *Mahabharata*, set against the background of an age of decaying values still holds good and is relevant even today. An analogy between Indian epics and Milton's *ParadiseLost* draws attention to the fact that all these epics were composed not solely for entertainment. They are culturally valuable not only for their storytelling appeal but mainly for their embedded instructions which are as true and relevant today as when they were composed. Though Milton wrote *ParadiseLost* with the specific purpose of justifying the way of God to man, the epic reeks of political vision of Milton.

**11.2. OBJECTIVES**

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After going through this unit, you will be able to –

- Explain the uniqueness and sublimity of Milton's poetic art.
- To comprehend the spirit of Renaissance and Reformation and their incorporation in *ParadiseLost*.
- Form an idea of the epic genre and of innovations and deviations introduced by Milton.
- Undertake an analysis of the rich repertoire of similes in *ParadiseLost*.
- To understand the role and relevance of religion in Milton's as well as in the present age.

**11.3. BACKGROUND TO THE EPIC**

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As Rome was not built in a day, likewise great poems are not composed in a day. They are the result of years of hard work and experience of immensely talented genius. They are conceived and planned over a period a time. Milton wrote to his friend Diodati in 1637 about his intention of writing a great work of art. In the beginning, he was inclined towards the legend of King Arthur and wanted to write a drama but he abandoned his plan, fortunately for himself because his true genius was lyrical rather than dramatic. He studied with interest Homer, Virgil, Tasso, Aristotle, The Book of Job etc. After Restoration, Milton fell out on evil days. He had already gone blind. It was in this state of mind, he started composing *ParadiseLost* (1667) in his mind which was penned largely by his nephew Philips.

**11.3.1. SOURCES OF PARADISE LOST**

Though Milton himself did not acknowledge any source behind the composition of the great epic, it is well evident that the prime source of the epic is *The Bible*. The central theme, several allusions, words and phrases reveal the Bible connection as well as his indebtedness to Greek, Latin and Jewish churches. For the model and structure of the epic, Milton owes heavily to the *Illiad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Aenied*. As Du Bartas' epic (translation) was very popular when he was a boy, it is natural to assume that Milton came under its influence. Critics also trace connection of *Paradise Lost* to Andreini's *Adamo, Angeleida*, Grotius' *Adamus Exul* and Vondel's *Lucifer*. There is also a striking similarity between Milton's interpretation of the moral issues and that of Spenser's in *The Fairy Queen*. Echoes of Marlowe are traced in Milton's grand style. Shakespeare is also imitated at places by Milton. He seems to have borrowed from Tasso, Aristo and Plutarch, however like Shakespeare; he recreates his borrowings with the result that *Paradise Lost* remains one of the most original works in English or in any literature.

**11.3.2. MILTON'S COSMOLOGY**

It shall be much easier for you to understand *Paradise Lost*, if you know even a little bit of Milton's cosmology. As you know, the action of *Paradise Lost* takes place at different places- Earth, Heaven and Hell and the time of action is prior to the creation of the world. People of Milton's age believed in the Ptolemaic system of astronomy and it is no wonder that Milton also subscribes to the same idea. Milton's belief can be summarized under the following heads-

In the beginning, there was nothing but infinite space.

It was divided into three parts:

- Heaven above (called Empyrean- a region of pure fire).
- The abode of God and His angels.
- Chaos-A whirling mass of shapeless matter.

**Chaos** – Heaven was marked out from Chaos by a wall of crystal. It means an empty void. It is referred to as Abyss which means bottomless pit. Earth, air, fire and water- nothing exists there.

**Hell**- It is created out of Chaos. Its' a dark, gloomy, fearful and dismal place with the lake of fire.

**Heaven** – At the other end of the Chaos is heaven.

**The New world** – Earth with its planetary system is created out of Chaos. This world is hung by a golden chain from Heaven.

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**11.4 THEME AND MORAL PURPOSE**

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Milton is one of those poets who think highly of the vocation of poetry. Through his poetry, he wanted to give people something 'doctrinal and exemplary'. As he was a devoutly religious person, he used the medium of poetry to sow the seeds of virtue in people. Not surprisingly, he chose the Fall of man as the theme of *Paradise Lost*. In an age when man was moving away from religion, Milton set out to prove the importance of religion and justify the ways of God to Man. The theme he chose, in fact, is appealing for it forms the basis of all religions. Unlike others, he confined himself not to eulogize fortunes of a king or of an empire but sought to appeal to the whole human race with his analysis of the questions on the origin of sin, of evil, of good, of the war between good and evil.

Interpreting, *Paradise Lost*, in the present context critics like E.M.W. Tillyard, and Denis Saurat point out that purpose of the epic is to highlight that Fall takes place when passion triumphs over reason. When passions triumph, chaos ensues; all the peace of mind is gone and instead of liberty, man is trapped by his weaknesses. When passion sways, reason robs man of liberty and man is subjected to slavery both within and without. Christ (religion) helps him establish reason and reach a higher state than that from which he fell. If Satan stands for passion, Christ stands for reason. The message is still relevant for the present generation- Sin is not eternal damnation, there is always a hope of Redemption.

#### **11.4.1. THE ARGUMENT OF BOOK I**

Milton resorts to the technique of opening *Paradise Lost Book I* in the middle of the story with a reference to the disobedience of God's command. God had forbidden Adam and Eve not to taste the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Chronologically, the story begins with the rebellion of one third of the angels against the absolute rule and authority of God in Heaven. Satan challenges God; a fierce war takes place in Heaven between the two opposing forces. In a show of strength, the God defeats Satan and sends him and the rebels to Hell.

Besides, *Paradise Lost* also discusses the creation of Adam and Eve and Paradise. They were living in a state of perfect bliss as immortal spirits except they were prohibited from tasting the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge. Satan sought to defeat and frustrates God's scheme and persuaded Adam and Eve to disobey God's command. Satan hatches a conspiracy and seeks the help of Beelzebub, Moloch, Thammuz, Belial and Titan etc. and commands them to meet at Pandemonium. At his command, millions of fallen angels rush to the Pandemonium and deliberate on the further course of action.

#### **11.4.2. THE PRINCIPLE OF FREE WILL AND DIVINE JUSTICE**

According to this Christian doctrine, God created both humans and angels. They had the right and freedom to choose between good and evil, obedience and rebellion – 'freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell' (*Paradise Lost* Book III). They have the freedom to choose their actions and the responsibility of their actions. However, God's omniscience complicates all the matters. As in other religions, in Christian theology too,

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God is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omni benevolent. He is the Cause of everything. He is self-existent. He has the perfect power to do anything, perfect knowledge of all things and the perfect goodness. With such a God, how can evil exist? How can Adam and Eve commit disobedience? In such a scenario how can exist the free will? It is clear here that Milton presents God as being fully aware of the flaws within his creations and it is He who allows them to act on their flaws. When they fail, they get punished for the fault and failure of their creator.

### **11.4.3. DESCRIPTION OF HELL**

You are all well aware of the idea of Hell and Heaven. What is striking is that in every religion, the two are equated with Evil and Good respectively. The opening scene of *Paradise Lost* grips our imagination through its despair, violence, mystery and fear. Satan and his 'horried crew' of fallen angels are shown as lying and rolling on a lake of fire. It is a place of 'bottomless perdition', 'huge affliction,' 'regions of sorrow' where God has thrown the defeated angels. Here we discover only sights of woe – the sulphurous fires are always burning. Geologically, are you not reminded that it is a volcanic region- a fiery gulf with liquid fire? Besides, there is a 'dreary plain, forlorn and wild' with intense heat. It is said that there is topographical similarities between the Phlegraean Fields lying close to Naples, Italy and Milton's description of Hell. This was the place Milton had visited before he became blind. However, after reading *Paradise Lost*, you feel that Hell is a state of mind.

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### **11.5. PARADISE LOST AS AN EPIC**

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It is common knowledge that in the seventeenth century, the models for an epic poet were Homer, Virgil, Tasso, Ariosto and Spenser. Highly ambitious as Milton was, he wanted to write an epic matching Homer and Virgil's epics. As he was well versed in Latin and Greek, he studied deeply all the classical epics and followed both Aristotle's rules as well as the conventions that grew in the process of time. Epic, as you know is a narrative poem on a large scale with a serious, exalted and universal subject matched by an equally exalted style. Constituent elements of an epic according to Aristotle are:

- a. Fable
- b. Probable and marvellous theme
- c. Characters
- d. Machinery
- e. Episodes
- f. Integrity
- g. Sentiments

h. Grand Style

As fable or story is the basis of the epic the poet generally selects a fable with a moral. Milton selects the fable of Biblical story of creation, of the fall of man, of the war between God and Satan followed by Satan's all eventually leading to the fall of man and his redemption by Christ's sacrifice and final restoration to Heaven again. The theme of an epic according to Aristotle must be 'probable and marvellous'. It must be grand and elevated but it should not be unconvincing or improbable. As is evident, theme of *ParadiseLost* is the 'finest ever chosen for heroic poetry' (Hallam). Milton does not select any small or trivial matter, instead he writes about the fate of worlds, of heaven and hell, rebellion against the mightiest God, Adam and Eve, their punishment, original happiness and innocence, the loss of immortality and the restoration of man to the state of bliss. His theme is universal and is true of all times, all climates and of all nations. The questions of Good and Evil, liberty and servility, monarchy or republic which are relevant even today find place in *ParadiseLost*. As having a momentous theme or event is not enough, an epic should have a multitude of characters, which are varied and are projected as representatives of mankind. Milton's characters are not equals-ordinary and typical-they are God, Christ, Adam, Eve, Satan and other angels. Though Satan is the rebel Archfiend against God, yet Milton projects him so skillfully that he appears to be the most exalted and the most depraved at the same time. What is so significant is that his angels and fiends are wonderful creations and are not abstractions. Satan bears remarkable resemblance to us-in his craving for liberty, spirit of vengeance deception, guile, anger, hatred, envy etc. yet he is sublime. In Homer and Virgil, gods and goddesses take part in the action. *ParadiseLost* follows the pattern of classical epics for in it except two human characters, the rest of the characters are supernatural beings- God, Satan, angels and fiends. However, significantly these supernaturals possess various human traits- spirit of revenge, scorn, rebellion etc. *ParadiseLost* lacks in episodes. Raphael's narration of the war in heaven and Michael's prophecy of changes to happen in this world are the only two episodes, however, they are not digressions and contribute towards the unity of the main action. *ParadiseLost* is a long narrative poem running into twelve books with several of episodes, digression, long narrative and descriptive passages. Milton weaves them all so skillfully that they neither appear disjointed nor hinder the progress of the story or the main action. The action fulfills Aristotle's condition that it should have a beginning, middle and an end. The action of *ParadiseLost* is contrived in hell, executed upon the earth and rounded off in heaven. There are some digressions and superfluities but they all end up giving pleasure. The only two human characters Adam and Eve express their sentiments of fear and repentance very effectively and beautifully. What strikes us most is how Milton projects supernaturals as human beings and ascribes them human sentiments. When Satan expresses his anger, envy and hatred against God, are we not also reminded of our helplessness and inaction against tyranny and exploitation by the authority? His spirit to seek, to find and not to yield and his craving for human freedom expressed in poetical language have inspired generations after generations. Milton's epic remains unsurpassed even today in its unique diction and eloquent, grand style. Milton uses all the three methods that contribute to sublime style. They are

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- a. Use of bold, relevant and apt metaphors which recall passages in Homer, Virgil, Horace, Dante and Spenser etc.
- b. He uses very frequently idioms and words of other languages like Latin, Greek etc.
- c. He provides a great variety to his verse by insertion, suppression, omission and shortening of syllables.

The main features of Milton's style may be summed up thus-

- i. Latin construction
- ii. Absolute construction
- iii. Ellipses
- iv. Interchange of Parts of Speech
- v. Inversion of Adjectives
- vi. Punning
- vii. Condensed Expression
- viii. Poetic use of Proper Names.

Weight, dignity, balance and precision are other qualities of his grand style.

### **OTHER CONVENTIONS OF EPIC POETRY**

- 1) Invoking the Muse- Milton follows the classical convention by invoking the muse to 'what in me is dark illumine, what is low, raise and support'.
- 2) Plunges in the Middle of the Action – As per the conventions of the classical epic, *ParadiseLost* also plunges into the middle of the action. Though criticized, this practice allows the poet to retrospect and introspect into the action.
- 3) Roll Call- In keeping with convention, Milton's roll call of devils is comparable to the catalogue of ships in Homer's *Illiad*.
- 4) Prophecy- Like Cassandra's of prophesy the Fall of troy, Archangel Michael also prophesies to Adam, the Fall of the mankind.
- 5) Epic Similes- Milton's employment of Homeric similes adds grandeur, ennobles and enriches his text. They are dealt at length elsewhere in unit. There is no doubt that Milton is very self-consciously using the material of earlier epics, and there is equally no doubt that he wants the reader to appreciate his enormous learning. He was aware that the test of the poet is to

bring the conventions alive, to reinvigorate them and perhaps even transform them as 'no precedents justify absurdity' (Dr. Johnson). Naturally therefore we find him transcend the classical conventions at several times:

- I. A classical epic according to Aristotle is a story of human action. *ParadiseLost* lacks human touch. Even Adam and Eve are prototypes rather than types-puritan wife and man and the first Man and first Woman in perfect bliss and innocence.
- II. Secondly, in a way, there is no hero in *ParadiseLost*. Satan displays some traits of a hero but how often do you meet a hero with negative traits? Milton's adds a new dimension to epic poetry by making Satan a central figure.
- III. Milton deviates from the classical tradition in not invoking the pagan Muse. Instead, he invokes the Holy Spirit, the Holy Muse.
- IV. The classical epic in Milton's hands becomes a mouth piece of Puritanism.
- V. Before Milton, the best literary epic had been predominantly secular; it was Milton who turned it into theological.

Milton's epic thus becomes an illustration of how the old traditional genres get modified at the hands of a genius in the course of time and get imbued with the spirit of the age. As an epic, *ParadiseLost* stands in a class apart in its blending of classicism and Puritanism, medieval theme and neo-classical compression of form.

### **11.5.1. MILTON'S EPIC SIMILES**

Simile as you know is a traditionally used literary device in epic poetry that embellishes and enriches the narrative. Milton, the epic writer makes frequent use of short and long similes to create a number of effects in his epic. He knew that he has chosen a very different theme for his epic and rightly therefore to make the theme comprehensible, he uses similes drawn from simple observation of nature, myth, legend, history, travel and science-from the Jew, the Christian and the Pagan history, Greek philosophy and Roman politics etc. The similes Milton uses are called Homeric long tailed similes-sometimes they run into several pages. Not satisfied with a single comparison, he proceeds from one to another. After comparing Satan's huge body with the sea-beast Leviathan, he goes on telling us the story of the pilot of some 'night foundered skiff'. At times, they reveal Milton's vast store of learning of classical literature and mythology. Thus, we find palace of Hell as something far beyond the magnificence of 'Babylone'. He draws from the tales and fancies of the middle Ages when he compares the dwarfed rebels of Hell to the 'faery elves' engaged in 'midnight revels'. While describing angels lying on the lack of fire, Milton draws simile from nature. He compares them to 'thick as autumnal leaves that stow the Brooks/ in Vallombrosa'. Not content with this, Milton links the description with its great predecessors and also opens a window to an episode of Biblical history .Some very highly effective and suggestive similes from contemporary social and

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political life make the narrative intelligible to the reader. Satan leaps over the walls of Paradise like a 'Prowling Wolf' whom hunger drives to seek new haunt for prey or as a thief-

bent to unhoard the cash

of some richer burger

When you read *Paradise Lost*, you get the impression that at times similes are expanded beyond the point of comparison which the occasion may or may not require. At such places, his similes appear superfluous, independent, unrelated and merely excursions of the imagination. Critics thus find them beautiful diversions, not integral to the theme. Addison, Johnson, Pope, T.S. Eliot, F.R. Lewis all support this view. Thus, the simile of Leviathan is expanded into several lines. Satan-Leviathan simile not only gives us an idea of physical enormity of Satan but also suggests the confusing magnitude of evil world in flux. When Milton compares the shield of Satan to the orb of the moon, he crowds the imagination with the discovery of the telescope and all the wonders which the telescope discovered at the time. The vast image of Satan alighting and walking on the dark, waste and wild globe runs into several lines with reference to Tartar bounds, Ganges, Hydaspes, Indian streams, Chinese plains etc. It appears at times that such long drawn similes detract the mind from the context. However, a closer look into the narration leads you to think that similes are not merely ornamental, decorative or digressive. They are in fact, an integral part of the poem and not diversions. Thus, when Eve is compared to Proserpine we get to know that she will be gathered by Satan as Proserpine will be gathered by Dis. Similes are also significant in that they provide relief to the readers who get bored with the descriptions of Hell and Heaven. Thus, fairy elves simile leads us to a moonlit English lane. His similes are rightly called epic similes for they have the quality of permanence and vastness about them and add grandeur and sublimity to his poetry. Illustrative of Milton's imaginative and artistic power, the similes are organic and justify themselves. They are also significant for they fuse the Christian and the classical elements – so dominating in Milton's poetry.

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### **11.6. REFORMATION AND RENAISSANCE ELEMENTS**

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The Reformation and Renaissance have been discussed in the earlier unit on Milton and His Age. You are well aware that Milton was writing in an age when the Renaissance spirit of love, adventure, chivalry, music and dance still prevailed and when Reformation with its insistence upon spiritual discipline, moral austerity and other worldly outlook continued to exist. As every artist represents the ethos of his times, Milton's literature too represents the two seemingly contrasting outlooks- of Renaissance and Reformation. Milton's religious bent of mind and his broad and enlightened outlook is evident in the epic. Greatly influenced by Calvinist doctrines, Milton selected the theme of the Fall of man wherein he condemns the mental levity of man who forgets easily the importance of his own actions. Adam and Eve commit error for which they are punished. Milton

upholds and justifies the Divine order. It is God under whose command the universe not only remains interconnected but also properly balanced. God's dispensation of punishment and award is thus always justified. Milton's love of the Psalms and the Book of Job is evident in his description of the glories of creation and its creator. The epic reveals Milton's deepest faith in God.

However, Milton's epic world would not have been so popular, so unique, if he had not incorporated the spirit of Renaissance in it. It will not be improper to say that the epic is the product of Renaissance learning, art and literature. The Renaissance spirit is woven in the following way- (a) Milton draws upon Ptolemaic theory of cosmology which was the most important Renaissance theory of cosmology. (b) Renaissance philosophy upholds that a life in which man is not responsible for his actions is meaningless. Milton shows that Adam and Eve as well as Satan had free will and are punished for their actions. (c) Satan even in his misery and defeat retains his individual worth and dignity. Satan says to his comrades 'Fallen Cherub, to be weak is miserable doing or suffering'. (d) Independence and not servility is what Satan craves for-

A mind not to be changed by place or time  
The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a Heaven of Hell, or Hell of Heaven.  
.....  
Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.

(e) Satan represents Renaissance thirst for knowledge, adventure and exploration in his break away from Hell and explores the immeasurable chaos and the newly created human world. (f) The epic is imbued with Milton's knowledge of classical art and learning. (g) Milton avoids the strict moral discipline and appreciates a free expansion of life.

Conclusively, Milton stands high upon merit for the splendid fusion and synthesis of the two great movements of his age- The Renaissance and the Reformation- a feat none could achieve after him.

### **11.6.1 HUMAN INTEREST IN PARADISE LOST**

Even a cursory glance at the epic advances the suggestion that *ParadiseLost* is about super humans - God, Satan, Angels etc., engaged in action in Heaven and Hell. Even the two heavenly characters- Adam and Eve are dissimilar to us- the original man and woman. They live in perfect isolation and a state of sinlessness- without business, without hopes or fears or memories, without experiencing death and joy. The reader fails to connect himself to the abstract theme of fight between good and evil as well as to the mythical characters existing in times immemorial. The machinery of *ParadiseLost* with its demonology and cosmology fails to evoke any interest. Milton's world appears far removed from the cheerful, multi-coloured world of his predecessors like Chaucer. In fact, Milton had the enormous objective of justifying the ways of God to man through his epic. His focus was to aim for 'raising the thoughts above sublunary cares or pleasures'.

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Naturally therefore, issues of ordinary nature, everyday occurrences, disputes, wars, fighting, trades could not find a place in his epic.

Despite all this lack of human interest, you could agree that while writing the epic, he had a lofty theme concerning the fortunes of the whole human race in his mind. He was involved in discussing the bigger though abstract issues- in such a case, there was no room for unraveling the mind and heart of man and analyze his actions.

### **EXERCISE 1**

1. Do you agree with the assumption free will is the theme of *Paradise Lost*?
2. Has Milton been able to justify in ways of God to Man?
3. *Paradise Lost* reveals Milton 'o life in almost all its important phases, Discuss.
4. The critics fail to find human interest in *Paradise Lost*. What is your perception?
5. Discuss *Paradise Lost* as an epic.
6. Trace and list all the epic/Homeric similes in Book I.

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### **11.7.AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENT IN *PARADISELOST*- THE MAN IN POETRY**

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However, hard an artist may try not to reveal himself in his works, he reveals himself consciously or unconsciously in his works. Milton is no exception here as he belongs to that group of poets who draw no line between their life and poetry. It will not be an exaggeration to say that Milton is in every line of *ParadiseLost*. Milton unlike others is not shy of expressing what lies inside him. His world view, his intense religious streak of personality, his conscious awareness of political strife between authoritarianism and liberty, along with his appreciation of beauty, adventure, music etc. all get expressed in the epic compelling critics to acknowledge *ParadiseLost* as the poet's emotional and spiritual autobiography. His love of liberty and republicanism against the King's monarchial rule is illustrated in Satan's revolt against God. He fought against feudal monarchy and defended and instigated the execution of Charles I. It appears that Satan fights on the side of Milton. Unwillingly driven to sympathize with Satan, Milton enlivens his portrait with his own personal feelings. The Puritanism, his religious ardour and hatred of a life of indulgence is expressed frequently. Besides, his skeptical attitude and passionate outburst against womanhood, there are several references to his blindness. It is true that in *ParadiseLost*, Milton has externalized his own inner strife.

#### **11.7.1 MILTON'S POLITICAL VIEWS**

While assessing Satan's character, it is important to relate him to Milton's political ideology. You have been told earlier about Milton's personal feelings against the restoration of the monarchy. Therefore, it is not hard to imagine that one of the greatest events in his personal life would have some impact on his greatest work. In the very

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beginning of *Paradise Lost*, he refers to 'the throne and monarchy of God' (1.42). His reference to the word 'monarchy' to describe God is especially significant as it reveals his intentions. Further, his references to the 'tyranny of Heaven' (1.124), and 'His throne upheld by old repute' (1.639) illustrate Milton's personal feelings regarding God's role. Milton's political views repeatedly show up in the poem. Satan appears to be cast in the role of a downtrodden freedom fighter leading his troops against a vastly superior oppressive enemy- a role bearing similarity to Milton and others who vehemently opposed tyrannical rule of monarch-

'We will strike back'. Or we will find a way, either through force or guile, to continue our fight against our tyrannical oppressor. We now have an idea of his true strength, and are now better able to plan our next assault.

Further, Satan's replies to the angels' question exhibit his intense hatred of servility-

Suffer we may, but of this you can be sure; we will never submit to the government's will.

and

We have lost so much.....but it is better to be poor and free, than wealthy and subject to the government's whim.

Satan's figure seems to emanate from Milton's perception of a stereotypical leader. He is courageous and ambitious but is hampered by his pride. In the beginning of the epic, he curses himself for the loss and wretched condition of the fallen angels. However, his unconquerable will strengthens further his determination to fight against the 'merciless' God. He delivers a rousing speech in the manner of a true leader. He praises his troops for their prowess, expresses his amazement at their defeat and reassures them of their ultimate win. As a strategist, he resolves to change his tactics- justifying fraud and deception to defeat the oppressors. He is a charismatic hero as he ends up ordering his men salute in union. In other Books, also Milton continues to project Satan as the spokesman of his political philosophy.

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### **11.8. SATAN – THE QUESTION OF HERO OF *PARADISE LOST***

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By now you might have formed the idea that *Paradise Lost* is not simply an epic poem but a defense of God's goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil. However, at the same time, you get an idea of the importance Milton attached to the character of Satan. William Blake even went to the extent of saying that Milton was 'of Devil's party without knowing it'. Blake's comment may be an exaggeration but perhaps he is making a valid observation. Shelley too corroborates Blake when he wrote-

Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in *Paradise Lost*. It is a mistake to suppose that he could ever have been intended for the popular personification of even...Milton's devils is a moral being is as far superior to...God.

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Though Milton writes about the events of the creation and the fall of man, his focus is not so much on the roles of God or Adam or Eve, but on the actions of Satan. This fact has been the subject of much debate since the publication of *Paradise Lost*.

There has been a great controversy as to who is the hero of *Paradise Lost*? Did Milton intend Satan to represent the classic incarnation of evil and villainy or did he carefully craft a version of Satan with which the reader is supposed to sympathize? You might well say that hero is one that takes the place of Achilles in the *Iliad* or Odysseus in the *Odyssey*? What character holds our attention as engaged in the most intense and typical dramatic conflict for the longest period? Various answers are floated: Satan is the most magnificent character (until he is degraded and turned into a snake); God is the most powerful in the poem; Adam and Eve are the human protagonists. Which actually is the central figure? Is it Milton himself, who embarks on to sort out the deep conflict between his imaginative sympathy for the rebels and his deep abhorrence of God's justice (his blindness) and his compulsion that the narrative requires God to be just, merciful and justifiable. In fact, much of the reader's fascination lies in the narrator's moral confusion.

It was Dryden who first of all expressed his opinion that Satan is the hero of *Paradise Lost*. Later on romantic critics and poets like Hazlitt, Shelley, Burns and William Blake endorsed Dryden's claim. Addison however in 18<sup>th</sup> century claimed that hero is the Messiah, while Blackmore opined that the hero is Adam. Shelley in *Preface to Prometheus Unbound* called Satan as the hero, though he found his virtues to be tainted with ambition, envy and courage. Hazlitt also appreciated Satan's daring ambition and fierce passion for freedom. Critics in 20<sup>th</sup> century however disagree with the earlier view and explain that Satan no doubt is a powerfully drawn character but as he is depicted as degenerating, hence does not lay any claim to our admiration and is thus not the hero of *Paradise Lost*. Critics may differ in their opinion but the fact remains that Satan is the most unforgettable character in *Paradise Lost*. Actually, what checks his from accepting his as the hero is our typical midget. We assume that when the prince of darkness appears, his intentions and motivation must also be nothing else but evil. How could such a malicious figure be considered a heroic figure?

You now know that *Paradise Lost* deviates from a classical epic in many respects. It has been called as an inverted epic or anti epic. Actually, Milton has trusted the epic conventions to serve his purpose-to retell the Biblical account of creation and fall as given in Genesis and to give an account of his own Christian world view.

Milton seems to deviate from epic conventions in making Satan as the hero or more accurately the anti-hero Satan is the tragic hero to be destroyed by the end. Satan's flaw is his sinful nature and his inability to accept God's forgiveness. It is in this sense; Satan becomes the metaphor for the ultimate sinner. Such a person deserves punishment- this is what Milton wants to convey.

When you meet Satan having invincible courage and an irrepressible will, you realize that Milton makes Satan mocking sin and evil. Despite all this, Satan's character appears so

real and so human that it appeals to us all. Milton's poetic talent unwittingly makes Satan's presence as the most memorable.

The hero is someone at the centre of the reader's attention. Milton placed his Satan directly in that imagination Satan is the main point of view from which we experience the action.

Milton's Satan draws analogy with heroes of the classical epics. He is compared to Achilles, Odysseus and Jason on their heroic voyages, Satan is the chief warrior, powerful speaker, able to rally and organize his troops. The extraordinary powerful depiction of Satan qualifies his claim to be an unforgettable character:

What though the field be lost?  
All is not lost: the unconquerable will,  
And study of revenge, immortal hate  
And courage never to submit or yield  
And what is else not to be overcome?

These are the very lines which Winston Churchill spoke to the British people after the military disaster of Dunkirk. As a powerful and complex character, who seeks to assert his identity against invincible odds and refuses to bow in submission to the tyrant, Milton's Satan stands in a class apart.

Moreover, Satan bears similarity to the hero in a classical tragedy. Like the hero in tragedy, Satan's fatal flaw is his lack of self knowledge; he has no ability to recognize his own limitations. His for much self-confidence and pride does not let him realize that he can never win in a contest between the creator and the created being Satan's fall is evident in his moving away from reigning in Hell' in Book I to his transformation into a 'monstrous serpent Hell by the power of God.

**God** as per Book 1 is tyranny incarnate. Nearly one third of the angels of heaven rebelled against God under the leadership of Satan. God is projected as merciless for he drives the rebellions angels out of heaven and throw them headlong down into Hell. He is pitiless because he subjected the fallen angels burning lake.

**Satan**, the evil incarnate despised the authority of God. Jealous as he was of God's powers, glory and position, he instigated other angels to rise up in arms against God.

**Beelzebub**- Next to Satan in power and crime was Beelzebub. He was an archangel in Heaven and for his conspiracy against God, was pushed out of Heaven. Though defeated he remains undaunted and is prepared to resume the war against God with new courage.

**Train of Devils** – A number of devils demons, monsters and spirits fell from Heaven with Satan. The description of the principal devils is given below-

**Moloch** was the first to rise from the burning lake at Satan's call. He has a horrible appearance, besmeared with blood. Children were sacrificed on his altar.

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**Chemos**- Next in power to Moloch was Chemos. His other name was Peor-a very lustful and obscene angel he was. People dreaded him.

**Thammuz**- The young Syrian Virgins offered love songs upon his altar.

**Baalim and Ashtoreth, Dagon, Rimmon, OsirisIsis, Orus** were their fallen angles.

**Belial** – He was the most lustful and wicked devil. No temple was made in his memory but he polluted the temples and altars of God. He and his followers mission was to pollute the people.

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### **11.9. MILTON’S USE OF BLANK VERSE**

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After Surrey, Marlow, Shakespeare who used blank very every impressively, it degenerated into rhythmical prose. Earlier Dryden held the view that rhymed couplet was best suited by sublime tragedy or poetry and that blank verse could be used only for the lighter and more colloquial purposes of comedy. It was left to Milton to turn it into a worthy epic metre. You should know that Paradise Lost is the first English epic written in blank verse.

His most important contribution is his use of verse paragraph which he carried to artistic and architectonic perfection. The sense flows onto the next line. In fact, the unit of Milton’s verse is paragraph, the smaller unit is the ten-syllable line. The ten syllable are commonly grouped in pairs and the lines contain any number of stresses from three to eight. These stresses are not uniform as they differ in degree and in position. The pause is generally found in the middle, though at times it is found even after the first syllable as in

.....But not to me returns

Day, or the sweet approach of ev’n or morn

The first verse para of Paradise Lost Book I contains the essential rhythmical pause as well as the grammatical ones. The first six lines are done here-

Of man’s/first dis/obed/ience/and/the/fruit

Of the/forbid/den tree/whose more/tal taste

Brought death/into/the world/and all/our woe,

With loss/of ed/ en/till/ one great/ er man

Restore/ us// and/ regain/the bliss/ ful seat

Sing, heaven/ ly muse// that one/ the sec/ ret to...

The run on lines and pauses here add to the continuity of rhythm and sense. Besides, the continual changes of pace and stress give Milton’ blank verse a compelling charm and

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does not allow it to be monotonous. Further, Milton makes effective use of inverted stress, full stresses quickening the pace of the line, slowing down of the normal pace.

It will be right to say that no other metre allows such a variety as blank verse, and no other metrist makes a more splendid use of this freedom than Milton. Milton's verse is by far more musical than that of any other English poet. The music of his verse is superb, delicate and sweet. Even Spenser who is said to be the most harmonious of our poets and Dryden who is considered to be the most sounding and varied of rhymes slay behind in having the same ear for music as Milton had a harmony between sense and sound, rise and fall, pause and hurry characterizes his poetry. His poetry abounds in exquisitely modulated passages where the verse floats up and down as if at had wings, in fact evince the interest of Elizabethans who diligently practiced and cultivated a taste for music. Unlike Tennyson, Milton had not to make conscious efforts to assemble musical sounds and study musical effects.

### **EXERCISE 2**

1. How far do you agree that in spite of himself, he (Milton) was in deep sympathy with Satan, the great rebel of Heaven and The Enemy of God?
2. Show how Satan's portrayal reveals Renaissance spirit of challenge, inquiry and adventure.
3. The epic *Paradise lost* is a mental pilgrimage: the loss of one paradise and the finding on this earth of a paradise within the happier far "*Tillyard*). Do you think that *Paradise Lost* has not lost its relevance even today? Discuss.

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### **11.10. SUMMING UP**

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In a nutshell, *Paradise Lost* is one of the most powerful poems of the modern world and it still has great impact today. The epic is significant because it invites readers to interpret traditions surrounding the genesis story and find how this story is treated in various religious texts of our times. It offers a study in the epic tradition of poetry which seems to have found lesser favour with the exponents of poetry today. Besides, it throws light on certain questions hotly debated in the seventeenth century- marital relationship, challenges of love, work, education, change, temptation, deception, what is tyranny servitude and liberty, resistance and rebellion against the authority, monarchical rule vs. republication-all these issues are very relevant even today – *Paradise Lost* seeks to answer them all.

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### **11.11. GLOSSARY**

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**The Forbidden Tree-** The tree of knowledge of good and evil in the Garden Eden - Despite being it forbidden, Eve and Adam ate the fruit at the behest of Satan. They lost the state of innocence they were punished by God and driven away from Eden.

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**Pandemonium** – Milton’s Pandemonium was the capital Eden built to receive all the devils. It is a place full of noise, confusion and discard.

**HomericofEpicSimiles**- Similes are called Homeric because the Greek epic poet Homer was the first to use them. They have been used by all the succeeding epic similes. Rightly therefore they are called epic similes.

**Leviathan** – a huge sea creature. In Hebrew mythology, Leviathan is the monster that brings about eclipses by swallowing the Sun and Moon in its capacious mouth, thus drawing an analogy to the demon Rahu in Hindu Mythology.

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### **11.12. ANSWERS TO SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS**

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#### **EXERCISE 1**

1. Refer to the section 11.4.3.
2. Refer to the Section 11.4.
3. Go through the section 11.7.
4. Refer to the Section 11.6.1.
5. Refer to the Section 11.5 and 11.5.1.

#### **EXERCISE 2**

1. Refer to the section 11.8.1.
2. Refer to the section 11.6 and 11.8.1.
3. Go through the whole unit and frame your answer.

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### **11.13. REFERENCE**

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### **11.14.TERMINAL AND MODEL QUESTIONS**

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Q1.“Devoutly, but mechanically, Milton paid lip service to the duty of obedience, but in his heart he was chanting a hymn to freedom and rebellion.” Explain and illustrate.

Q2. Comment on the view that in *Paradise Lost*, Milton has externalised his own inner strife.

Q3. "The briefest survey of Milton's religious thought and feelings makes sufficiently absurd the romantic idea that he was of the devil's party without knowing it." Discuss the appropriateness of this observation.

**UNIT 12**    **Neoclassicism**

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12.1 Introduction

12.2 Objectives

12.3 Neoclassicism

12.4 Characteristics

    12.4.1 The New Restraint

    12.4.2 Influence of Classics

    12.4.3 Assumptions

    12.4.4 Social themes

    12.4.5 The Age of Reason

12.5 The Neo-Classical School of Poetry

    12.5.1 Realism, Didacticism and Satire

    12.5.2 Heroic Couplet

12.6 Summary

12.7 References

**12.1 Introduction**

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In this section we will discuss and analyze the neoclassical movement and its major characteristics. In the previous unit we read Milton. Now we will study the features of the neoclassical poetry and the works of its major representatives, John Dryden and Alexander Pope.

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**1.2 Objectives**

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After reading this unit you would be able to:

- understand the neoclassical movement
  - explain and understand the major characteristics of the movement
  - understand the poetic developments of the period
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**12.3 Neo-Classicism**

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The English Neoclassical movement (see Boileau's *L'Art Poetique* (1674)) and Pope's "Essay on Criticism" (1711) as critical statements of Neoclassical principles) embodied a group of attitudes toward art and human existence — ideals of order, logic, restraint, accuracy, correctness, decorum, and so on, which would enable the practitioners of various arts to imitate or reproduce the structures and themes of Greek or Roman originals. Neoclassicism dominated English literature from the Restoration in 1660 until the end of the eighteenth century, when the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) by Wordsworth and Coleridge marked the full emergence of Romanticism.

The Neoclassic period can be roughly divided into three relatively coherent parts: the Restoration Age (1660-1700), in which Milton, Bunyan, and Dryden were the dominant influences; the Augustan Age (1700-1750), in which Pope was the central poetic figure, while Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett were presiding over the sophistication of the novel; and the Age of Johnson (1750-1798), which, while it was dominated and characterized by the mind and personality of the inimitable Dr. Samuel Johnson, whose sympathies were with the fading Augustan past, saw the beginnings of a new understanding and appreciation of the work of Shakespeare, the development, by Sterne and others, of the novel of sensibility, and the emergence of the Gothic school — attitudes which, in the context of the development of a cult of Nature, the influence of German romantic thought, religious tendencies like the rise of Methodism, and political events like the American and French revolutions — established the intellectual and emotional foundations of English Romanticism.

To a certain extent Neoclassicism represented a reaction against the optimistic, exuberant, and enthusiastic Renaissance view of man as a being fundamentally good and possessed of an infinite potential for spiritual and intellectual growth. Neoclassical theorists, by contrast, saw man as an imperfect being, inherently sinful, whose potential

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was limited. They replaced the Renaissance emphasis on the imagination, on invention and experimentation, and on mysticism with an emphasis on order and reason, on restraint, on common sense, and on religious, political, economic and philosophical conservatism. They maintained that man himself was the most appropriate subject of art, and saw art itself as essentially pragmatic — as valuable because it was somehow useful — and as something which was properly intellectual rather than emotional.

Hence their emphasis on proper subject matter; and hence their attempts to subordinate details to an overall design, to employ in their work concepts like symmetry, proportion, unity, harmony, and grace, which would facilitate the process of delighting, instructing, educating, and correcting the social animal which they believed man to be. Their favourite prose literary forms were the essay, the letter, the satire, the parody, the burlesque, and the moral fable; in poetry, the favourite verse form was the rhymed couplet, which reached its greatest sophistication in heroic couplet of Pope; while the theatre saw the development of the heroic drama, the melodrama, the sentimental comedy, and the comedy of manners. The fading away of Neoclassicism may have appeared to represent the last flicker of the Enlightenment, but artistic movements never really die: many of the primary aesthetic tenets of Neoclassicism, in fact have reappeared in the twentieth century — in, for example, the poetry and criticism of T. S. Eliot — as manifestations of a reaction against Romanticism itself: Eliot saw Neo-classicism as emphasising poetic form and conscious craftsmanship, and Romanticism as a poetics of personal emotion and "inspiration," and pointedly preferred the former.

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### **12.4 Characteristics**

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After the Renaissance—a period of exploration and expansiveness—came a reaction in the direction of order and restraint. Generally speaking, this reaction developed in France in the mid-seventeenth century and in England thirty years later; and it dominated European literature until the last part of the eighteenth century.

#### **12.4.1 The New Restraint**

Writers turned from inventing new words to regularizing vocabulary and grammar. Complex, boldly metaphorical language, such as Shakespeare used in his major tragedies, is clarified and simplified—using fewer and more conventional figures of speech. Mystery and obscurity are considered symptoms of incompetence rather than signs of grandeur. The ideal style is lucid, polished, and precisely appropriate to the genre of a work and the social position of its characters. Tragedy and high comedy, for example, use the language of cultivated people and maintain a well-bred tone. The crude humor of the gravediggers' in *Hamlet* or the pulling out of Gloucester's eyes in *King Lear* would no longer be admitted in tragedy. Structure, like tone, becomes more simple and unified. In contrast to Shakespeare's plays, those of neoclassical playwrights such as Racine and Moliere develop a single plot line and are strictly limited in time and place (often, like Moliere's *The Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe*, to a single setting and a single day's time).

#### **12.4.2 Influence of the Classics**

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The period is called *neoclassical* because its writers looked back to the ideals and art forms of classical times, emphasizing even more than their Renaissance predecessors the classical ideals of order and rational control. Their respect for the past led them to be conservative both in art and politics. Always aware of the conventions appropriate to each genre, they modeled their works on classical masterpieces and heeded the "rules" thought to be laid down by classical critics. In political and social affairs, too, they were guided by the wisdom of the past: traditional institutions had, at least, survived the test of time. No more than their medieval and Renaissance predecessors did neoclassical thinkers share our modern assumption that change means progress, since they believed that human nature is imperfect, human achievements are necessarily limited, and therefore human aims should be sensibly limited as well.

### **12.4.3 Neoclassical Assumptions and Their Implications**

Neoclassical thinkers could use the past as a guide for the present because they assumed that human nature was constant--essentially the same regardless of time and place. Art, they believed, should express this essential nature: "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature" (Samuel Johnson). An individual character was valuable for what he or she revealed of universal human nature. But neoclassical artists more consciously emphasized common human characteristics over individual differences.

If human nature has remained constant over the centuries, it is unlikely that any startling new discoveries will be made. Hence neoclassical artists did not strive to be original so much as to express old truths in a newly effective way. As Alexander Pope, one of their greatest poets wrote: "True wit is nature to advantage dressed, / What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed." Neoclassical writers aimed to articulate general truth rather than unique vision, to communicate to others more than to express themselves.

### **12.4.4 Social Themes**

Neoclassical writers saw themselves, as well as their readers and characters, above all as members of society. Social institutions might be foolish or corrupt--indeed, given the intrinsic limitations of human nature, they probably were--but the individual who rebelled against custom or asserted his superiority to humankind was presented as presumptuous and absurd. While Renaissance writers were sometimes fascinated by rebels, and later Romantic artists often glorified them, neoclassical artists expected people to conform to established social norms. For individual opinion was far less likely to be true than was the consensus of society, developed over time and embodied in custom and tradition. As the rules for proper writing should be followed, so should the rules for civilized conduct in society. Neither Moliere nor Jane Austen advocate blind following of convention, yet both insist that good manners are important as a manifestation of self-control and consideration for others.

**12.4.5 The Age of Reason**

The classical ideals of order and moderation which inspired this period, its realistically limited aspirations, and its emphasis on the common sense of society rather than individual imagination, could all be characterized as rational. And, indeed, it is often known as the Age of Reason. Reason had traditionally been assumed to be the highest mental faculty, but in this period many thinkers considered it a sufficient guide in all areas. Both religious belief and morality were grounded on reason: revelation and grace were de-emphasized, and morality consisted of acting rightly to one's fellow beings on this earth. John Locke, the most influential philosopher of the age, analyzed logically how our minds function (1690), argued for religious toleration (1689), and maintained that government is justified not by divine right but by a "social contract" that is broken if the people's natural rights are not respected.

As reason should guide human individuals and societies, it should also direct artistic creation. Neoclassical art is not meant to seem a spontaneous outpouring of emotion or imagination. Emotion appears, of course; but it is consciously controlled. A work of art should be logically organized and should advocate rational norms. Sharp and brilliant wit, produced within the clearly defined ideals of neoclassical art, and focused on people in their social context, make this perhaps the world's greatest age of comedy and satire.

—Adapted from *A Guide to the Study of Literature: A Companion Text for Core Studies 6, Landmarks of Literature*, ©English Department, Brooklyn College.

**12.5 The Neo-Classical School of Poetry**

Generally, the period between 1680 and 1750 is called the Augustan age in English literature, for frequent comparisons were made between the literary activity of the England of this period and that of the Rome of Emperor Augustus which produced such poetic geniuses as Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and many others. Dr. Johnson in his characteristic way said that Dryden did for English poetry what Augustus had done for the city of Rome—"he found it brick and left it marble."

Dryden and Pope were the greatest poets of the Augustan age. They conscientiously looked to the writers of Greek and Roman antiquity for guidance and inspiration. However, most of all, they were influenced by the Roman poets of the age of Augustus. They discredited the tradition of the decadent metaphysicals and established a new school of poetry which has since come to be known as the neoclassical school of English poetry. Though something had already been done before Dryden by Denham and Waller yet much was left to be done by Dryden himself and, still later, by Pope. The neo-classicism of Dryden and Pope was representative of the spirit of the age. The Restoration age marked the close of the genuine "romanticism" of the Elizabethan period and also the decadent romanticism of the Jacobean and Caroline periods. The creative imagination, exuberant fancy, and extravagance of the past had no appeal for an age which saw the establishment of the Royal Society and the inauguration of a new era of experimental

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science. A critical spirit was aboard, and men stopped taking things for granted. The spirit of the age was analytic and inquisitive, not synthetic and naively credulous. It put a greater stress on reason and intellect than on passion and imagination. The neoclassical poetry of Dryden, Pope, and their contemporaries was a manifestation of this new spirit.

Cazamian observes: "The literary transition--from the Renaissance to the Restoration is nothing more or less than the progressive movement of a spirit of liberty at once fanciful, brilliant, and adventurous towards a rule and discipline both in inspiration and in form." The neo-classicists were champions of common sense and reason and were in favour of normal generalities against the whims and eccentricities of individual genius. These normal generalities went under the term "Nature." Pope's advice to writers was to "follow Nature." Curiously enough, the slogan of Rousseau and the English romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge who reacted against the school of Pope, was also the same. But "Nature" for the romantics meant something entirely different--primitive simplicity and the world of forests, flowers, birds, streams, etc. Dryden and Pope laid special stress on the imitation of the ancients and the observance of the rules formulated or adhered to by them. For the rules of the ancients were, in the words of Pope, "Nature still, but Nature methodised." Neoclassical poets abundantly translated and adapted classical works. Thus Dryden gave a verse translation of Virgil, and Pope of Homer. Even the original works of the English neo-classicists have rich echoes of classical writers.

### **Influence of the French Neo-classicists:**

The neo-classical school of Dryden and Pope was much influenced by the neo-classical French school of the age of Louis XIV which goes down in history as the "golden" or "Augustan" age of French literature. According to W. H. Hudson *An Outline History of English Literature*, "the contemporary literature of France was characterised by lucidity, vivacity, and—by reason of the close attention given to form—correctness, elegance, and finish...It was moreover a literature in which intellect was in the ascendant and the critical faculty always in control." It was a literature of good sense and regularity and order.

One of the important tenets of the French neo-classical criticism was the theory of kinds or genres. Traditional criticism in the age of Dryden and Pope also worked through a reverent attention to these genres which the French critics had derived from the classics. Aristotle, the godhead of all criticism for the neo-classicists, had dealt with only two genres--epic and tragedy. But by the middle of the seventeenth century many more genres came to be recognized. The English poets adopted the important genre of mock-epic from the French neo-classicists. The most influential mock epic was Boileau's *Le Lutrin* which provided a model for such excellent English mock epics as Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe*, Garth's *The Dispensary*, and Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* and even *The Dunciad*.

### **12.5.1 Realism, Didacticism, and Satire:**

Much of romantic poetry is marked by lack of realism amounting at times to sheer escapism. Classicism, on the other hand, puts special emphasis on concrete reality and

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aims preeminently at edification and improvement of the reader. That is why much of classical poetry is realistic, didactic, and satiric. Almost all classical poets were men of action very much in the thick of life and its pressing affairs. They wrote with a very clear and concrete purpose, not just for the fun of it or for fulfilling a pressing necessity of self-revelation. Political, religious, and even personal satire became in the Augustan era the vogue of the day. If the neo-classical poet was not satiric, he was, at least, sure to be didactic. It is very rarely that we come across in this age such a poem as Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard*, which is "a poem without a purpose" aiming neither at instruction nor at ridicule nor chastisement through satire. To quote some instances, Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* and *The Medal* are political satires, and his *Mac Flecknoe* a personal satire. Pope's most important poems, like *The Dunciad*, *The Rape of the Lock*, and *The Epistle to Afbuthnot*, are all satires. Most of the rest of his poems, like his "Moral Essays", are didactic in aim. A subject on which neo-classical poets showed much brilliance was dullness—the dullness of some specific rivals or the collective dullness of all of them put together. *The Dunciad* and *Mac Flecknoe* show how dullness can serve as a target of brilliant satire. Some of neo-classical poems are too much topical in nature, and all of them are full of contemporary references, and they need exhaustive annotation to become comprehensible to the reader of today who is unfamiliar with the atmosphere out of which these poems grew and which was very well known to the readers of that age. The poems of the romantics, on the other hand, are largely free from contemporary references, for the romantic poet, generally speaking, is not a man of action and affairs and scarcely lives on the common, humdrum earth. He lives, instead, in a world of his own fancy with

*magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.*

One explanation for the realism of neo-classical poetry is that the neo-classical poet wrote as a civilised man speaking to other civilised men, not, like a romantic poet, an eerie voice 'speaking from the clouds.' The works of neo-classical poets were appraised not in literary journals but in drawing-rooms and coffee-houses. Neoclassical poetry, then, is what the French call *vers de societe*. The aim of the neo-classical poet was not only self-revelation but arguing and convincing with the help of either real logic or rhetoric (which has been called "specious logic"). Satire also came in handy for the purpose. Being in all respects a normal member of the community, the neo-classical poet made it a point to write poems on festive or important public occasions such as the coronation of a king, the recovery from illness of a dignitary, a national victory in a battle, and so on. Dryden's *Astraea Redux* commemorated the coronation of Charles II, his *Annus Mirabilis* had for its theme the Great Fire of 1666 and the defeat of the Dutch Fleet in the same year, his *Medal* was occasioned as a reaction against the jubilation of the Whigs at the release of the Earl of Shaftesbury in 1681 and their striking a medal in his honour. Addison's *The Campaign* was written to commemorate the Allies' victory in the battle of Blenheim. Much of Swift's poetry is also occasional in nature. Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* and some other poems also got started off by one real happening or another.

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Being *vers de societe*, it is natural for neo-classical poetry to be town poetry, or even "drawing-room poetry" having little contact with the "barbarous" world of nature which to some romantics appealed as a deity and to all as a source of inspiration and a perennial theme for poetry. About this aspect of neo-classical poetry W. H. Hudson observes: "It is almost exclusively a "town" poetry, made out of the interests of 'society' in the great centres of culture. The humbler aspects of life are neglected in it, and it shows no real love of nature, landscape, ordinary things and people." The neo-classicists were averse to the description of natural beauty, however appealing. Pope in his maturity disapproved of his earlier poem *Windsor Forest* because in it, to quote himself, "mere description held the place of sense."

### **No Imagination or Passionate Lyricism:**

Being cultured men of society, neo-classical poets held all passion as suspect, as something primitive and uncultured. Lyricism therefore declined and very few good lyrics were produced in the age of Dryden and Pope. Dryden did write a few good lyrics. "but they, too, are "classical" in spirit, for in them he was fully objective and rigorously correct. He never gave a free play to his emotions. In neoclassical poetry wit and intellect took the place of passion and imagination. It is only now and then that the neo-classical poet deals with human passion, as for instance Pope in his *Eloisa to Abelard*. Pope mostly dealt with poetry as if it were just an intellectual exercise to please himself and his friends and to frighten his enemies. He liked such poetic toys as acrostics, puzzles, puns, anagrams, and so on which showed his intellect and art rather than any deep poetic passion or inspiration. For instance, consider the following couplets by him which are expressive of wit rather than romantic poetic fury:

"Epigram engraved on the collar of a dog which I gave to His Royal Highness"

I am his Highness 'dog at Kew,  
Pray, tell me, sir, whose dog are you?

You Beat your Pate, and Fancy Wit will come;  
Knock as you please, there's nobody at home.

"Epitaph"

Here Francis Charters lies. Be civil;  
The rest God knows—perhaps the Devil!

"The Balance of Europe" Now Europe's balanc'd, neither side prevails:  
For nothing 'd left in either of the Scales.

### **12.5.2 HeroicCouplet:**

The neo-classical poet put a special premium upon beautiful and effective expression. He did not mind even if the thought sought to be expressed was stale. As Pope puts it,

True Wit is Nature to advantage dress'd,  
What oft was thought but ne'er so well express 'd.

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The heroic couplet became with neo-classic poets the most favoured of verse measures. It was Dryden who took this measure from Waller and Denham and polished it into a very effective medium of narrative and satiric poetry. It was left for Pope to perfect the heroic couplet and to employ it as the effective expression for all kinds of poetry. R. P. C. Mutter and Kinkead-Weekes observe in Introduction to *Selected Poems and Letters of Alexander Pope* : "From Dryden's extremely varied achievement in the heroic couplet Pope learnt how it could be made flowing and easy, or packed and concise, how it could be wittily antithetical or tenderly elegiac." Whereas neo-classical poets expressed themselves mostly in the heroic couplet or such "recognized" measures as the heroic stanza (making exception for the irregular and intricate measures of the so-called Pindaric ode), romantic poets revived a large number of stanzaic patterns and invented many on their own. In the age of Dryden and Pope much stress was laid on the "correctness" of sentiment and form, and the heroic couplet with all its neatness and precision embodied well the desired correctness of form.

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### **12.6 Summary**

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In this unit we read about the neoclassical age and its beliefs. We also discussed its major characteristics and the features of the poetry in this age. Dryden and Pope turned out to be the leading followers of this thought.

#### **Check your progress**

- (i) What do you understand by the term neoclassical?
- (ii) Discuss the major characteristics of the neo-classical thought.
- (iii) Describe the salient features of neo-classical poetry.
- (iv) Write a short note on the major writers of the neoclassical age.
- (v) Name some of the major poetic works of the age.
- (vi) What do you understand by the heroic couplet? Give examples.

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### **12.7 References**

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**Unit 13**                      **Dryden: *Absalom and Achitophel***

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13.1 Introduction

13.2 Objectives

13.3 The author and the text

13.3.1 John Dryden

13.3.2 *Absalom and Achitophel*: About the poem

13.3.2.1 Biblical Background

13.3.2.2 Historical background

13.3.3 Summary of the poem

13.3.4 Structure

13.4 Characters

13.5 Theme

13.6 Summary

13.7 References

### 13.1 Introduction

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In the earlier unit we discussed the neoclassical movement and understood its basic characteristics and assumptions. In this unit we will discuss one of the greatest neoclassical poets John Dryden and his famous work *Absalom and Achitophel*.

### 13.2 Objectives

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In this unit we will

- Discuss the life and works of John Dryden
- Analyse *Absalom and Achitophel*
- Understand the background related to the poem
- Analyze the characters of the poem

### 13.3 The Author and the text

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#### 13.3.1 John Dryden

Dryden was born in the village rectory of Aldwincle near Thrapston in Northamptonshire, where his maternal grandfather was Rector of All Saints. He was the eldest of fourteen children born to Erasmus Dryden and wife Mary Pickering. As a boy Dryden lived in the nearby village of Titchmarsh, Northampton shire where it is also likely that he received his first education. In 1644 he was sent to Westminster School as a King's Scholar. As a humanist public school, Westminster maintained a curriculum which trained pupils in the art of rhetoric and the presentation of arguments for both sides of a given issue. This is a skill which remained with Dryden and influenced his later writing and thinking. The Westminster curriculum also included weekly translation assignments which developed Dryden's capacity for assimilation. This was also to be exhibited in his later works. In 1650 Dryden went up to Trinity College, Cambridge. Though there is little specific information on Dryden's undergraduate years, he would most certainly have followed the standard curriculum of classics, rhetoric, and mathematics. In 1654 he obtained his BA, graduating top of the list for Trinity that year.

Returning to London during The Protectorate, Dryden obtained work with Cromwell's Secretary of State, John Thurloe. At Cromwell's funeral on 23 November 1658 Dryden processed with the Puritan poets John Milton and Andrew Marvell. Shortly thereafter he published his first important poem, *Heroique Stanzas* (1658), a eulogy on Cromwell's death which is cautious and prudent in its emotional display. In 1660 Dryden celebrated the Restoration of the monarchy and the return of Charles II with *Astraea Redux*, an authentic royalist panegyric. In this work the interregnum is illustrated as a time of anarchy, and Charles is seen as the restorer of peace and order.

**Later life and career**

After the Restoration, Dryden quickly established himself as the leading poet and literary critic of his day and he transferred his allegiances to the new government. Along with *Astraea Redux*, Dryden welcomed the new regime with two more panegyrics; *To His Sacred Majesty: A Panegyric on his Coronation* (1662), and *To My Lord Chancellor* (1662). These, and his other non-dramatic poems, are occasional—that is, they celebrate public events. In November 1662 Dryden was proposed for membership in the Royal Society, and he was elected an early fellow. However, Dryden was inactive in Society affairs and in 1666 was expelled for non-payment of his dues.

With the reopening of the theatres after the Puritan ban, Dryden busied himself with the composition of plays. His first play, *The Wild Gallant* appeared in 1663, and was not successful, but later he was contracted to produce three plays a year for the King's Company in which he became a shareholder. During the 1660s and 70s theatrical writing was his main source of income. He led the way in Restoration comedy, his best known work being *Marriage à la Mode* (1672), as well as heroic tragedy and regular tragedy, in which his greatest success was *All for Love* (1678). In 1667, around the same time his dramatic career began, he published *Annus Mirabilis*, a lengthy historical poem which described the events of 1666; the English defeat of the Dutch naval fleet and the Great Fire of London. It was a modern epic in pentameter quatrains that established him as the preeminent poet of his generation, and was crucial in his attaining the posts of Poet Laureate (1668) and historiographer royal (1670).

When the Great Plague of London closed the theatres in 1665 Dryden retreated to Wiltshire where he wrote *Of Dramatick Poesie* (1668), arguably the best of his unsystematic prefaces and essays. Dryden constantly defended his own literary practice, and *Of Dramatick Poesie*, the longest of his critical works, takes the form of a dialogue in which four characters—each based on a prominent contemporary, with Dryden himself as 'Neander'—debate the merits of classical, French and English drama. The greater part of his critical works introduce problems which he is eager to discuss, and show the work of a writer of independent mind who feels strongly about his own ideas. He felt strongly about the relation of the poet to tradition and the creative process, and his best heroic play *Aureng-zebe* (1675) has a prologue which denounces the use of rhyme in serious drama. His play *All for Love* (1678) was written in blank verse, and was to immediately follow *Aureng-Zebe*.

Dryden's greatest achievements were in satiric verse: the mock-heroic *MacFlecknoe*, a more personal product of his Laureate years, was a lampoon circulated in manuscript and an attack on the playwright Thomas Shadwell. This line of satire continued with *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681) and *The Medal* (1682). His other major works from this period are the religious poems *Religio Laici* (1682), written from the position of a member of the Church of England; his 1683 edition of *Plutarch's Lives Translated From the Greek by Several Hands* in which he introduced the word biography to English readers; and *The Hind and the Panther*, (1687) which celebrates his conversion to Roman Catholicism.

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In 1694 he began work on what became his most ambitious and defining work as translator, *The Works of Virgil* (1697). His final translations appeared in the volume *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700), a series of episodes from Homer, Ovid, and Boccaccio, as well as modernized adaptations from Geoffrey Chaucer interspersed with Dryden's own poems.

Dryden died on May 1, 1700, and was initially buried in St. Anne's cemetery in Soho, before being exhumed and reburied in Westminster Abbey ten days later. He was the subject of various poetic eulogies, such as *Luctus Brittannici: or the Tears of the British Muses; for the Death of John Dryden, Esq.* (London, 1700), and *The Nine Muses*.

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### 13.3.2 Absalom and Achitophel

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*Absalom and Achitophel* is a landmark poetic political satire by John Dryden. The poem is an allegory that uses the story of the rebellion of Absalom against King David as the basis for discussion of the background to the Monmouth Rebellion (1685), the Popish Plot (1678) and the Exclusion Crisis.

#### 13.3.2.1 Biblical Background

The story of Absalom's revolt is told in the Second Book of Samuel in the Old Testament of the Bible (chapters 14 to 18). Absalom rebels against his father King David. The beautiful Absalom is distinguished by extraordinarily abundant hair, which is probably meant to symbolize his pride (2 Sam. 14:26). When David's renowned advisor, Achitophel (Ahitophel in the Vulgate) joins Absalom's rebellion, another advisor, Hushai, plots with David to pretend to defect and give Absalom advice that plays into David's hands. The result was that Absalom takes the advice of the double agent Hushai over the good advice of Achitophel, who realizing that the rebellion is doomed to failure, goes home and hangs himself. Absalom is killed (against David's explicit commands) after getting caught by his hair in the thick branches of a great oak: "His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on" (NRSV 2 Sam. 18:9). The death of his son, Absalom, causes David enormous personal grief. The title of Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!* is taken from David's mourning in 2 Sam. 18:33 or 19:4.

#### 13.3.2.2 Historical Background

In 1681 in England, Charles II was in advanced years. He had had a number of mistresses and produced a number of illegitimate children. One of these was James Scott, the Duke of Monmouth, who was very popular, both for his personal charisma and his fervor for the Protestant cause. Charles had no legitimate heirs, and his brother, the future James II of England was openly a Roman Catholic. When Charles's health suffered, there was a panic in the House of Commons over the potential for the nation being ruled by a Roman Catholic king. The Earl of Shaftesbury had sponsored and advocated the Exclusion Bill, which would prevent James II from succeeding to the throne, but this bill was blocked by the House of Lords on two occasions. In the Spring of 1681, at the Oxford Parliament, Shaftesbury appealed to Charles II to legitimate Monmouth. Monmouth was caught

preparing to rebel and seek the throne, and Shaftesbury was suspected of fostering this rebellion. The poem was written, possibly at Charles's behest, and published in early November 1681.<sup>[2]</sup> On November 24, 1681, Shaftesbury was seized and charged with high treason. A trial before a jury picked by Whig sheriffs acquitted him.

Later, after the death of his father and unwilling to see his uncle James II become King, the Duke of Monmouth executed his plans and went into full revolt. The Monmouth Rebellion was put down, and in 1685 the Duke was executed.

### **13.3.3 Summary**

“Absalom and Achitophel” is one of Dryden’s great political satires. In “Absalom and Achitophel,” Dryden comments on the Popish Plot (1678: an alleged plot by Catholics to kill the king and make England Catholic again), the Exclusion Crisis (to keep Charles’ Catholic brother, James, from inheriting the throne after Charles’ death), and the Monmouth Rebellion (1685: an attempt to put the king’s illegitimate son James, Duke of Monmouth on the throne). He frames these contemporary events in terms of the biblical story of King David and his rebellious son Absalom.

### **13.3.4 Structure**

The poem can be roughly divided into 13 sections:

1. 1-42 Promiscuity of Charles II; lack of legitimate offspring; numerous bastards, of whom Absalom is the most attractive.
2. 43-149: Historical summary of the troubles of the century, the Popish Plot, and its aftermath in the rise of factions.
3. 150-229: A brilliant section analyzing Achitophel.
4. 230-302: Achitophel’s first speech to Absalom, in which he tempts him.
5. 303-372: The effect on Absalom of Achitophel’s speech and Absalom’s speech to Achitophel in reply.
6. 373-476: Achitophel’s second speech.
7. 477-681: A catalogue of the principal plotters against David. Those who join Achitophel and Absalom have disparate motives: There are mistaken patriots: “The best, (and of the princes some were such,) / Who thought the power of the monarchy too much, / Mistaken men and patriots in their hearts, / Not wicked, but seduced by impious arts.” There are anti-monarchists: “Others thought kings a useless heavy load.” There are also demigods: “With them joined all the harangers of the throng / That thought to get preferment by the tongue.” There are dissenters: “A numerous host of dreaming saints succeed / Of that true old enthusiastic breed” (529-30). The political intellectuals: “but far more numerous was the herd of such / Who think too little and who talk too much.”

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Dryden goes on to characterize the leading personalities of the rebellion: Zimri, Shimei, and others.

8. 682-759: Absalom leaves David's court, his second speech which courts the goodwill of the people, and his progress.

9. 759-810: Dryden's persona intervenes to give his own political credo.

10. 811-913: The King's supporters and friends with Dryden's comment on their loyal actions and advice:

a. Poor aspects of the portrait of Barzillai (817-828): (1) Weak antithesis with no real contract: "For him he suffered, and with him returned"

b. Weak metaphor: "buoy the state . . . sinking")

c. The portraits of the King's friends are generally shorter since virtue tends to be less interesting than vice. For instance, he praises Ameil most convincingly by blaming Amiel's successor (898-913).

d. David's followers embody the virtues necessary for the social and moral good of humankind: the right use of money and position (Barzillai, who contrasts with Zimri), religion and law (the Sagan of Jerusalem and Zadoc), family, and bravery.

11. 914-932: A short summary of the action, preparatory to David's speech.

12. 933-1025: The King speaks directly to his people, justifying the royal position. Deus-ex-machina-like appearance of Charles. Most critics find the speech of Charles as flat and dull.

13. 1026-1031: The poem closes with a 6-line prophecy of Charles's triumph, thereby ending *in medias res* and without resolution.

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### **13.4 Characters**

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#### **A. ACHITOPHEL**

**Achitophel as Devil:** Achitophel is closely linked to Satan by diabolic imagery. His pernicious powers are alluded to in "cockle, that oppressed the noble seed," an allusion to the New Testament parable of the tares (Matt. 13. 18-23. The "golden fruit" which Achitophel assists to dislodge reminds us of Satan's temptation of Eve. Achitophel's enticing powers are those of Satan. The comparison to Satan is completed by the lines, "In friendship false, implacable in hate / Resolved to ruin or to rule the state." "Implacable in hate" reminds us of Melton's Satan's immortal hate" and the latter line is reminiscent of "better to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven." Satan is proverbially "the father of lies" and therefore we suspect everything he says. His temptation of Absalom is laden with the imagery of prophet and miracle worker as in "second Moses, whose

extended wand / Divides the seas.” Achitophel uses flattery, the introductory words to his speech stating “sheds its venom in such words as these.” Absalom is beguiled by the words.

### **B. DAVID**

**David as God:** The alter ego of Charles II. The principle of the “divine right of kings” is alluded to frequently in the term “godlike David.” David created Absalom with a “diviner lust” and sees “His youthful image in his son renewed,” a discrete reference to Genesis “in his own image and likeness.” The elevation of David to a godlike state reconciles the discontinuity of the course of the poem. As God is almighty, he has no need to fight “the powerful engines bent / To batter down the lawful government.” The continual references to “god” in David’s final declamation give the impression of one impervious to attacks by mortal man. The proceedings are thereby brought to a peaceful if noisy conclusion in “peals of thunder.”

### **C. ABSALOM**

**Absalom and the People as Fallen Man:** As David is portrayed as God and Achitophel as Satan, the role of Adam would seem to be appropriate to Absalom. However, Dryden allots the role of fallen man to the English people represented as the Jews and nominated “Adam-wits.” The imagery surrounding the Jews is of idols, the product of “god-smiths” and the invention of “priestcraft,” a neologism by Dryden reminiscent of witchcraft. The culmination of this imagery is that “golden calf, a state,” thereby linking a celebrated idol with Republican sentiment. He has linked the English with idolatry and this with republicanism thereby making his anti-monarchical enemies guilty of the heinous sin of idolatry, a violation of the second commandment. The Catholics, personified as the Jebusites, are also partakers in the idol imagery. Their idols are more tangible than those of the Jews being of “beaten gold,” “Stock, stone” or “common wood.” The Jebusites also have the imagery of fire as in the phrase, “in a flame.” The purpose of the imagery becomes apparent when we encounter the pun on “mass” in “swallowed in the mass, unchewed and crude.” This latent attack on the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation made abundantly apparent in “served at once for worship and for food” links the originator of the “Plot” with mendacity in mocking a doctrine presumed to be fallacious by a Protestant readership.

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### **13.5 Themes**

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1. Temptation. An arch-rebel (Achitophel), who suffers from a turbulent pride of intellect and will brook no authority, attempts to lure an inexperienced young man (Absalom) from his allegiance to the anointed order in the State.
2. The theme resembles the theme of *Paradise Lost*, published fourteen years earlier, and in his preface to the poem, Dryden says that the temptations of Achitophel are similar to those placed before Adam, who had to resist, “the two Devils, the Serpent and the Woman. The characters of the rebel angels in PL, book 2, are similar to the character sketches in Absalom and Achitophel.

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3. Political theory of the poem: Dryden attempts to interpret events in the light of political theory in the poem Dryden's generation learned from Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) that people, growing weary of a state of nature where each person is an enemy to every other person had contracted to surrender the right of governing themselves to a king. In return, the king promised to secure peace at home and defense from enemies of the state. The contract was supposed to be irrevocable. It passed from king to king in succession and was reaffirmed in the coronation oath. In Dryden's eyes, Shaftesbury was attempting to destroy the contract by investing more power in the people.
4. In *Absalom and Achitophel* the theory of contract is debated and the penalty of revoking it—no less than anarchy—is clearly stated (409-16; 759-80).
5. The poem is both a satire against disvalue and a panegyric on value.

(Adapted from [www.travenlit.org](http://www.travenlit.org))

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### **13.6 Summary**

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In this unit we find how Dryden uses a biblical theme to present a contemporary situation. Though no action really happens in Dryden's poem, the speech of David (Charles II) quashes the rebellion before it can start. This poem is an allegory of the political crisis confronting England in 1681, presented through a retelling the biblical story of Absalom's rebellion against his father King David. Thus the poem has two levels: (1) English history and (2) the biblical story.

Dryden was influenced by Thomas D'Urfey's *The Progress of Honesty* (1680), in which Shaftesbury is specifically pictured as Achitophel. The poem's excellence lies in its series of masterful portraits: Absalom (Monmouth), Zimri (Buckingham; Dryden said this was his favorite; it may be intended to answer Buckingham's *The Rehearsal*, a satirical play on Dryden); Corah (Titus Oates), and best of all, Achitophel (Shaftesbury).

### **Check your progress**

1. Discuss the historical and biblical background of Absalom and Achitophel.
2. Discuss Dryden as a neoclassical poet.
3. Do you think that Achitophel's real motive was to benefit himself and not Absalom.
4. Write a critical appreciation of the poem Absalom and Achitophel.
5. After reading the poem what do you think about the doctrine of the divine right of kings. Explain.

### **13.8 References**

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**Unit 14 Pope: Rape of the Lock**

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14.1 Introduction

14.2 Objectives

14.3 The author and the text

14.3.1 Alexander Pope

14.3.2 *Rape of the Lock*: About the poem

14.3.2.1 Summary of the poem

14.3.2.2 Characters

14.3 Substance of the poem

14.4 Theme

14.5 The heroic couplet

14.6 Summary

14.7 References

14.8 Model and Terminal Questions

### 14.1 Introduction

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In the earlier unit we discussed the Dryden. Now we will study another major neoclassic champion Alexander Pope. In this unit we will go through his work *Rape of the Lock* and see how he nourished the neoclassical traditions.

### 14.2 Objectives

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After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Write about the life of Pope
- Discuss him as a neoclassic poet
- Provide the details of the age he was living
- Explain *Rape of the lock* as a mock epic
- Understand the heroic couplet

### 14.3 The Author and the text

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#### 14.3.1 Alexander Pope

Pope was born to Alexander Pope Senior (1646–1717), a linen merchant of Plough Court, Lombard Street, London, and his wife Edith (née Turner) (1643–1733), who were both Catholics. Pope's education was affected by the recently enacted Test Acts, which upheld the status of the established Church of England and banned Catholics from teaching, attending a university, voting, or holding public office. Pope was taught to read by his aunt, and went to Twyford School in about 1698/99. He then went to two Catholic schools in London. Such schools, while illegal, were tolerated in some areas.

In 1700, his family moved to a small estate at Popeswood in Binfield, Berkshire, close to the royal Windsor Forest. This was due to strong anti-Catholic sentiment and a statute preventing Catholics from living within 10 miles (16 km) of either London or Westminster. Pope would later describe the countryside around the house in his poem *Windsor Forest*. Pope's formal education ended at this time, and from then on he mostly educated himself by reading the works of classical writers such as the satirists Horace and Juvenal, the epic poets Homer and Virgil, as well as English authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare and John Dryden. He also studied many languages and read works by English, French, Italian, Latin, and Greek poets. After five years of study, Pope came into contact with figures from the London literary society such as William Wycherley, William Congreve, Samuel Garth, William Trumbull, and William Walsh.

At Binfield, he also began to make many important friends. One of them, John Caryl (the future dedicatee of *The Rape of the Lock*), was twenty years older than the poet and had made many acquaintances in the London literary world. He introduced the young Pope to

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the ageing playwright William Wycherley and to William Walsh, a minor poet, who helped Pope revise his first major work, *The Pastorals*. He also met the Blount sisters, Teresa and (his alleged future lover) Martha, both of whom would remain lifelong friends.

From the age of 12, he suffered numerous health problems, such as Pott's disease (a form of tuberculosis that affects the bone), which deformed his body and stunted his growth, leaving him with a severe hunchback. His tuberculosis infection caused other health problems including respiratory difficulties, high fevers, inflamed eyes, and abdominal pain. He grew to a height of only 1.37 m (4 ft 6 in) tall. Pope was already removed from society because he was Catholic; his poor health only alienated him further. Although he never married, he had many female friends to whom he wrote witty letters.

### **Early career**

In May, 1709, Pope's *Pastorals* was published in the sixth part of Tonson's *Poetical Miscellanies*. This brought Pope instant fame, and was followed by *An Essay on Criticism*, published in May 1711, which was equally well received.

Around 1711, Pope made friends with Tory writers John Gay, Jonathan Swift, Thomas Parnell and John Arbuthnot, who together formed the satirical Scriblerus Club. The aim of the club was to satirise ignorance and pedantry in the form of the fictional scholar Martinus Scriblerus. He also made friends with Whig writers Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. In March 1713, *Windsor Forest* was published to great acclaim.

During Pope's friendship with Joseph Addison, he contributed to Addison's play *Cato*, as well as writing for *The Guardian* and *The Spectator*. Around this time he began the work of translating the *Iliad*, which was a painstaking process – publication began in 1715 and did not end until 1720.

In 1714, the political situation worsened with the death of Queen Anne and the disputed succession between the Hanoverians and the Jacobites, leading to the attempted Jacobite Rebellion of 1715. Though Pope as a Catholic might have been expected to have supported the Jacobites because of his religious and political affiliations, according to Maynard Mack, "where Pope himself stood on these matters can probably never be confidently known". These events led to an immediate downturn in the fortunes of the Tories, and Pope's friend, Henry St John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke, fled to France.

Pope lived in his parents' house in Mawson Row, Chiswick, between 1716 and 1719; the red brick building is now the Mawson Arms, commemorating him with a blue plaque.

The money made from his translation of Homer allowed Pope to move to a villa at Twickenham in 1719, where he created his now famous grotto and gardens.

He died on the 30th of May 1744, and he was buried in the parish church of Twickenham

**14.3.2 About the poem**

Pope's most famous poem is *The Rape of the Lock*, first published in 1712, with a revised version published in 1714. A mock-epic, it satirises a high-society quarrel between Arabella Fermor (the "Belinda" of the poem) and Lord Petre, who had snipped a lock of hair from her head without her permission.

**14.3.2.1 Summary**

Belinda arises to prepare for the day's social activities after sleeping late. Her guardian sylph, Ariel, warned her in a dream that some disaster will befall her, and promises to protect her to the best of his abilities. Belinda takes little notice of this oracle, however. After an elaborate ritual of dressing and primping, she travels on the Thames River to Hampton Court Palace, an ancient royal residence outside of London, where a group of wealthy young socialites are gathering for a party. Among them is the Baron, who has already made up his mind to steal a lock of Belinda's hair. He has risen early to perform an elaborate set of prayers and sacrifices to promote success in this enterprise. When the partygoers arrive at the palace, they enjoy a tense game of cards, which Pope describes in mock-heroic terms as a battle. This is followed by a round of coffee. Then the Baron takes up a pair of scissors and manages, on the third try, to cut off the coveted lock of Belinda's hair. Belinda is furious. Umbriel, a mischievous gnome, journeys down to the Cave of Spleen to procure a sack of sighs and a flask of tears which he then bestows on the heroine to fan the flames of her ire. Clarissa, who had aided the Baron in his crime, now urges Belinda to give up her anger in favor of good humor and good sense, moral qualities which will outlast her vanities. But Clarissa's moralizing falls on deaf ears, and Belinda initiates a scuffle between the ladies and the gentlemen, in which she attempts to recover the severed curl. The lock is lost in the confusion of this mock battle, however; the poet consoles the bereft Belinda with the suggestion that it has been taken up into the heavens and immortalized as a constellation.

**14.3.2.2 Characters**

**Belinda** - Belinda is based on the historical Arabella Fermor, a member of Pope's circle of prominent Roman Catholics. Robert, Lord Petre (the Baron in the poem) had precipitated a rift between their two families by snipping off a lock of her hair.

**The Baron** - This is the pseudonym for the historical Robert, Lord Petre, the young gentleman in Pope's social circle who offended Arabella Fermor and her family by cutting off a lock of her hair. In the poem's version of events, Arabella is known as Belinda.

**Caryl** - The historical basis for the Caryl character is John Caryll, a friend of Pope and of the two families that had become estranged over the incident the poem relates. It was Caryll who suggested that Pope encourage a reconciliation by writing a humorous poem.

**Goddess** - The muse who, according to classical convention, inspires poets to write their verses

**Shock** - Belinda's lapdog

**Ariel** - Belinda's guardian sylph, who oversees an army of invisible protective deities

**Umbriel** - The chief gnome, who travels to the Cave of Spleen and returns with bundles of sighs and tears to aggravate Belinda's vexation

**Brillante** - The sylph who is assigned to guard Belinda's earrings

**Momentilla** - The sylph who is assigned to guard Belinda's watch

**Crispissa** - The sylph who is assigned to guard Belinda's "fav'rite Lock"

**Clarissa** - A woman in attendance at the Hampton Court party. She lends the Baron the pair of scissors with which he cuts Belinda's hair, and later delivers a moralizing lecture.

**Thalestris** - Belinda's friend, named for the Queen of the Amazons and representing the historical Gertrude Morley, a friend of Pope's and the wife of Sir George Browne (rendered as her "beau," Sir Plume, in the poem). She eggs Belinda on in her anger and demands that the lock be returned.

**Sir Plume** - Thalestris's "beau," who makes an ineffectual challenge to the Baron. He represents the historical Sir George Browne, a member of Pope's social circle.

### **14.3.3 Substance of the poem**

The opening of the poem establishes it as mock-heroic. Pope introduces the conventional epic subjects of love and war and includes an invocation to the muse and a dedication to the man (the historical John Caryll) who commissioned the poem. In mock-epic, the high heroic style works not to dignify the subject but rather to expose and ridicule it. Therefore, the basic irony of the style supports the substance of the poem's satire, which attacks the misguided values of a society that takes small matters for serious ones while failing to attend to issues of genuine importance. With Belinda's dream, Pope introduces the "machinery" of the poem—the supernatural powers that influence the action from behind the scenes.

Pope's portrayal of Belinda at her dressing table introduces mock-heroic motifs that will run through the poem. The scene of her toilette is rendered first as a religious sacrament, in which Belinda herself is the priestess and her image in the looking glass is the Goddess she serves. This parody of the religious rites before a battle gives way, then, to another kind of mock-epic scene, that of the ritualized arming of the hero. Combs, pins, and cosmetics take the place of weapons as "awful Beauty puts on all its arms."

In the second canto, the sexual allegory of the poem begins to come into fuller view. The title of the poem already associates the cutting of Belinda's hair with a more explicit

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sexual conquest, and here Pope cultivates that suggestion. He multiplies his sexually metaphorical language for the incident, adding words like “ravish” and “betray” to the “rape” of the title. He also slips in some commentary on the implications of his society’s sexual mores, as when he remarks that “when success a Lover’s toil attends, / few ask, if fraud or force attain’d his ends.” In the Sylphs’ defensive efforts, Belinda’s petticoat is the battlefield that requires the most extensive fortifications. This fact furthers the idea that the rape of the lock stands in for a literal rape, or at least represents a threat to her chastity more serious than just the mere theft of a curl.

The rendering of the card game as a battle constitutes an amusing and deft narrative feat. By parodying the battle scenes of the great epic poems, Pope is suggesting that the energy and passion once applied to brave and serious purposes is now expended on such insignificant trials as games and gambling, which often become a mere front for flirtation. The structure of “the three attempts” by which the lock is cut is a convention of heroic challenges, particularly in the romance genre. The romance is further invoked in the image of Clarissa arming the Baron—not with a real weapon, however, but with a pair of sewing scissors. Canto 4

The description of the “battle” has a markedly erotic quality, as ladies and lords wallow in their mock-agonies. Sir Plume “draw[s] Clarissa down” in a sexual way, and Belinda “flies” on her foe with flashing eyes and an erotic ardour. When Pope informs us that the Baron fights on unafraid because he “sought no more than on his foe to die,” the expression means that his goal all along was sexual consummation.

This final battle is the culmination of the long sequence of mock-heroic military actions. Pope invokes by name the Roman gods who were most active in warfare, and he alludes as well to the Aeneid, comparing the stoic Baron to Aeneas (“the Trojan”), who had to leave his love to become the founder of Rome. Belinda’s tossing of the snuff makes a perfect turning point, ideally suited to the scale of this trivial battle. The snuff causes the Baron to sneeze, a comic and decidedly unheroic thing for a hero to do. The bodkin, too, serves nicely: here a bodkin is a decorative hairpin, not the weapon of ancient days. Still, Pope gives the pin an elaborate history in accordance with the conventions of true epic.

The mock-heroic conclusion of the poem is designed to compliment the lady it alludes to (Arabella Fermor), while also giving the poet himself due credit for being the instrument of her immortality. This ending effectively indulges the heroine’s vanity, even though the poem has functioned throughout as a critique of that vanity. And no real moral development has taken place: Belinda is asked to come to terms with her loss through a kind of bribe or distraction that reinforces her basically frivolous outlook. But even in its most mocking moments, this poem is a gentle one, in which Pope shows a basic sympathy with the social world in spite of its folly and foibles. The searing critiques of his later satires would be much more stringent and less forgiving.

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### **14.4 Themes**

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*The Rape of the Lock* is a humorous indictment of the vanities and idleness of 18th-century high society. Basing his poem on a real incident among families of his acquaintance, Pope intended his verses to cool hot tempers and to encourage his friends to laugh at their own folly.

The poem is perhaps the most outstanding example in the English language of the genre of mock-epic. The epic had long been considered one of the most serious of literary forms; it had been applied, in the classical period, to the lofty subject matter of love and war, and, more recently, by Milton, to the intricacies of the Christian faith. The strategy of Pope's mock-epic is not to mock the form itself, but to mock his society in its very failure to rise to epic standards, exposing its pettiness by casting it against the grandeur of the traditional epic subjects and the bravery and fortitude of epic heroes: Pope's mock-heroic treatment in *The Rape of the Lock* underscores the ridiculousness of a society in which values have lost all proportion, and the trivial is handled with the gravity and solemnity that ought to be accorded to truly important issues. The society on display in this poem is one that fails to distinguish between things that matter and things that do not. The poem mocks the men it portrays by showing them as unworthy of a form that suited a more heroic culture. Thus the mock-epic resembles the epic in that its central concerns are serious and often moral, but the fact that the approach must now be satirical rather than earnest is symptomatic of how far the culture has fallen.

Pope's use of the mock-epic genre is intricate and exhaustive. *The Rape of the Lock* is a poem in which every element of the contemporary scene conjures up some image from epic tradition or the classical world view, and the pieces are wrought together with a cleverness and expertise that makes the poem surprising and delightful. Pope's transformations are numerous, striking, and loaded with moral implications. The great battles of epic become bouts of gambling and flirtatious tiffs. The great Greek and Roman gods are converted into a relatively undifferentiated army of basically ineffectual sprites. Cosmetics, clothing, and jewellery substitute for armour and weapons, and the rituals of religious sacrifice are transplanted to the dressing room and the altar of love.

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#### **14.5 The Heroic couplet**

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The verse form of *The Rape of the Lock* is the heroic couplet; Pope still reigns as the uncontested master of the form. The heroic couplet consists of rhymed pairs of iambic pentameter lines (lines of ten syllables each, alternating stressed and unstressed syllables). Pope's couplets do not fall into strict iambs, however, flowering instead with a rich rhythmic variation that keeps the highly regular meter from becoming heavy or tedious. Moreover, the inherent balance of the couplet form is strikingly well suited to a subject matter that draws on comparisons and contrasts: the form invites configurations in which two ideas or circumstances are balanced, measured, or compared against one another. It is thus perfect for the evaluative, moralizing premise of the poem, particularly in the hands of this brilliant poet.

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**14.6 Summary**

In this unit we discussed Pope's brilliant use of the mock-epic to present a satire on the society. The Rape of the Lock is an excellent example of satire which mocks the trivial affairs of the society.

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**14.7 References**

Baines, Paul. (2000). The Complete Critical Guide to Alexander Pope. London: Routledge.

[www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)

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**14.8 Model and Terminal Questions**

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1. Write a note on the life of Alexander Pope.
2. Discuss Rape of the Lock as a mock-epic.
3. Explain how Pope provides grandeur to the morning rituals of Bellinda.
4. What do you think is the purpose behind writing the Rape of the Lock?

**Unit 15**      **Thomas Gray and His poems**

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15.1 Introduction

15.2 Objectives

15.3 The author and the text

15.3.1 Thomas Gray

15.3.2 *Elegy written in a country churchyard*: About the poem

15.3.3 Substance of the poem

15.3.4 Critical appreciation of the poem

15.4 *Ode on a Distant prospect of Eton College*: about the poem

15.4.1 Substance of the poem

15.4.2 Critical appreciation of the poem

15.5 *Ode on the Spring*: about the poem

15.5.1 Substance of the poem

15.5.2 Critical appreciation of the poem

15.6 Literary Terms

15.7 Summing up

15.8 Answers to Self-Assessment- Questions

15.9 References

15.10 Terminal and Model Questions

### 15.1 Introduction

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The later half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is an age of reaction. It is a period of transition, an era in which there is a marked conflict between the old and the new. The men of pope's time had reacted against the immortality of the Restoration and the excess of metaphysical. They made reason and good sense their guides, developed a rigid formalism, distrusted emotion and enthusiasm, so that the atmosphere of their life and writing became hard and dry.

Thomas Gray is the most important poetical figure in literature between Pope and Wordsworth. Gray is perhaps the only poet, except Coleridge who has earned a permanent place among English poets in spite of his meager production in poetry. His work in poetry is very slender, but whatever is being left behind him is of supreme worth and value. In this unit we will know about his three poems. "*The Elegy Written In Country Churchyard*," is the best perfect poem of Gray and the second one "*Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*" which is considered to be his first poem and the third one is "*Ode On Spring*" which is his first English poem, others being Latin pieces. He is now seen as a precursor of Romanticism.

### 15.2 Objectives

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After going through this unit, you will be able to –

- Find out the Salient features of Gray's Poetry.
- Explain briefly the main merits of Gray's Poetry.
- Find out the melancholic notes in his poems.
- Identify the difference between Elegy and Ode.

### 15.3 The Author and the Text

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Gray is the central figure in the drift from the dominant school of classicism towards the rising school of Romanticism, which began with the publication of Thomson's *Seasons* in 1730, and which reached its culmination with the publication of the lyrical ballads in 1798.

Gray's development as a poet may be said to be a miniature form of the development of English poetry in the age of Transition. The bulk of Gray's poetry is small enough to be contained in a slender volume. But qualitatively, it can not be regarded as so slender. It comprises some of the choicest possessions of English poetry. The excellence of poetic art as well as the richness of thought in it was not the result of a day's labour. Gray achieved the mastery over his craft after much study, effort and practice.

Elegy written in country church yard is known as the best English poem in English language, a poem full of the gentle melancholy which marks all early romantic poetry. It

should be read entire as a perfect model of its kind. Not even Milton's "Il Penseroso", which it strongly suggests, excels it in beauty and suggestiveness.

"Ode to Spring" and "Ode a Distant Prospect of Eton College". These two early poems reveal two suggestive things: first, the appearance of that melancholy which characterizes all the poetry of the period, and second, the study of nature, not for its own beauty or truth, but rather as a suitable background for the play of human emotions.

### 15.3.1 Thomas Gray

Thomas Gray was the son of Philip Gray, a prosperous Scrivener in the city of London. Born in Cornhill on December 26, 1716, he was a delicate boy, the only one of a large family who survived his infancy. He had a troubled childhood because of his father's harsh and of times violent treatment of his mother, who was obliged to run a milliner's shop in order to pay for the boy's education.

Gray was sent to Eton in 1725, and was extremely happy there. His closest friends were Horace Walpole (a son of Sir Robert Walpole, the Prime Minister) and Richard West whose father was a distinguished lawyer. The influence of Eton with its beauty and its ancient traditions remained with him throughout his life. In 1734 he became a scholar at Peterhouse, Cambridge and left without taking a degree in 1738. His habits as at Eton, were studious and reflective, and he began to write Latin verse of considerable merit.

His first poem was the "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College (1747)", which contained gloomy moral livings on the approaching fate of those "little victims," the school boys. Then, after years of revision and excision, appeared the famous Elegy written in country churchyard (1751). This poem was smooth and graceful; it contained familiar sentiments turned into admirable, quotable phrases, and so, while it was agreeably familiar, it was fresh enough to be attractive. Its popularity has been maintained to the present day. His Pindaric odes (1757) were unsuccessful, being criticized for their obscurity. *The Bard* and *The Progress of Poesy*, the two Pindaric odes in the book, certainly require some elucidation, especially to readers not familiar with history and literature. At the first glance Gray's Odes are seen to have all the odic splendor of diction, in fact, the adornment is so thickly applied that it can almost stand alone, like a robe stiff with gems and gold lace. Yet the poems have energy and dignity. Johnson, who had a distaste for both the character and the work of Gray, cavils at the work, saying that it has a strutting dignity. "He is tall by walking on tiptoe. His art and his struggle are too visible."

The prose work of Gray is notable. It consists partly of letters written during his travels, describing the scenes he visits. In them he shows vigour of style, and a sharp eye and a generous admiration for the real beauties of nature. Gray explored the origins of romance in the early Norse and Celtic legends, his sympathies with the poor and oppressed were genuine and emphatically expressed; and his treatment of nature was a great improvement upon that of his predecessors.

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Perhaps he was the most learned man in Europe. He was equally acquainted with the elegant and profound parts of history and that not superficially, but thoroughly. He knew every branch of scientific history, both natural and civil. He had read all the original historians of England, France and Italy and was a great antiquarian.

Criticism, metaphysics, morals, politics, made a principal part of his Study; voyages and travels of all sorts were his favorite amusements; and he had a fine taste in painting, prints, architecture and gardening.

Gray's health which was never robust, had now declining for some years. He died in his rooms at Pembroke, after a sudden illness, on July 30, 1771. He was buried in the churchyard of Stoke-Poges.

### **15.3.2 *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard:***

#### **About the Poem**

"The Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" was begun at Stoke Poges, the residence of Gray's aunt sometime in the year 1742. After the death of his aunt on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 1748, the unfinished poem was again taken up and completed on the 15<sup>th</sup> June 1750. It was published on February, 16, 1751.

Elegy written in a country churchyard, a dignified contemplation of death, is one of the most quoted poems in English Language.

#### **15.3.3 Substance of the Poem**

Gray hears the church bells while standing in the country churchyard. Bells announcing the end of the day at the same time it reminds the poet of funeral bells. He muses on all those uncelebrated men, who lie buried in their small graves around the churchyard, the soil over them is loose and broken and they lie there for ever, not to be awakened by sweet morning air or the twittering of the swallows or the cock's shrill cry or the echoing horns of the hunters.

The poem commemorates the simple village folk, who remain unknown and unrecognized. Philosophically, the poet concludes that nothing in life is everlasting, because wealth, exalted birth, power and beauty all lead to the one and the only end--death. In short, the poet mourns the death of village people, who had no ambition. The poem gives expression to the universal truth felt by all. It is useless to run after name, fame, pomp, money and power. One should not forget that death will come to all sooner or later. Grave is the end of the life's journey. Death levels all distinctions. So it is useless to strive for power and show. At its close, the open casts forward to the prospect of the poet's death, and considers the possibility that Art- in the shape of poem itself might offer a more durable memorial against time.

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The 'Epitaph' in the poem is said by critics to have been written as a separate poem, and later on to have been joined to the poem so as to form an integral part of it. It carries a strange personal note and may have been written about Gray himself in anticipation of his death. But the Epitaph should not be jumped in isolation. It is a part of the context.

### **Exercise 1**

1. What are the salient characteristics of Gray's poetry?
2. Write a note on Gray's classicism. What qualities of classicism are found in his poetry?
3. Trace the development of thought in Gray's "Elegy written in country churchyard."
4. Analyse the ideas in Gray's Elegy.
5. Write a note on Gray's philosophy of death.
6. What picture of poor villagers lives does Gray give in this Elegy?
7. After reading this poem the idea that we get is-
  - a. Poor people have no choice
  - b. Death is inevitable
  - c. God makes partiality with his people
  - d. Poet's view about God
8. In the elegy at the end poet talks about whom
  - a. Himself
  - b. His wife and children
  - c. His Neighbours
  - d. His friends

### **15.3.4 Critical Appreciation of the *Elegy***

#### **A Great Poem**

Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is among the greatest and most popular poems in the English language. It has continued to delight the readers for long. According to Dr. Johnson "The Elegy abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo."

**Fusion of Romanticism and classicism**

Elegy is a milestone in the tradition of English tragedies. It is a transitional poem and is a bridge between classicism and romanticism. It reveals a growing democratic sentiment and romantic mood of the poet, Elegy reveals a romantic spirit and marks a shift from neoclassical poetry of the Augustan Age towards the romantic poetry of the coming age. But in style and sobriety it still has the classical qualities. Its form is also classical. In its moral tone and earnestness too it is classical. The poem teaches a moral lesson too.

**The theme and subject of the poem**

The elegy is characterized by a melancholic note. The dominant mood of the poem is one of the gloom and sadness. The shadow of death hovers throughout the poem, and the regret over the frustration of human efforts and hopes is inherent in its tone. The opening scene of the poem is steeped in melancholy, and the musing on human destiny in the later is also of a melancholic nature.

The discretion of the rustic poet also gives a gloomy picture of his life. Thus, the whole atmosphere and mood of the poem is tinged with melancholy. Death dominates the poem. The death in the past of the forefathers, the death in the present of the people every where, and the death in future of the poet-youth is the main theme of the poem. Another theme treated in the Elegy is the transitoriness of all human glory and joy. The poet attempts to show that all 'the paths of glory lead but to grave'. Thus the futility of all human ambitions and aspiration is hinted at.

The contrast between the lives of the rich and the poor or the privileged and the unprivileged forms another theme in the Elegy. The poet shows how the poor are not in a position to enjoy the luxuries and happiness of life in the world. Their poverty proves an obstacle in the path of progress. But this poverty is a blessing in disguise. It does not allow people rise high at the same time it also restrains them from doing evil, by limiting the power to do so. The rich on the other hand, possess the power and means to do good to themselves and the world. But they also have power to commit mischief, and bring destruction to innocent people.

The poem also deals with the desire for fame, and desire to be remembered after death. This theme is treated along with other themes in the poem. Gray shows how even the poor rustics try to perpetuate their memory through inscription on some 'frail' memorial decked with 'uncouth and shapeless sculpture.'

**The autobiographical Element in the poem**

Besides Being an expression of general or universal feelings and sentiments, and describing the lot of the common Man, the Elegy contains some autobiographical or personal elements. It deals with the life, destiny and anticipated death of the poet himself, Gray has, in the poem, thrown light on certain aspects of his own life.

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He was, as he shows in the Elegy, a man of a melancholy and wayward disposition, who, lived a secluded life ('for from the madding crowd's ignoble strife'.) He was, as he tells us in the Epitaph appended to the poem, of humble birth, and lived a life of obscurity, and seclusion. In spite of his birth in a poor family, he had acquired much knowledge and learning, but remained unknown to Fame and Fortune. He was sincere and had great gifts of mind and heart. Living a melancholic life, he faced much misery and had to shed tears frequently. Unlike the neo-classical poetry, the Elegy deals with the poet's personal feelings and sentiments, and reflects his own mood after the manner of the romantic poetry.

### **Moral Tone**

The Elegy is didactic in nature and seeks to convey certain moral lessons about human life. Gray exhorts the proud and ambitious people not to laugh at the simple life and obscure destiny of the poor. He tells them that they are much like the poor in that they have also to die one day and leave all their glory and luxury and the emptiness of all boast of power and wealth. It also points out to the inevitability of death, Gray seems to impress on us the idea that being poor is not altogether a matter of misfortune. The poor are fortunate in that they do not have to resort to flattery, cruelty and violence to gain selfish ends. They do not have to shut the gates of mercy on their fellow beings as the great men have to do.

### **Style and Metre**

The style in which Gray writes is a model of clearness in expression and order. It has a chaste simplicity and innocence about it. The poem is charged with a romantic inspiration in its descriptions of the beauties of Nature, its strange democratic note, and the personal element. Many phrases and lines are so universal in their appeal that they have become "household words", e.g. "The paths of glory lead but to the grave", "Full many a gem of purest ray serene", "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen", "and far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife", etc. The whole poem is a rare piece of refinement rather than a passion. The passion of grief is there, but it is under Gray's classical restraint.

The Elegy is written in heroic quatrains. Each line is in iambic pentameter and alternate line in each quatrain rhyme together. The poem ends with an epitaph of three quatrains. The last nine stanzas including the closing epitaph, which narrate the poet's own imagined death are like an elegy within elegy.

The harmony between matter and manner is note worthy. The steady and solemn motion of the iambic lines nicely with grave and sad reflections the poem contains. This makes the elegy a delightful reading.

The fine melody of the poem is one of its lasting charms, and makes us feel tempted to read it over and over again.

The Elegy has a number of artistic beauties and fine images. It has the charm of incomparable felicity of a melody that is not too subtle to charm every ear of moral

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persuasiveness that appeals to every generation, and of metrical skill that in each line proclaims the master. The sublime effusion is the result of a labour of about eight years.

The soft and tender cadences, the pacing metre of the rhythm and pensive atmosphere awarded to the verse transport the reader to that higher plane of thinking where he feels oneness with the mind and the soul of the poet.

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### **15.4 Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College**

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#### **About the poem**

‘The Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College’ belongs to the earlier period of Gray’s life. It was written in 1742. It exhibits Gray’s classicism. Gray himself was a student of Eton College near Windsor. He himself enjoyed the landscape and the life of the College, its games and sports too. He passed there a life of adventure and joy.

#### **15.4.1 Substance of the Poem**

Eton College is near Windsor, It has ancient spires and towers. It was founded by Henry VI. It stood for imparting knowledge in Science. Gray begins his ode with a description of the scenery around Eton College, where he passed a happy period of childhood. Later he joined Eton College as a student.

The poem begins with an address to the ‘distant spires’ and ‘antique towers’ of Eton College that rise prominently above the watered fields of grass. The towers rise high over the valley of the Thames. Under these towers men pursue knowledge with feelings of gratitude to King Henry VI, who founded the Eton College. The College is situated on the heights of Windsor forest. From that height it overlooks the grove, the lawn and the meadow stretched far and wide before it. Among its shade, turf and flowers, the river Thames flows along ‘his silver winding way.’

According to the Poet all men here have to groan under the weight of their suffering. The kind-hearted people suffer when they see others in trouble. The insensitive or hard-hearted people suffer when they find themselves in pain, and do not care for others suffering. The poet is of the view that people should not be anxious about their future or fate because they will inevitably have to face sorrow and suffering. Sorrows come to them at the appointed time and flies away soon. If people keep thinking or worrying about their fate, they will only lose the happiness which they are enjoying at present in a state of ignorance or unawareness of their future. Thus, knowledge of future tends to destroy our happiness. The state of ignorance about future is a state of bliss. Therefore, it is better to remain ignorant about future than to have a foreknowledge of it. It is a folly to be wise or knowledgeable about future, if our ignorance can keep us happy.

#### **Exercise2**

1. Who was the founder of Eton College ?

2. Write a brief note about the theme of the Eton poem.
3. This Poem exhibits Gray's -
  - a. Romanticism
  - b. Classicism
  - c. Both
  - d. None of these
  
4. Which is the first poem of Gray-
  - a. The Bard
  - b. The Progress of Poesy
  - c. Ode to Spring
  - d. Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College

#### **15.4.2 A Critical appreciation of the “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College”**

##### **Sources of the poem**

This poem was written in 1742. It was written to commemorate the death of Gray's friend, Richard West. According to Oliver Elton, the Eton ode is “one of Gray's strongest performances.” The Eton College is near Windsor. It has ancient spires and towers. It was founded by Henry VI for imparting knowledge in Science.

The Motto of the poem is taken from Meander. The translation from Greek is, “I am a man, a sufficient excuse for being miserable.”.

##### **The Theme of the Poem**

Memories of his student life, the condition of man on this earth, the contrast between carefree life in childhood and the life of cares and anxiety in the grown-up years, transitoriness of happiness and the inevitability of suffering and pain in human life are the main themes of the poem. The poet has divided life into three parts-childhood, youth and old age. After describing the pleasure of childhood, he comes to tell us the prerogatives lively cheer, wild wit, thoughtless day, easy night and slumber light. He does not care for future. He is unmindful of the doom of the people. Fate rules him but he does not care what misfortunes may befall him. Passions tear his mind. Disdainful anger, pallid fear and shame, envy, care, comfortless despair and sorrow follow in his train. Gray, then comes to examine the middle life of man. He finds that a man's ambition is the root and infamy, falsehood and unkindness, remorse and madness surround him. In old age new miseries crop up. The old age racks the joints, fires the veins, and poverty completely consumes the body.

**Melancholic Tone**

The general tone of the poem is melancholic and gloomy. The poet describes the ills like Despair, Disease and Poverty that fall to the share of every human being in this world. Every age is full of sorrows and cares except childhood. Every man has to suffer. The poet rightly declares in a sad note:

Yet ah! why should they know their fate?  
Since sorrow never comes too late,  
And happiness too swiftly flies.

The poet is in a dark, gloomy mood in the poem. He says that every one in this world has got his own share of sorrows and troubles. The very fact that we are men makes us liable to suffer. The kind-hearted suffer; because they sympathise with the sorrows of others. The unkind also suffer, because they have their own share of sorrows in life. But the poet says it is useless to poison our present happiness by anticipating the future misfortunes, since sorrow always comes early in life, while happiness vanishes too soon. It is sheer foolishness to be prematurely wise, if ignorance can prolong our happiness.

**Style and Metre**

The poem is classical in manner but romantic in spirit. It employs neo-classical devices such as personification, dignified style and language, and a moral tone. However, it is, in some ways romantic in spirit. Its melancholic note, its treatment of Nature and its concern with the life of the common man on this earth give it an essentially romantic colour. Nevertheless, The Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College is one of the more successful of Gray's odes. It may be said to be the best among his Horatian odes. It is a Horatian ode, regular in its metrical structure, made up of several stanzas but without the threefold division of the Pindaric ode. According to Oliver Elton, the Eton ode is "one of Gray's strongest performances."

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**15.5 Ode on the Spring**

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**About the Poem**

The Ode on the Spring was composed in the month of May, in 1742, during Gray's visit to Stoke Pogis. It was originally given the title, "Noontide an Ode", but was later called 'Ode on the Spring.' In April 1742, Gray had received an Ode on May consisting of 30 lines written by his friend, Richard West, beginning 'Dear Gray, that always in my heart' and ending with the line 'And Heaven and Earth be glad at heart'. This ode elicited a reply from Gray in the form of the Ode on the Spring. Gray sent his poem to West in the first week of June; not knowing that his friend had already died on June 1. The poem sent by Gray came back to him; the covering letter remaining unopened. Thus, Gray's poem was inspired by West's Ode on May, and was meant to be a reply there of.

**15.5.1 Substance of the Poem**

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Spring is a joyful season of beauty. It helps in the blossoming of flowers. In this season the nightingale and the cuckoo sing sweet songs in a spontaneous and natural manner, and cool and refreshing breezes go on scattering fragrance and scent. During this time of joy and beauty, the Muse will sit with the poet on the banks of some stream under the shade of an oak or beech on a grassy patch of land. The Muse will reflect on the vanity of human passions and the littleness of the proud men. In the spring the young insects enjoy freely, bask in the sun, float on the current of air or water, and display their golden colours. The race of man is like insects. Men are all moving in the eternal cycle of birth and death. Even happy people will have to suffer at the hands of Mischance or Misfortune. When they become old, they would die. The poet himself being lonely and poor is unable to enjoy life. His spring is over. Thus, the brightness and beauty of the spring of our life is overshadowed by the clouds of old age and death.

### **Exercise 3**

1. What do you mean by spring?
2. Write about the style and metre of the poem.
3. What was the name of Gray's friend who inspired him to write "Ode on Spring"-
  - a. Graham Hough
  - b. Richard West
  - c. William Collins
  - d. Douglas Bush
4. What was the first title which was given to "Ode to Spring"-
  - a. Noontide an Ode
  - b. Ode on Evening
  - c. Morningtide Ode
  - d. The Bard

### **15.5.2 Critical appreciation of the poem "Ode on the spring"**

#### **Sources of the poem**

The Ode on the Spring is an immature poetic performance by Gray. The poem was written at Stoke Pogis in 1742. It is a poem "lighter in tone, colder in sentiment and more trivial in conception than his other serious productions." There is a perplexing change of tone from the beginning where he was perhaps inspired by that exquisite strain of florid fancy to the stoic moralizing of the later stanzas:

How vain the ardour of the Crowd,  
How low, how little are the Proud,  
How indigent the Great.

The idea contained in the fourth stanza, which is the best one, is a commonplace of pseudo classical meditation, presenting the analogy between insect and human life. It has been expressed by Thomson also in his Seasons in a form far closer to Gray's presentation.

**Theme of the Ode**

Gray hails the coming of spring. With it have come the attendants of Venus, the Goddess of Love and Life. The long-awaited Spring brings with it colourful flowers, the melodious song of the nightingale, the natural but charming notes of the cuckoo, cool and healthy breeze and clear sky, and the whole atmosphere seems to be full of fragrance.

Describing the scenic beauty, Gray refers to the open spaces among the beeches, along the side of which flows water with full grown reeds. Gray thinks of composing a poem in such a calm and quiet atmosphere. He thinks of the insatiability of man's desires of his worldly grandeur. The calmness of Spring is welcomed by all. The labourers are at rest. The cattle are out to enjoy repose. The insects are full of life. They are out to taste the balmy air of spring. They swim through the gentle breeze and in thin summer. Everybody is full of life and spirits.

**Style and Metre**

This Ode begins with a quatrain of the common ballad measure; an octosyllable couplet is added, and this would close it with a rustic effect, where the music not prolonged by the addition of three lines more, while the stanza closes with a short line of six syllables.

The manner, style and direction of the poem are conventional. The personified abstractions like 'rosy-bosomed Hours,' toiling hand of Care' and 'busy murmur' are like those found in neoclassical poetry. The moralizing tone of the poem is similar to that of the poetry. The moralizing tone of the poem is similar to that of the poetry of the Augustan Age. The phraseology is also conventional. Several of the fine phrases have been adapted from Virgil, Shakespeare, Milton and Matthew Green's poem *The Grotto*.

**Melancholic Note**

There is a melancholic note in the poem. Man of this earth is like an insect. He has a momentary existence. In that temporary existence too he is full of sorrow and misery. The poet's own life is sad and monotonous. He was unmarried when he wrote this poem. Hence he refers to his loneliness too.

**Love of Nature**

The poem also displays Gray's power of keen observation and description, besides his love for Nature. His description of Spring with its singing birds and blossoming flowers, is based on his own observation, and so is the description of the insect youth floating 'amid the liquid noon.'

**15.6 LITERARY TERMS**

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The definition of following terms have been given for the convenience of students, so that they can understand Gray's poem at his age in an easier way.

**Elegy** - A lyric poem setting forth the poet's meditations upon death. It is characterized by conventional language expressing with dignity and decorum a formal grief. A classical form, common to both Latin and Greek literature, an elegy originally signified almost any type of serious, subjective poetic meditation.

Milton's *Lycidas* and Gray's *Elegy written in country churchyard* are well-known elegies.

**Dirge** - A wailing song sung at a funeral or in commemoration of death; a short lyric of lamentation.

**Classicism** - As a critical term, a body of doctrine thought to be derived from (or to reflect) the qualities of ancient Greek and Roman culture, particularly literature, philosophy, art and criticism. Classicism is commonly opposed to romanticism and realism, although these qualities are not mutually exclusive. Ben Jonson for example, advocated classicism as a critic and dramatist yet his "Classical" tragedies contain non-classical elements, such as comic relief and violation of one or more of the unities.

However, Classicism does stand for certain definite ideas and attitudes, most of them drawn from the critical pronouncements of the Greeks and Romans, or developed through an imitation of ancient art and literature. These qualities include restraint, predominance of reason, unity of design and aim, clarity, simplicity, balance, moderation, respect for tradition and sense of form.

**Ode** - A lyric poem expressing exalted or enthusiastic emotion. The ode is an elaborate lyric, expressed in language that is imaginative, dignified and sincere.

Originally a Greek form used in dramatic poetry, the ode was choral in quality and divided into strophe, antistrophe and epode. In English the strophe may be called 'The Turn' the Antistrophe the Counter Turn and the Epode, the 'After Song'. The names are derived from the Greek theatre. The turn or strophe denoting the movement from one side of the dance stage to the other, the counter-turn, the reverse movement, and the After-song, something sung after two such movements.

This was the form used by the Greek poet, Pindar (552-442 B.C.), who wrote odes celebrating public occasions. Horace (65-8 B.C.), wrote Latin odes that were more private and personal and that consisted of a number of uniform stanzas.

Not all the odes can be classified as Pindaric or Horatian (also called Aeolian). Irregular forms are more flexible, allowing freedom within the strophe and in the stanza pattern. English Literature is rich in a variety of odes, dating from Spenser's *Epithalamion*.

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**Romanticism-** A movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that marked the reaction in literature, philosophy, art, religion and politics against the neoclassicism and formal doctrines of the preceding periods. One aspect is reflected in Victor Hugo's phrase "liberalism in literature" meaning especially the freeing of the artist and the writer from the restraints and rules of the classicists, and also suggesting a spirit of individualism, which led to the encouragement of revolutionary political ideas.

In England, the romantic movement was marked by such qualities as sentimentalism primitivism, love of nature, interest in the past. These qualities were expressed by the abandonment of the heroic couplet and the ode in favour of blank verse, the sonnet, the spenserian stanza and many experimental verse forms. Conventional poetic imagery was replaced by fresh bold expression other characteristics of romanticism in literature were : the idealization of rural life (Gold Smith) ; Interest in human rights (Burn & Byron) ; sentimental melancholy (Gray) ; and a renewed interest in Spenser, Shakespeare & Milton.

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### **15.7 Summing Up**

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In this unit you have learned

- About Gray's various qualities as a poet.
- How to read symbolically a rich literary text
- About the use of various techniques in poem.

You have observed how Gray used various elements in his poem. You have also noted how various literary elements like classicism, romanticism, ode, elegy and figures of speech have been used by Thomas Gray.

Gray's poetry shows personal sentiment and emotion in abundance. In Gray's poetry we have glimpses of sentiment and emotion which later on were cultivated with great care and devotion by the Romantic Poets.

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### **15.8 Answers to self-Assessment Questions**

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#### **Exercise-1**

- Encyclopedia Britannica has a very detailed write up on Thomas Gray.
- Refer to discussion at 15.3.3
- Refer to discussion at 15.3.4
- Refer to discussion at 15.3.4
- Refer to discussion at 15.3.4
- Refer to discussion at 15.3.3
- (b)

(viii) (a)

**Exercise-2**

- (i) Refer to a discussion at 15.4
- (ii) Refer to a discussion at 15.4.2
- (iii) (c)
- (iv) (d)

**Exercise-3**

- (i) Refer to a discussion at 15.5
- (ii) Refer to a discussion at 15.5.2
- (iii) (b)
- (iv) (a)

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**15.9 References**

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- William Lyon Phelps ed. *Selections from the poetry and prose of Thomas Gray*. Boston :  
Ginn & Company, 1894

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**15.10 Terminal and model Questions**

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- 1- Give a general estimate of Gray as a poet.
- 2- Write a note on Gray's classicism. What qualities of classicism are found in his poetry?
- 3- Write a short essay on Gray as a writer of Odes.
- 4- Discuss Gray's "Elegy" as an elegiac poem.
- 5- Write a note on Gray's philosophy of Death.

**Unit 16 William Collins and His Poems**

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16.1. Introduction

16.2. Objectives

16.3. The Age of Transition

16.4. William Collins

16.5. Ode to Evening

16.5.1 Summary

16.5.2 Critical Appreciation

16.5.3 Glossary

16.6. Ode to Simplicity

16.6.1 Summary

16.6.2 Critical Appreciation

16.6.3 Glossary

16.7. Answers to Check Your Progress

16.8. References

16.9. Suggested Reading

16.10. Terminal and Model Questions

**16.1 INTRODUCTION**

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In the previous unit you read about Thomas Gray, an important transitional poet and also analysed three of his famous poems. This unit will take up another important transitional poet, William Collins and two of his well known poems, “Ode to Evening” and “Ode on Simplicity.” While analysing the poems of Collins you will see for yourself why Collins like Gray, although being a precursor to Romanticism was also a Classicist in some ways. You will be able to understand why he has rightly be called a transitional poet.

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**16.2. OBJECTIVES**

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After going through this unit you will be able to

- understand the Age of Transition
  - know about the life of the William Collins
  - examine Collins as a poet and learn something about his poetic style
  - critically examine and appreciate two of his well known poems, “Ode to Evening” and “Ode on Simplicity.”
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**16.3. THE AGE OF TRANSITION**

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Transition literally means a changeover. The late eighteenth century witnessed a shift from pseudo Classicism to Romanticism. The poets of this period sought freedom in their poetry, in respect of matter, form and spirit. Poets of the later Classical Age like Dr. Johnson and Oliver Goldsmith followed the Augustan tradition and emulated poets like Pope in their writings. However, by their time, the Classical school was fast crumbling as its intellectualism and form lacked naturalness, making the poetry look artificial. It was around this time that some poets started making poetry new by gradually shedding the intellectual, formal and artificial elements of classical poetry in favour of anti-intellectual, spontaneous and more democratic poetry. However, these poets did not completely revolt against Classicism, like the Romantics who came later on, and had a double tendency of adhering to the classical tradition as well as for a search of new romanticism. As this group of poets lay in between the Classicists and the Romantics, they share the characteristics of both the Classicists and the Romantics. Thus, they are known as Transitional Poets.

**16.4. WILLIAM COLLINS (25 December 1721-12 June 1759)**

Like Thomas Gray, William Collins was an important Transitional poet. Collins is chiefly known for his odes which mark a watershed in English poetry for Collins lyrical odes mark a turn away from classical poetry and lay the foundation of the Romantic era.

William Collins was born in Chichester, Sussex. He was educated at Winchester and Magdalene College, Oxford. Collins’ first collection of poems titled *Persian Eclogues* came out in the year 1742, while he was still in the University. The poems in this

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collection are exotic and charming, yet show the immaturity of a beginner. After graduating in 1743, Collins headed for London. In London he was supported by a small allowance from his cousin, George Pane and soon made friends by writers like James Thompson and Dr. Johnson. Collins and Dr. Johnson became great friends. Dr. Johnson fondly remembered Collins as a man of learning who “loved fairies, genii, giants and monsters” and who “delighted to love through meanders of enchantment.”

In 1747, Collins came out with his collection *Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegorical Subjects*. This collection was to appear in a joint volume with odes by Joseph Warton but the plan did not materialize and the collections of both the poets came out separately. Nonetheless, with this collection, Collin’s reputation as a poet was established.

Collins is chiefly known for his odes. In his odes, Collins returns to Pindar’s regularity of structure. His odes are addressed to personified abstractions like fear, pity and passions. His “Ode to Fear” raises “wild enthusiastic heat” and “pays tribute to the effects achieved by Aeschylus and Sophocles in a language that strangely combines stylized eighteenth-century poetic diction and a more melodramatic and personal utterance:

Wrapt in thy cloudy veil th’ incestuous queen  
Sighed the sad call her son and husband heard,  
When once alone it broke the silent scene,  
And he the wretch of Thebes no more appeared...

Thou who such weary lengths hast past,  
Where wilt thou rest, mad nymph, at last?  
Say, wilt thou shroud in haunted cell,  
Where gloomy Rape and Murder dwell?”

His “Ode to Pity” celebrates Euripides. “The Passions: an Ode for Music” is an oratorio that was received with acclaim. However, this poem was full of melodramatic extravagance, such as in these lines:

With eyes upraised, as one inspired,  
Pale Melancholy sat retired,  
And from her wild sequestered seat  
In notes by distance made more sweet,  
Poured through the mellow horn her pensive soul  
And dashing soft from rocks around,  
Bubbling runnels joined the sound...

Collins had a deep interest in older poets like Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton. In “Ode on the Poetical Character”, he pays tribute to poets like Milton and Spenser. It is said that Collins’ interest in older poets gives his poems a new simplicity both in the verse form and diction. This simplicity of style and diction is evident in his “Song from Shakespeare’s Cymbeline” which is a re-working of Shakespeare’s lament sung by the two hunter brothers Arviragus and Guiderlus in *Cymbeline*. The ode makes brilliant use

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of imagery and thoughts. Collins was also fond of the device of personification, which was a common feature of the classical poetry of the eighteenth century. “Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands of Scotland” is “one of the first attempts in English literature to exploit the romantic aspects of Scottish scenery and legend.” However, it is incomplete and was published posthumously. His “Ode Written on Thomson’s Death” is a simple elegy written on the death of his neighbour James Thomson. Collins dedicated this poem to George Lyttelton, Thomson’s friend and patron. According to George Gregory Collins’ ““On the Death of Mr. Thomson”..bears all the true characteristics of an elegy- softness, sweetness and harmony...”

The body of Collins works is slender. His fame mainly rests on his odes. Besides the odes Collins tried other kinds of writings too. However, none came to fruition and Collins gradually started fading into obscurity. As a result of experiencing failure in other kinds of writings, he thought of putting an end to his career as a writer. Inheriting some money, he started travelling but soon started suffering from severe bouts of insanity, which was a fate common to some other eighteenth century writers like Swift, Cowper and Christopher Smart. His insanity worsened with time, deepening into total debility. Collins spent the last years of his life in his hometown Chichester, Sussex in the company of close friends. He died on 12 June 1759 aged 37.

Shortly after Collins’ death, his poems were issued in a collection edited by John Langhorne. Dr.Johnson also wrote a sympathetic account of his friend in his *Lives of the Poets*. With the advent of the Romantic Movement, Collins gained further reputation. The Romantics were profoundly influenced by him and he along with Thomas Gray came to be known as precursor of Romanticism.

You have two of Collins’ poems namely “Ode to Evening” and “Ode to Simplicity” prescribed in your syllabus. Let us now examine these poems one by one.

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### **16.5.“ODE TO EVENING”**

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#### **16.5.1 Summary**

“Ode to Evening” is one of the finest odes of English literature. It came out in the year 1747 in “Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegorical Subjects.” As the name of the poem suggests, it is a tribute to Evening . Evening in this poem has been personified as a solemn maid and referred to as “Chaste Eve” by Collins. Collins chose to write his ode in unrhymed stanzas of four lines each for he felt that “probably the rhymed form would disturb the gentle, peaceful and transitory effect of the evening” which the poet sought to produce.

Collins begins the poem by asking chaste Eve(ning) to bless his verse and to fill his verse with her divine qualities. He asks her how best he could please her ears. He wants to play her a tune as soft and soothing as her own solemn spring and fading winds and in this way wants to soothe her ears. In the next line he refers to her as a modest Nymph and asks her again if there is any suitable song that could please her then she should let him know for then he will ask the bright-haired sun that is setting in the West, looking as

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though sitting in a tent of cloudy skirts, woven with delicate braids that overhangs its wavy bed, to teach him how to sing those soft melodies.

There is perfect silence in the evening air and the only sounds that can be heard are those of the flitting of the weak-eyed bats' wings and the blowing of the tiny, dull horn of the beetle in the half-lit path of the pilgrim who, walks on, unmindful of the beetle. The poet wants the calm maiden (Evening) to teach him to sing soft melodies which may fill her darkening valley without disturbing the stillness of the air. He further says that he wants to learn some soft melodies from her which he wishes to turn into happy tunes so that when she returns the next day, he is able to sing a welcome song for her.

The speaker says that as Evening descends, and the evening star rises and shines faintly, and the air is filled with sweet fragrance, the Elves who sleep in the buds during daytime and the Nymphs who adorn their forehead with grass and drop freshening dew and sweet thoughtful pleasures, prepare Evening's shadowy carriage.

The poet sees Evening as a calm devotee and wants her to lead him to some quiet place like a still lake, a lonely moor, some ancient ruined building which is made holy by time or to some grey fallowed upland, to watch her serene beauty. But if he is prevented from doing so by "chill, blustering winds, or driving rain", he would like to take refuge in a hut from where he can get a view of the mountain side, swelling rivers, brown hamlets, faintly visible spires and from where one can hear their simple bells and watch the dusky Evening gradually descending over the surrounding landscape.

The poem ends with the poet's conviction that as long as spring continues to pour his showers and bathe gentle Evening's "breathing tresses" ; and summer wishes to play beneath her lingering light; and the autumn with yellow leaves fills solemn Evening's lap; or harsh winter, "yelling thro' the troublous air" brings havoc, which means throughout the four seasons, Evening shall continue to inspire fancy (poets), friendship (friends), science (men of learning) and smiling peace (lovers of peace) .

### **16.5.2 Critical Appreciation**

"Ode to Evening" is one of the most memorable odes of English literature. In the words of Eric Rothstein "Ode to Evening" along with "Peace", "The Manners" and "The Passions" offers "peace in nature...and in society". This Ode is a clear break from the traditional odes in style as well as subject matter for Collins chose to write the ode in unrhymed stanzas of four lines for he thought that the rhyme form "would not be able to convey the subtle sombreness characteristic of the evening." Indeed, this was a bold creative step taken by Collins who broke free from the heroic couplet form that had dominated the age in favour of unrhymed stanzas so that he could make use of lyrical freedom for creative expression. Collins language reminds one of Milton who too chose the rhyme less stanza form. In the words of David Daiches, "Ode to Evening" is Perhaps the most technical successful of all Collins' poems (after "How sleep the Brave") ...one of the few successful examples in English of the unrhymed lyric, where the skilful handling of vowel sounds and rhythmic effects compensates for the lack of rhyme:

If aught of oaten stop or pastoral song  
May hope, chaste Eve, to soothe thy modest ear,  
    Like thy own solemn springs,  
    Thy springs, and dying gales,  
Of nymph reserved, while now the bright-haired sun  
Sits in yon western tent,...

In this poem Collins sees Evening not just a time of day but a living goddess. He is overwhelmed seeing the serene beauty of Evening. Collins begins the poem by invoking the spirit of Evening so that she can teach him how to compose poetry. Collins sees Evening as a Nymph who is reserved by nature. She is peaceful and simple. The poet says that he would like to learn how to play soft music from her for he in return wishes to sing soothing songs to her in order to soothe her modest ears. He wishes to please her in all her ways and wants to learn lessons of simplicity from her. Even the evening sun wishes to take refuge in her and “sits in (Evening’s) western tent.”

For Collins Evening is living nature. He calls her by various names such as chaste Eve, Nymph, maid composed, calm vot’ress. All these names give us a picture of a peaceful and composed evening. The poet says that except for the cry of the bat and the beetle, there is perfect silence in the Evening air. He longs to go to some solitary and barren spot or some ancient ruined building among lonely valleys in the evening to watch its beauty.

Collins concludes the poem by stating that evening shall continue to inspire poets, men of learning, friends and lovers of peace through all the four seasons.

The poem is remarkable for its lyrical quality, subjectivity and love of nature. Collins personifies evening as a chaste nymph, meek and reserved, “a calm vot’ress” who stands in stark contrast with the “bright haired sun”. Collins has been charged of making excessive use of personification which was a characteristic feature of his age for besides Evening, he also personifies Hours, Fancy, Friendship and Science. The poem also makes brilliant use of imagery. The poem draws a fanciful picture of a child’s story book. For example, “The fairies and elves come out at the close of day and prepare Evening’s shadowy carriage”.

The poem begins with a lofty note as Collins begins the poem in a traditional way by invoking the muses which is an indication that the poet is about to undertake a lofty mission. Collins’ use of archaic words like “aught” and “oaten stop” shows his love for the antique. In the words of Cazamian, “*Ode to Evening*, the most delicately exquisite of eighteenth –century poems; where a pensive colouring, rich in subdued, restrained vibrations, spread out over the landscape as over the meditative mind that contemplates it, fuses in so harmonious a manner the charm of twilight, the paling lights, the ongoing silence and gloom, till that the hour holds of happy and foreboding intent, into the suggestion of a mysterious eloquence.”

**16.5.3 GLOSSARY**

Aught: anything

Oaten: (archaic) a musical pipe made of straw

Dying gales : light winds

Brede: braid

Ethereal: having a delicate beauty; ethereal sounds, qualities etc. Have a delicate beauty that makes them seem not to be part of the real world

Wove: woven

Elf: a small imaginary mischievous person with magical powers

Nymph: In ancient Greek and Roman stories, one of the female spirits who live in rivers, mountains or forests

Pensive Pleasures: Sweet thoughtful pleasures

Sedge: a kind of wetland grasses

Vot'ress: a priestess dedicated to the service of God

Sheety lake: lake as still as a sheet

Dim discover'd: faintly visible

Wont: wish, desire

Tresses: long hair that hangs down a woman's back

Sallow: yellowish

Shrinking train: fearful group

Sylvan shed: wooded shelter

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q1. What does the poet desire to do in the opening lines of the poem?

Q2. Who is in the "Western tent?" Why?

Q3. What are the clouds like?

Q4. How does the poet describe the bat and the beetle?

Q5. Explain the following phrases

- (i) Sheety Lake
- (ii) Lone heath

Q6. Explain the following lines:

- (i) If aught of oaten stop, or pastoral song... O'erhangs his wavy bed.
- (ii) Then lead, calm Vot'ress ...Reflect its last col gleam

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## **16.6.ODE TO SIMPLICITY**

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### **16.6.1 Summary**

“Ode to Simplicity” was written in 1747 and published along with his “Odes of Several Descriptive and Allegorical Subjects.” This ode along with the odes Pity, Fear and the Poetical Character deal with “poetry and its place in the British Tradition.” It is considered to be one of Collins most regularly constructed odes. It consists of nine stanzas of six lines each.

In this poem Collins pays tribute to simplicity and personifies it as a pure, truth and humble maiden devoid of artificiality and pomp. The poem opens with an invocation to the spirit of Simplicity. Simplicity, like Evening, has been personified as a chaste maid. She has been nursed by Nature who taught her the lessons of honesty and sincerity and thoughts in verses that are pure and sweet. Poetry has been personified by Collins as the prettiest Child of Simplicity and Pleasure and as one who is born in Fancy or Imagination.

The speaker considers Simplicity to be a pure, dignified and modest maiden. She has a simple and sublime heart like that of an ascetic's. She does not approve of the pompous treasure of Art. Expressions such as “Gauds”, “pageant Weeds” and “trailing pail” evoke the courtliness to which simplicity is opposed. She is dressed simply in Athenian garments. Collins calls Simplicity “A Chaste unboastful Maid!” and then invokes her in the name of the sweetness of honey on Hybla's shore, in the name of blossoming flowers, murmuring streams of Hybla and also in the melodious “love –lorn” evening songs of the nightingale which once provided comfort to Sophocles, one of the greatest ancient Greek tragedians and the writer of *Electra*. He also invokes Simplicity in the name of Cephissus, a river flowing around Athens, where ancient Greek poetry flourished for many years. The speaker says that Poetry waded along with the waters of Cephissus, never to have left its lovely green shores for simplicity could only be found in Greek poetry.

When Athens lost her freedom, poetry had to take refuge in foreign shores. However, these foreign shores did not prove to be suitable for the graceful poetry of Greece. The speaker now addresses Simplicity as the humble sister of Truth and wants the youth to emulate her sober nature and natural charms. The speaker further wishes to make a wreath of the sweetest flowers of imagination for Simplicity and also asks her to help him out in arranging the words and lines of his poetry in different colours so as to make it truly great.

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The speaker now gives a historical account of the path traversed by poetry after the fall of the mighty Greek empire, where after it reached Rome. Initially, Roman poetry was largely patriotic and chaste like its Greek counterpart. Simplicity seemed to love the Roman hills and led her group of great poets to sing for Emperor Augustus, the patron of Virgil and Homer. However, Roman poetry gradually declined after the reign of Augustus and simplicity had to flee Rome as Roman poetry now became courtly and artificial and also dealt with gross themes like sensual love and wine. Collins further says that “Taste” and “Genius” may decorate poetry and may appeal to the eye but their charm is merely external. On the other hand Simplicity is important to poetry because it reaches the soul of the poet and stirs it.

In the next stanza, the speaker seeks the patronage of Simplicity so that he may be able to write simple, sincere and modest poems which wants to set to the music of his reed. He wants Simplicity to be his driving force and provide him with the flowers of poetry, and work through him in arranging the patterns of his poems; “Still ask thy Hand to range their order’d Hues.” In the sixth and the seventh stanzas Collins links the decline of poetry to the erosion of political and individual freedom. Collins wants to find Simplicity’s “temperate Vale” so that he may compose divinely inspired poems which have the power to touch the hearts of simple innocent folks like maids and shepherds and other children who dwell in the lap of nature.

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### **16.6.2 CRITICAL APPRECIATION**

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In ‘Ode to Simplicity’ Collins celebrates the virtue of simplicity, thereby advocating simplicity in every respect including poetic diction. This idea was later developed by Wordsworth who too was of the opinion that poetry should be in the language of common people, free from artificiality. It consists of nine stanzas of six lines each. In this poem Collins personifies Simplicity like Evening in “Ode to Evening”. He portrays Simplicity as a ‘generous maid’ who is brought up in the lap of Nature thus radiating the pureness of Nature. Simplicity, has been described as an austere beauty in the second stanza. She has a “Hermit Heart” which shows her spiritual bent of mind. She appears to be “chaste” and “unboastful” in her plain Athenian garments. George Soule in his paper titled ‘Odes by Thomas Gray and William Collins’ states, “Stanzas 3 and 4 employ a series of phrases beginning with the word “by”. Collins is building up an inventory of the forces which will empower his invocation in stanza 5. By implication, these forces also add qualities to the emerging figure of Simplicity.” The charming beauty of Hybla, the “love-lorn” sound of the nightingale, the magnificence of the river Cephissus, all provide serenity to the atmosphere. However, there is a turn in thought in the next stanza as Collins states that poetry had to leave the sheltered shores of Athens when Philip of Macedon attacked the city. Stanza five is central as Collins urges Simplicity to impart her “sober aid and native Charms” to the youngsters. He also requests her to become a part of his poetry. However, he laments the decline of poetry and links it to the decline of political and individual freedom. However, Collins ends the poem in a humble personal

note and wishes to find Simplicity's "temp'rate Vale" so that she may inspire and guide him.

The poem has a rhythmic, lyrical quality, achieved through alliteration, rhythm and figures of speech, especially personification, a favourite device of neo-classical poetry. Simplicity, Pleasure, song, the river Cephisus, Freedom, Truth, Beauty, Love are all personified in the poem. One can also come across allusions, which formed an important element in the poems of Transitional poets like Gray and Collins. The references to classical mythology and literature show Collins as a true representative of his age. For instance, one can find an echo of Milton in the line "Thou, only thou can'st raise thy meeting soul!" The poem also abounds in imagery as it speaks of Hybla's shore of honey; of the nightingale singing "love-lorn" songs of grief; the river Cephisus flowing across its course, all that form an important part of Romantic poetry.

However, Collins was criticized severely for being artificial in tone. Cazamian said of the simplicity of Collin's ode, "... it is not yet the Simplicity at once verbal and moral of Wordsworth. His vocabulary remains laboured and the 'Ode to Simplicity' does not fulfil all its promise. ..." However, he appreciates the poem when he continues, "But where his Classicism is perfect, it is sufficiently spiritualized by an inner youthfulness of spirit to rejoin Romanticism in its moments of soberness. The rhythms are adapted to the sentiment with a very sure intuition, which presages the freedom of the future."

### **16.6.3 GLOSSARY**

Nurs's Pow'rs of Song: fostered or composed the force of melodies

Hermity Heart: simple, sublime heart of simplicity

Disdain'st the wealth: simplicity scorns the pompous treasures of artificial are

Gaud: gaudy, showy, over bright

Pageant: show, parade

Attic Robe: simple Athenian garments

Hybla's Thyme Shore: Hybla is a district in Sicily known for honey and its shores appear green because of thyme (a green plant)

Her: Nightingale-Philomela was the daughter of Pandion, king of Athens. She had a very melodious voice and according to legends was transformed into a nightingale.

Ev'ning Musing: gradual thoughts of evening

Electra's Poet's Ear: Sophocles, the writer of *Electra* had a peculiar fondness for the sad love songs of the nightingale .

Cephisus: a river in Athens (Greece). It represents ancient Greek poetry.

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Warbled Wanderings: journey of Music carried along with waters of Cephisus

Green Retreat: green verdant dwellings

When Holy Freedom Died: When Athens lost her freedom

Sober Aid: virtue of sobriety. The poet wants simplicity to aid youth in becoming sober and natural

Native charms: natural charms/ attractions

Laureate Band: group of great poets patronized by Emperor Augustus

Hall or Bow'r: courtly poetry

Forceless Numbers: poetry without merit or substance

Meeting soul: cf. Milton, *L'Allegro*, lines 136-38 "Lap me in soft Lydian airs/Married to immortal verse,/such as the meeting soul may pierce"

Temp'rate Vale: valley of simplicity, sincerity, moderation like the valley in Mediterranean region

Reed: wooden musical instrument

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q1. Who has been brought up in the lap of Nature?

Q2. What qualities of simplicity does the poet highlight in the second stanza?

Q3. The poet invokes simplicity in many ways in the third stanza. Illustrate.

Q4. What is the significance of "Cephisus"?

Q5. Explain the following stanzas:

- (i) O sister meek of Truth...Still ask thy Hand to range their order'd Hues
- (ii) No more, in hall or bow'r...Shall gain thy Feet to bless the servile scene.

Q6. According to the speaker of the poem, why is simplicity important.

Q7. Pick out six personifications from the poem.

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### **16.7.ANSWERES TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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To know the answers from Q1 to Q6, read the summary of the poem.

A7. "Nature" "Fancy" "Pleasure" "chaste unboastful Nymph" "Her" "holy Freedom"

**16.8.REFERENCES**

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**16.9.SUGGESTED READING**

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**16.10.TERMINAL AND MODEL QUESTIONS**

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Q1. Draw a biographical sketch of William Collins in your own words.

Q2. Give a critical appreciation of the poem 'Ode to Evening.'

Q3. Give a critical appreciation of the poem 'Ode to Simplicity.'

Q4. You have now read two of Collins famous odes. Did you find any similarity between the two? Discuss.